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HIGHER EDUCATION ESL CURRICULUM TRANSITION POST- COVID-19 ERA: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a stir in the field of education. As higher educational institution (HEI) closes its lecture halls and tutorial rooms due to the pandemic, lecturers in HEI are scrambling to adjust to the curriculum transition from having a face-to-face lecture to teaching remotely using an online platform. ESL instructors in HEI were among those affected by the sudden curriculum transition. Therefore, this paper aims to systematically review the challenges faced by ESL instructors from HEI on how they adapted to the curriculum transition post-COVID-19. Related articles were obtained from two prominent databases namely ProQuest and Scopus using specific keyword search terms. A total of six articles were selected for review out of 933 articles that were initially detected from the databases after executing a thorough selection criteria. After that, the challenges faced by ESL instructors and how they cope with the challenges were identified and discussed. Our findings suggest that ESL instructors from different parts of the world are all experiencing an adverse struggle in adapting to the curriculum transition caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, more studies in the context of ESL curriculum are needed to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on ESL instructors' teaching performance.

Keywords:

Higher Education Institution, ESL Curriculum, Curriculum Transition, COVID-19, Online Distance Learning

Introduction

The novel coronavirus or COVID-19 disease is a highly infectious disease that was first experienced in Wuhan City, China in December 2019 (Shereen et al., 2020). The rapid spread of the virus took only 2 months for it to reach Malaysian grounds. In a survey analysis of 424 higher education institutions (HEIs) from over 109 countries, it was found that almost all HEIs who participated in the survey has been affected by the pandemic with 59% of them mentioning that university activity has been halted (Marinoni, et al., 2020). Due to the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, HEIs were forced to shut down, prompting a response from the academic and administration staff of these educational institution to implement online distance learning to resume all classes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily affected lecturers and instructors in higher education, who had to abruptly shift to an online platform and away from the conventional method as highlighted from several studies related to the pandemic and its educational implication (Bento et al., 2021; Leo, 2021; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) evaluated the challenges and opportunities that arises during the COVID-19 lockdown. Additionally, this study gave an in-depth review on how the instant transition from face-to-face to online learning has made a significant impact on the teaching and learning activities, evaluation and assessment. While students take their time in adjusting to learning autonomously, instructors may also be troubled with designing and coming up with a strategy on how to present their content effortlessly through online learning. Sia and Adamu (2020) made a comprehensive literature review on the challenges and impacts of the pandemic towards instructors working at HEI in Malaysia. The findings of their study indicated that the primary challenge for instructors during online distance learning throughout the COVID-19 era is that they need to learn how to navigate the learning management system (LMS) in just a short amount of time before resuming class via online. Other challenges mentioned were the unavailability of a stable Internet service at their home as well as changing assessment and examinations to coursework or take-home exams. All these aspects have made many HEI instructors to experience stress and anxiety during the sudden transition to online distance learning.

Shifting the focus to teaching English as a second language (ESL) in HEI, despite receiving positive reception towards online learning, issues such as maintaining language teaching process comes to light (Rinekso and Muslim, 2020). Rinekso and Muslim (2020), emphasized that poor internet access, accumulation of unread chats, and misinterpretation of task were one of the major challenges faced during online distance learning. Meanwhile, Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) mentioned that planning and preparation were one of the main concerns among ESL instructors during remote teaching and learning, since online learning demands for a more thorough knowledge and skills in terms of technological integration. Furthermore, the researchers also added that apart from the challenges of relating pedagogy to technology, ESL instructors were also met with the challenges of designing an interactive course, reinforce formal learning and maintaining student engagement.

Given these points, it is evident that there are more challenges to online distance learning in the context of HEI that are yet to be explored. Moreover, there is limited literature that reviews the challenges of online learning specifically experienced by ESL lecturers or instructors teaching in HEIs. Hence, the current study takes focus on exploring ESL

lecturers' experienced challenges and adaptation towards the curriculum transition following the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on this aspect, the current study could help the ESL teaching community in HEI in identifying the issue that arises when language learning and teaching process takes place in an online platform.

