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STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE USE OF ONLINE MODE TO LEARN ENGLISH ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS DURING COVID-19 PERIOD

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 forced the world to immediately change how we live, including how classes are conducted. All educational institutions must close their doors to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Teachers and students are ordered to remain at home, and the normal learning environment has to shift online. Albeit the current generations of students are no strangers to the technology used in the classroom, however, to attend a class entirely conducted online is a new situation for them. Thus, this paper aims to study students' perceptions of using online modes in the teaching and learning process of oral communication in English. Fifty-three low-proficiency students who took Oral Communication in English at Universiti Malaysia Sabah participated in the study. A mixed-method research design was applied to the study. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the students to elicit their perceptions on the issue. The quantitative data revealed a positive impression from the participants on teaching oral communication skills online [n=46 (87%)]. The qualitative data show that (i) interactive mode, (ii) accessibility of materials, and (iii) ability to interact with the teachers and peers without feeling shy are among the reasons why online learning is favoured.

Keywords:

Online Learning, English as a Second Language, Communication Skills, ESL Students

Introduction

The modernised invention of information communication technologies (ICT) and the existence of the internet and social media have changed the learning and teaching process. Since their inception, they have allowed the learning process not to be confined solely to the four walls but everywhere and anywhere. The rapid advancement and changes in ICT have also helped transform the education world, including language pedagogy, learning, and language use. Moreover, the expansion of technology has led to the development a learning management system with which language instructors must acquaint themselves with the system for successful knowledge transmission (Muhammad Tanveer, 2011). As a result, many universities have assigned tremendous resources for expanding and implementing online learning (Jones & Madden, 2002; Rudy, 2007, cited in Waleed, Mohd Shahizan & Lizawati 2015).

Albeit the readiness of the educational institution to embrace technology into the process of teaching and learning, nothing prepared everyone for what was coming in 2020. In early 2020, the world was shocked by a novel virus, Covid-19, which started in Wuhan, China. Though the virus was first detected in Wuhan in December 2019, it was not until early 2020 that the lethal of the virus felt and spread worldwide. On March 11 2020, World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the Covid-19 outbreak a global pandemic after the number of people infected by the virus increased rapidly outside of China within a short time (Di Gennaro et al., 2020). Malaysia reported its first confirmed case of Covid-19 on January 25 2020, with a Chinese national who travelled to Malaysia from Singapore. However, it was not until March 2020 that the number of Covid-19 cases in Malaysia grew rapidly, giving birth to the first Covid-19 cluster in Malaysia, the religious mass gathering in Sri Petaling involving 16,000 participants across Malaysia and several countries in South East Asia (Elengoe, 2020). As the number of Covid-19 cases rose to 553, the Prime Minister of Malaysia at that time, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 16 2020, in the hope of impeding the spread of the virus (Elengoe, 2020; Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). The MCO was implemented nationwide for two weeks, from March 18 to March 31, 2020, and extended for another two weeks to April 14 2020, when the number of cases kept increasing.

The announcement of MCO has banned any face-to-face social gatherings or mass gatherings which consequently affected the teaching and learning process in every educational institution in Malaysia. All educational institutions in the country were asked to close. The decree has forced these institutions to devise an immediate action plan to continue the ongoing semester, including Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). UMS has instructed that the teaching and learning will be conducted online, obeying the order of MCO by the government. Since March 2020, the online class has continued in Malaysia, UMS in particular, to control the rise of Covid-19 cases. Nonetheless, online learning at UMS is not a foreign method of teaching. UMS has made it compulsory for all undergraduate courses to have a minimum of three teaching and learning sessions every semester to be conducted online or e-learning via the learning management system (LMS) Smartv3 even before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, having all 14 weeks of a semester's lessons delivered entirely online is indeed uncommon and new, particularly for some lecturers and students who lack a thorough understanding and experience with teaching applications and online meeting platforms.