Problem Statement

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ideal expectation of an educational environment is the building of a harmonious, humanistic university culture (Zhang and Li, 2016). Zhang and Li (2016) suggested that the ideal education revolves around the people and the social commitment that they form within an institution. This brings us to the point that face-to-face lectures are all the more important in establishing an ideal environment for providing and receiving education. However, due to the pandemic and the new norm of 'social distancing', many HEIs from across the globe were forced to temporarily close their lecture halls and tutorial rooms in order to contain the spread of the virus (Marinoni et al., 2020). This unexpected situation has greatly affected academics from higher learning institution in terms of their everyday teaching routine. The main concern would be that this condition can potentially disrupt the flow of a curriculum, as Elken and Stensaker (2018) once stated that a well-functioning higher learning institution puts emphasis on academic staff's control over their educational practices and the lack of such academic development would mean that these institutions can become stagnated.

In the same vein, the transition to online learning during the pandemic has made a psychological impact towards students and teaching staffs. Naidu and Nor Azam (2020) examined a group of lecturers in Malaysia and found that the issue of mental health has been a recurring theme when asked about the major challenges of the new norm post-COVID-19. These group of lecturers agreed that a lot of them experience burnouts while trying to preserve the quality of their online education that they present to their students.

The aftermath of COVID-19 on education has greatly affected students, instructors and the whole HEI organization. HEIs are the first in line in proving an enabling condition to provide leadership support for their academic and administrative staff as well as for the students. Hence, such initiative will allow the institution to not only improve productivity, but also safeguard the well-being of the teaching and learning community within the HEI.

The main objective of this review is to investigate the literature of the challenges of ESL instructors from higher education institution on how they adapted to the current curriculum post-COVID-19 by identifying publication that create awareness about the challenges and trends of online teaching and learning. The questions below are addressed:

- i) What are the challenges instructors have to deal with amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
- ii) How did English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors make adjustments to cope with curriculum transition?

Each of the question help the researcher to understand the experience of ESL instructors from HEI on how they adapted to the current curriculum post-COVID-19.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA, 2020) for reporting past literature to systematic literature reviews and meta-analysis.

Search Strategy

The first step in conducting this systematic review is by forming a research question that is feasible, clear and well-defined before conducting a preliminary search using the related keywords extracted from the research question (Tawfik et al., 2019). In the preliminary search, the keywords considered are “COVID-19”, “ESL lecturers”, “challenges”, “remote teaching and learning”, and “higher education. These keywords that were initially suggested proven to be quite challenging when they were used as search terms in the databases. Search terms that were too general and broad prompted an unmanageable number of publications, while specific search terms resulted in missing relevant papers. Thus, the following shows search phrases that were put together with a focus on the area of ESL in higher education institution:

“English AND teaching OR instructor OR lecturer OR professor OR faculty OR challenges OR curriculum AND transition OR professional AND development OR online AND teaching AND learning OR online AND distance AND learning OR remote AND teaching”

The search for article journals were performed on the databases; ProQuest and Scopus. The researcher added restrictions of selecting research articles written in English and specifying that the articles were published between 1 January 2020 to 30 December 2021.

Selection Criteria

A protocol was developed in advance, such as the inclusion and exclusion criteria, before documenting the analysis. For the purpose of this study, the inclusion criteria for this review were articles (i) involving online distance learning in higher education; (ii) focused on teaching English as a Second Language; and (iii) the full text was available. The exclusion criteria were articles that (i) focused on students in higher education as well as teachers and ESL learners below tertiary education, (iii) that were published in other language other than English. Papers that were published before the events of COVID-19 were also excluded.

Methodological Quality Assessment

For quality assessment of the article, the author used the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Prevalence Critical Appraisal Tool based on the critical appraisal tool developed by Munn et al. (2014). The JBI is a checklist that identifies the important criteria when evaluating systematic reviews of prevalence. It includes nine criteria that needs to be responded with either a “Yes”, “No” or “Unclear”. For this study, a score of one will be counted if the article affirms to the given criteria and a score of zero will be counted for articles that did not fit into the criteria. The nine criteria can be described in the following table.

Table 1: Quality Assessment Criteria based on Munn et al. (2014) Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Prevalence Critical Appraisal Tool

Item	Criteria description
1	Was the sample representative of the target population?
2	Were the study participants recruited in an appropriate way?
3	Was the sample size adequate?
4	Were the study subjects and the setting described in detail?
5	Was the data analysis conducted with sufficient coverage of the identified sample?
6	Were objective, standard criteria used for the measurement of the condition?
7	Was the condition measured reliably?
8	Was there appropriate statistical analysis?
9	Are all important confounding factors/subgroups/differences identified and accounted for?

Data Extraction And Data Analysis

After the final selection process, a total of six research articles fulfilled all the selection criteria. Information such as the author, year of publication, journal title, country of where the research was conducted and the relevant findings of the research article were tabulated.

Results

Figure 1 shows the flowchart of the research strategy and selection process. A total of 933 search records were detected from ProQuest (n=913) and Scopus (n=20), and 847 were excluded in the first screening based in the titles and abstract. After checking the full text of the remaining 83 articles, we came into a consensus to include six articles in our meta-analysis. The exclusion criteria or exclusion reasons are mentioned in Figure 1. All journal articles were downloaded as PDF files and saved in Mendeley for easy management and access by the authors. Table 1 summarizes the findings of each article that was included after the full text screening.