Literature Review

The inventions of the internet and information communication technology (ICT) have played a significant role in higher learning institutions for decades (Yu-Chun, 2014). Since then, many

have developed learning systems and educational approaches to incorporate technology into the classroom setting. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a trend since the 1980s, where CMC, according to Simpson (2002), “can provide valuable alternative spaces for collaboration and opportunities for learner autonomy” (p.415). Websites, online learning tools, and applications serve as part of the delivery system and medium of feedback while the traditional classroom is still present. Integrating technology and online applications offer unlimited opportunities for teachers and students to explore and use to enhance and learn knowledge, including the English language. Back in the 1970s, new programs called Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) were developed with the arrival of the personal computer (PC). In the 1980s, “CALL widened its scope, embracing the communicative approach and a range of new technologies” (Davies, 2002). The World Wide Web (www), launched in 1992, has developed CALL further into Web-based CALL, where the Web offers vast potential in language learning and teaching (Davies, 2002). The Web and its partner, the internet, make online learning today niftier and more flexible, which have proven to significantly impact the students in the language learning process, particularly in communication skill (Ru-Chu, 2010; Correa, 2015; Rodrigues & Vethamani, 2015).

Online Learning

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased awareness and popularity of online learning globally, despite the fact that it is not a new teaching method. Singh and Thurman (2019) defined online learning as learning experiences that take place synchronously or asynchronously using various technical devices, such as laptops, smartphones, or tablets, that are connected to an internet connection (cited in Dhawan, 2020). Synchronous learning is where the learning is conducted in real-time, where it offers instant communication and feedback. In contrast, asynchronous learning is where the students can do their own learning within the time frame set by the teachers. Teachers uploaded all the learning materials, including recorded lectures, onto the learning management system (LMS) for the students to learn independently. The two facets of online learning were chosen as the best solution for the lessons that must be continuously conducted during the pandemic while the world was under lockdown. However, despite the benefits offered through online learning, several concerns arose during its application during the Covid-19 pandemic. The inexperience and lack of proficiency towards online learning from the teachers' side caused the students to have unfavourable perceptions towards it (Rohman et al., 2020, cited in Ying et al. 2021; Wildana Wargadinata et al., 2020). Students felt online learning was monotonous, which led them to be bored and lazy to express themselves (Dhawan, 2020; Eko Wahyudi et al., 2021).

Online Learning in the Teaching of Speaking in English

Speaking is an essential part of a language that everyone uses every day. It often becomes the first impression based on their ability to communicate clearly and fluently, mainly for ESL and EFL students (Liao, 2009; Clampit, 2016, cited in Sudarmo, 2021). Even in the traditional classroom, speaking is challenging for ESL and EFL students, and online learning may exacerbate this issue. Online education has previously been criticised for lack of communication and interaction (Dailey-Hebert, 2018). Two-way communication between teachers and students or peers appears challenging to achieve through online mode. The students cited that they felt demotivated during online learning as they had limited interaction with the teachers, and it was mainly them and their computers (Toquero, 2020). It is even more difficult for first-semester students who enrolled in the course without any prior experience with online learning or familiarity with anyone to participate in speaking activities actively.

Hernandez and Flórez (2020) stated that peer interaction in online speaking lessons is insufficient for students to hone their abilities. Despite teachers' efforts to make the online class engaging and exciting, getting all students to respond and cooperate, particularly the passive students, remained difficult (Kaur & Aziz, 2020). Still, the only way for educational institutions and teachers to guarantee that learning continues is through online learning, despite its difficulties.