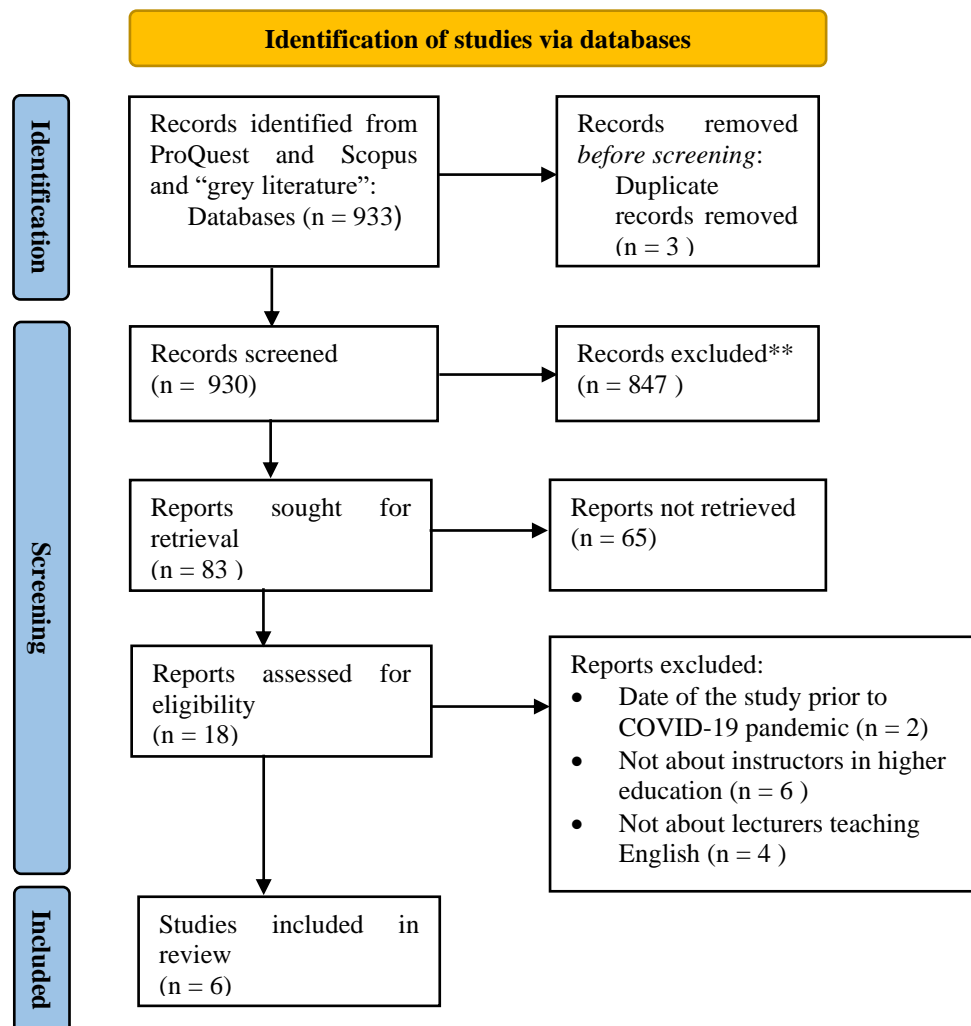


Figure 1: Flow Diagram for Systematic Review of Literature

Table 2: Findings of the Literature Review

First Author & Year	Title of Journal	Country	Relevant Findings
Sheppard, Jennifer (2021)	Pandemic Pedagogy: What We Learned from the Sudden Transition to Online Teaching and How It Can Help Us Prepare to Teach Writing in an Uncertain Future	United States	Increased workload, pressures in utilizing synchronous teaching medium and technology.

Chung (2021)	The Development of Sustainable Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of the English Language Program in South Korea.	South Korea	Results showed that a professional learning community was formed by instructors to engage in regular communication as an attempt to develop new forms of assessment practices that were process-oriented and formative. Instructors' level of satisfaction towards their language assessment practices were somewhat low.
Badia Hakim (2020)	Technology Integrated Online Classrooms and the Challenges Faced by the EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 Pandemic	Saudi Arabia	The challenges faced by EFL teachers were limited internet waveband, connectivity, LMS attendance linking issue and selecting the appropriate assessment tool.
Choi (2021)	Navigating Online Language Teaching in Uncertain Times: Challenges and Strategies of EFL Educators in Creating a Sustainable Technology-Mediated Language Learning Environment	South Korea	The sudden shift to online course delivery, instructors have insufficient training and support in conducting an online-ready classrooms. The instructors also reported lack of student interaction and participation. They adapted to the situation by creating and maintaining a virtual language learning community to encourage collaborative learning among students.

Meccawy (2021)	Assessment in 'survival mode': student and faculty perceptions of online assessment practices in HE during Covid-19 pandemic	Saudi Arabia	Major challenge was conducting online student assessment, as there are higher chances for students to cheat. From this experience, they suggested setting up workshops and training seminars to aid instructors.
Aziz (2021)	Learning about English language lecturers' resilience: Identification of stress and coping strategies of open and distance learning (ODL)	Malaysia	It was revealed that even though the lecturers were familiar with the application of technology in blended learning model, the pressure is rooted from insufficient preparation time and teaching materials for the full execution of ODL, and the difficulty of managing work-life balance.

The six selected research articles were further assessed using the JBI Prevalence Critical Appraisal Tool. Table 2 summarizes the result of the quality assessment.

Table 2: Quality Assessment

Study	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	TOTAL
Sheppard (2021)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	U	Y	6
Chung (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	9
Badia Hakim (2020)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	8
Choi (2021)	U	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
Meccawy (2021)	N	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
Aziz (2021)	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	7

Abbreviations: N: No, Y: Yes, U: Unclear, (1) Was the sample representative of the target population?; (2) Were the study participants recruited in an appropriate way?; (3) was the sample size adequate?; (4) Were the study subjects and the setting described in detail?; (5) Was the data analysis conducted with sufficient coverage of the identified sample?; (6) Were objective, standard criteria used for the measurement of the condition?; (7) Was the condition

measured reliably?; (8) Was there appropriate statistical analysis?; and (9) Are all important confounding factors/subgroups/differences identified and accounted for?

Discussion

The discussion of the review involves answering the research questions and objective. The discussion focuses on the online distance learning experience faced by ESL instructors in higher educational institution and what adjustments they made in response to the curriculum transition. The findings based on the systematic literature review suggest that there is a corresponding relation with the previous study, in which poor internet connectivity and lack of planning and preparedness were subjected as the most common challenges faced by ESL lecturers and instructors. Other findings identified by the authors were mainly on the struggles of ESL lecturers in dealing with student engagement and participation, forms of assessment and feedback and generally adapting to the new normal of teaching.

Challenges Faced by ESL Instructors During The Curriculum Transition Post-COVID-19

The findings of the systematic review reveals that most ESL instructors experienced low confidence in handling online classes as they were pressured with While students took their time in adjusting to learning autonomously, instructors may also be troubled with designing and coming up with a strategy on how to present their content effortlessly through online learning. Sia & Adamu (2020) made a comprehensive literature review on the challenges and impacts of the pandemic towards instructors working at HEI in Malaysia. The findings of their study indicated that the primary challenge for instructors during online distance learning throughout the COVID-19 era is that they need to learn how to navigate the learning management system (LMS) in just a short amount of time before resuming class via online. the unfamiliarity of heavily relying to technology as a medium of instruction. Other challenges mentioned were the unavailability of a stable Internet service at their home as well as changing assessment and examinations to coursework or take-home exams.

ESL instructors from HEI were also met with the obstacle of having to make conduct summative assessments and examinations online. As there was a great need to maintain social distancing among students to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 virus, HEI were forced to conduct examinations virtually. This, however, created a higher chance for students to cheat and manipulate as instructors have less control over virtual invigilation. Moreover, another challenge that was prominently mentioned was having to deal with students' lack of engagement and low attendance rate throughout the period of online distance learning. It was reported that students were having less learning engagement as there were factors such as students having a hard time accessing the online learning content. First and foremost, students are required to have technology and internet access as the primary tool for online learning. In a study by Aj and Vijayalakshmi (2020), students are the most affected by the lockdown in terms of technical difficulty and adapting to remote learning. However, the feeling of difficulty among students may differ depending on their locality and socio-economic background.

Adjustments Made To Cope With The Curriculum Transition

As a response to the curriculum transition in HEI, some ESL instructors have also suggested ways to cope with the challenges of adjusting to the new normal in education. One of the recommended strategies in coping with the challenges of this curriculum transition is to

introduce a language learning community to students as well as instructors. a quantitative study at HEI in Oman was conducted by Ayyat and Al-Aufi (2021) that focuses on English Foundation students' perspective of using interactive websites in enhancing their listening and speaking skills. The researchers found that majority of the ESL students showed positive response to the online learning tool as they were exposed to real-life conversational situation, which made them become aware of the different English that people from different parts of the world uses – depending on the cultural background of the language user. On top of that, the researcher also highly recommended the website that were featured in their study, which was Youghlish.com, to be used by instructor and ESL students as a module in ESL learning.

Meanwhile, for students' assessment, instructors have prepared various forms of assessment to measure students' performance throughout the course. A study by Singh et al. (2017) was conducted to analyze the forms of assessment and feedback that lecturers – including a handful of ESL lecturers – from various Malaysian HEI are currently practicing. Oral questioning and peer assessment emerged as the most frequent mode of giving student assessment while providing comments and immediately responding and correcting students' answers and mistakes were the most preferred form of feedback. The lecturers then explained that their strategy to execute oral questioning and peer assessment is through instructing their students to work in groups and conduct class presentations respectively. Of course, this is only the first phase of assessment – in which the first phase is formative in nature while the second phase in summative. In another study by Singh and Samad (2013) stated that most HEI in Malaysia still heavily rely on paper-and pencil tests to account for the summative part of student assessment.

Conclusion

The sudden implementation of online distance learning in higher educational institution during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted the education system from across the globe.

While the emergence of online distance learning tool such as Google Meet, Webex, Zoom and Telegram has acted as the key solution in overcoming the impact of COVID-19 on education, such transition from face-to-face to online learning mode need proper planning and execution from the course instructor as well as the administrator. While the solution is available, but without a standardized curriculum design that integrates online learning as the main medium of instruction, it could be the main setback to students in realising the full potential and effectiveness of online learning. It is crucial that higher educational institution world-wide would carefully revise the instructional design, pedagogy and e-learning policy in order to tap into the potential benefits of online distance learning and the challenges that comes with it.

Within the context of ESL curriculum in HEI, there is an urgent need for increased investment in improving online learning resources, both in higher education institutions as well as in the tertiary education community due to gap in aspects such as socio-economic levels and geographical factors in accessing information and communication technologies (ICTs). Considering that we are in an era of the new normal post-COVID-19, higher educational institution needs to plan ahead in rethinking their curriculum which emphasises on preparedness in times of a pandemic outbreak as a goal.

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