Fortunately, technological advancements and a plethora of applications and tools provide teachers and students with numerous options for compensating for the lack of interaction in online learning. Numerous studies over the years have demonstrated how ICT has improved teaching and learning by making it more interactive, meaningful, engaging, and motivating (Chapelle, 2003; Muhammad Tanveer, 2011; Sung & Chen-Yu, 2012; Rodrigues & Vethamani, 2015). Online language learning applications such as Skype, blogs, and videos have developed the learner's communication skills (Ryobe, 2009; Ru-Chu, 2010; Yu-Chun, 2014; Melnyk, 2016). Ryobe (2009) and Melnyk (2016) used skype as the medium of interaction between teachers and students to improve the student's proficiency in English. An excellent structured implementation of online learning with the right online tools proved that speaking skills could be improved. A study by Rodrigues and Vethamani (2015) at a private university in Malaysia found that online learning positively impacts students' speaking skills in terms of proficiency and self-confidence. A similar result was produced in Sosas' (2021) study, where technologies improved fluency and accuracy, eased anxiety, and built student confidence. Further, online learning helped encourage the students to interact where they would feel less shy compared to the classroom setting. Young (2003) and Egbert (2005) stated that the nature of online learning made the students feel less anxious, enabling them to express themselves more freely and actively. Pino (2008) study further proved this when he found that the online learning environment helped students to learn language skills without experiencing intense anxiety. A study by Purnama (2021) found that students are highly motivated to learn and actively participate in online learning activities. Additionally, students find it simpler to express themselves and believe that learning is more exciting, which improves their speaking abilities.

There is no perfect teaching method; however, online learning provides a platform for the teaching and learning process to continue when everyone's movement is restricted. Now that so many applications are available, online learning can be entertaining, collaborative, and a great way to develop one's language skills. Examples include learning management systems (LMS), numerous messaging apps, video conferencing platforms, and learning apps. As aforementioned, speaking is a critical skill that needs to be mastered by ESL and EFL students; however, during the covid-19 pandemic, the concern is heightened for these students when learning speaking skills through online learning. As there were no other options, the Covid-19 pandemic forced traditional classrooms to shift entirely online, affecting students who were new to this experience. Therefore, this study explored students' perceptions of using online mode in the teaching and learning of oral communication skills in English at UMS by asking three research questions:

- i. What are the students' perceptions of online teaching English oral communication skills?
- ii. What are the students' perceptions of learning platforms and applications used in the classroom in teaching communication skills?

- iii. What are the challenges students encounter during online learning?

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This study took place at Universiti Malaysia Sabah Labuan International Campus (UMSLIC), the second branch of UMS. Fifty-three low-proficiency level undergraduate students with Malaysian University English Test (MUET) results from Band 1, Band 2 and Band 3 participated in the study. Based on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) results, UMS separates the student's English language competency into two levels: the proficiency level ranges from Band 1 to Band 3, and the advanced level from Band 4 to Band 6. These 53 students had completed the Oral Communication in English subject for fourteen weeks, beginning in March and ending in June 2022. The students ranged in age from 20 to 25, with 41 females and 12 males.

Instruments

A questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions was distributed online using Google forms. The questionnaire included 14 closed-ended questions, as shown in Table 1 and five open-ended questions. The questions sought to elicit participants' perceptions and experiences toward teaching oral communication through online learning. The study's purpose was explained to the participants, and they informed that their participation was voluntary. This survey was conducted after the students had completed the oral communication subject in week 15.

Table 1: Students' Perception of Online Learning Mode Questionnaire

No	Item
Section A	
1	Online learning is effectively improving my English communication skills.
2	Online learning provides an interactive mode of study where I can directly interact with the teacher and classmates during class activities.
3	Online learning mode made it easier for me to access the learning materials.
4	Online learning mode allows me to interact with the teacher without feeling shy or nervous.
5	Online learning allows me to interact with other students without feeling shy or nervous.
6	Online learning provides me with sufficient opportunities to speak in class.
7	I feel more relaxed learning oral communication skill subject through online learning mode.
8	The communication activities provided through online learning contribute to the improvement of my oral communication skills.
9	The communication activities provided in online learning mode suit the topic discussed that week.
10	I feel motivated to speak and respond during online learning mode.
11	The use of Padlet, Kahoot and Smartv3 during online learning supports the interactivity in the teaching and learning of oral communication skills.
12	I am satisfied with how my teacher conducts oral communication classes online.
13	I am satisfied with the communication activities provided in the online class.

14	I am satisfied with the online learning platform and applications used in the online class.
Section B	
1	How was your experience learning oral communication skill subject through online mode?
2	Do you think online learning allows you to improve your oral communication skills?
3	Do you think the online learning mode is suitable for teaching oral communication skills?
4	What is your perception of using online learning applications and platforms such as Padlet, Kahoot, Webex and Smartv3 in online classroom?
5	What are the challenges you faced during online learning?

Procedure

Throughout the 14 weeks of study, teaching oral communication in English was conducted synchronously for three hours weekly via the Webex application. Over fourteen weeks, the class also used Smartv3, an online learning platform created by UMS, Padlet (padlet.com) and Kahoot. Smartv3 platform allowed teachers and lecturers to upload notes, syllabi, audio, videos and other relevant documents for students to access before, during and after the class. Teachers and lecturers also used Smartv3 and Kahoot to administer online assessments such as quizzes and assignments. The breakout room function in Webex made it easier for the teacher to assign small discussions for the given group of students to discuss an issue related to the topic learned for the week. The breakout room also served as a space for students to discuss with their members without the teacher's presence but still under the supervision of the teachers. Seven weeks out of 14 weeks, the students were assigned to a different group each week and placed in the breakout room to discuss a specific issue related to the topic for that week with their group members, followed by a short presentation based on their discussion. These students were also assigned various tasks such as role-playing, problem-solving, and product marketing. In another seven-week of the study, the students were given a listening test, a prepared dialogue assessment, and a group presentation. The researcher used Padlet as a platform for the students to upload their individual recorded short videos on selected topics they learned in the class. The short videos assisted them in assessing and observing their own and their peers' speaking abilities. In week 15, questionnaires were administered online, and their responses were recorded on Google forms.

Data Analysis

The responses to closed-ended questions were automatically calculated as a percentage. The student's answers to the open-ended questions were analysed and categorised into several main themes to discover perceptions and challenges of online learning and how it can help improve their communication skills. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis refers to the "process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data" (p.3352). The thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify what is significantly related to a topic or research question being explored.

Results and Discussion

Research Question One: What are the students' perceptions of the online mode of teaching English oral communication skills?

Based on the questionnaire, the quantitative result revealed that most participants agreed that online teaching of oral communication in English enhanced their communication skills. Figure 1 below shows that 87% of the participants agreed that online learning effectively enhances their English communication skills, whereas 5.6% felt neutral and 7.5% disagreed with the statement. The result could be because the class was conducted synchronously or in real-time; thus, the students had more opportunities to speak during the learning session and class activities with their friends. Since the study was conducted in 2022, teachers and students have had some experience and time to get used to online learning since March 2020. Therefore, these could contribute to positive perceptions by the participants. This finding resonates with the previous study done by Linardopoulus (2010) and Rodrigues and Vethamani (2015), where online language learning helps to improve the development of oral skills among ESL learners.

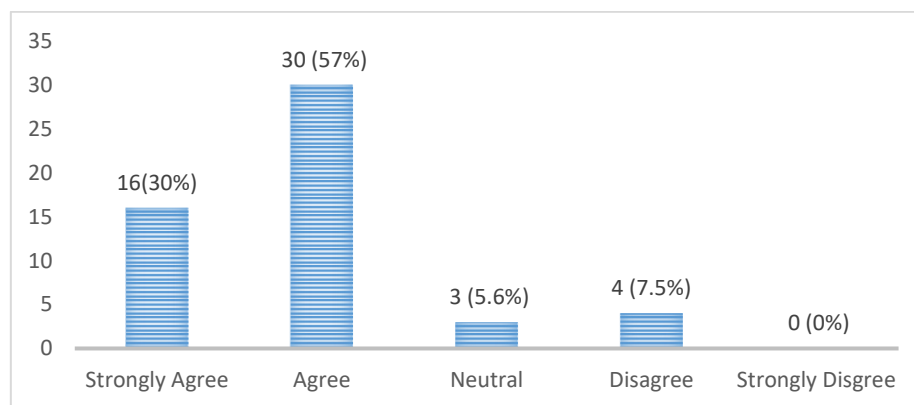


Figure 1: Online learning is Effectively Improving My English Communication Skills

The questionnaire also listed a few reasons why the participants think online learning is an effective medium of teaching oral communication in English to provide more data for the previous question. Figure 2 shows that all participants agreed that online learning offers an interactive mode of study. Dailey-Herbet (2018) categorises interactivity in online classes as communication between i) learner-learner, ii) learner-instructor, and iii) learner-content. Blending these activities and interactions in online learning is vital to improve students' satisfaction and achievement. Learner-learner interaction can occur in various ways through discussion, debate, role-playing or team projects. According to Salmon (2013), learner interactions allow the instructor to recognise that students no longer rely solely on the teacher to impart knowledge but have the opportunity to create knowledge and meaning jointly (cited in Dailey-Herbet 2018). As specified in the procedure section, students were given tasks weekly for seven weeks in a random group to discuss, role-playing and solve a problem for different topics they learned that week. These activities not only presented them with the chance to communicate but also to share and create new ideas. Learner-instructor interaction is essential in online learning as it provides the foundation for learning. Thurmond et al. (2002) discovered that having access to teachers in various methods and receiving timely feedback contribute to student happiness. Throughout the 14 weeks of the semester, the teacher conducted the class synchronously to maximise interaction and engagement. The teacher believes conducting the online class in real-time is the best method for teaching communication

skills, as the course's main objective is to help students improve their communication skills. Besides, it is easier for the students to receive teacher feedback whenever they have enquiries on the topic discussed. Integrating various online applications in online classes could enrich students' experiences and knowledge with the content they learned aside from using online textbooks. As stated earlier, the teacher incorporated UMS's learning management system (LMS), Smartv3, and also used online applications such as Webex breakout room, Padlet and Kahoot to promote the interactivensess of online learning. This learner-content element will be discussed further in the next section.

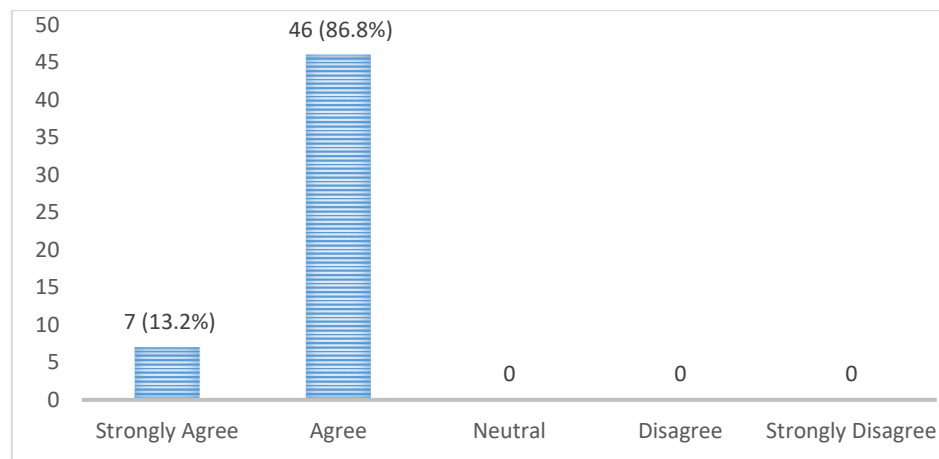


Figure 2: Online Learning Provides an Interactive Mode of Study where I can Directly Interact with the Teacher and Classmates during Class Activities

In addition to the interactive online learning mode, 69.7% of participants agreed that online learning effectively teaches oral communication skills because it allows them to interact with the instructors without feeling shy. Figure 3 shows that 69.7% of the participants agreed that online learning enabled them to interact with the instructor without feeling nervous, whereas 7.5% chose neutral and 22.7% disagreed with the statement. During the online class, the teacher made it optional for the students to switch on their cameras as some claimed that opening the camera would maximise their internet data. Often, none of the students switches on their cameras except during the assessments. Switching off their camera gives the students more freedom to express themselves throughout the speaking activities. That could contribute to positive feedback from the participants. Online learning, as mentioned in the literature review section, reduces students' nervousness when speaking in class because most students are afraid of being judged by the teacher and other students, mainly when they are not fluent in the target language. Thus, using online modes in teaching communication help to lower the student's anxiety about speaking, particularly for these low-proficiency students. Studies by Tuyen and Lian (2021) found that learning through video conference applications such as Google Meetings or Zoom helped overcome the students' shyness and embarrassment. Also, just hearing voices and no face-to-face made it easier for them to talk naturally. The technology used in the online class also contributes to easing the students' anxiety and apprehension, as found in a study by Sosas (2021). The result implied that the students performed better speaking when it did not require face-to-face interactions with the teachers.

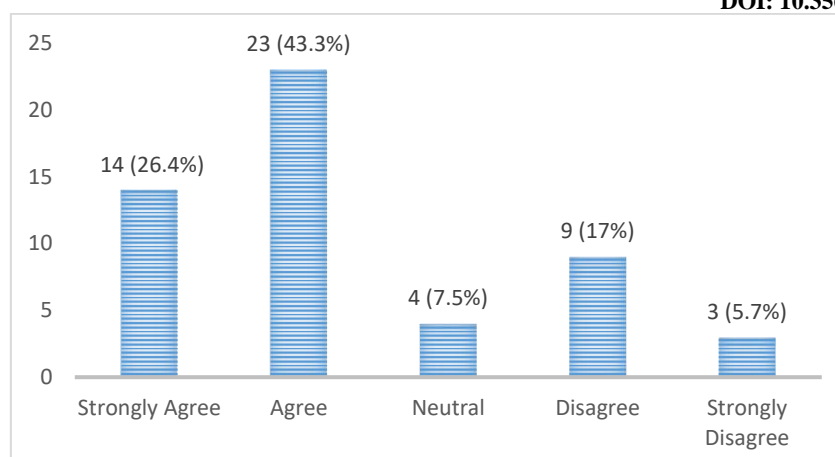


Figure 3: Online Learning Mode Allows Me to Interact with the Teacher Without Feeling Shy or Nervous

The open-ended questions elicited two responses from participants mentioning this.

“Yes. This is because sometimes, when speaking of an idea I feel my idea is wrong and will cause me to feel inferior and ashamed. especially when someone says that the idea I gave is wrong.” – R28

“Can ask questions without shy” – R32

As shown in Figure 3, 22.7% of the participants thought online learning caused limited teacher interactions. Few cited difficulties in understanding, and the online mode was unsuitable for teaching communication. These students preferred a face-to-face class because it would help them understand the topic discussed better. Due to several challenges the students faced, which will be addressed in the following section, they believed online learning was unsuitable for teaching communication skills.

“Yes because i dont know if it true or false. In classroom, teacher will correct us if it wrong and explain why it become like that” – R8

“It is hard to understand if you not teach us face to face” – R12

“I think for this course, face to face teaching is better” – R25

“Hard to get details explanation” – R34

‘It was a good experience but I rather go face to face class because that way I can understand better’ – R45

The participants also wrote that online classes made it harder for them to discuss group work.

“Difficult discuss with friends” – R5

“Its good but its hard when have group assignments it’s hard discuss” – R44

A similar result was found in the study by Azleen et al. (2020). Their finding revealed that the students believe face-to-face communication is essential to improve understanding further. The study also found that online classes limit their interaction with teachers and peers, and the limited interaction could impact the learning process. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) emphasise

that during the Covid-19 pandemic, some students had to learn the language independently, causing them to struggle to understand the materials given.

Research Question Two: What are The Students' Perceptions of Learning Platforms and Applications Used in the Classroom in Teaching Communication Skills?

Based on quantitative and qualitative data, online platforms and applications used by instructors support the teaching and learning process. They made it easier to gain subject knowledge and develop communication skills. Figure 4 shows that 86.7% of participants thought the online platform and applications used by teachers to teach communication skills were good, while 7% chose neutral. As previously stated, the researcher used Webex to conduct the class, while UMS learning management system, Smartv3, Padlet and Kahoot were used for uploading notes, online quizzes and recorded videos.

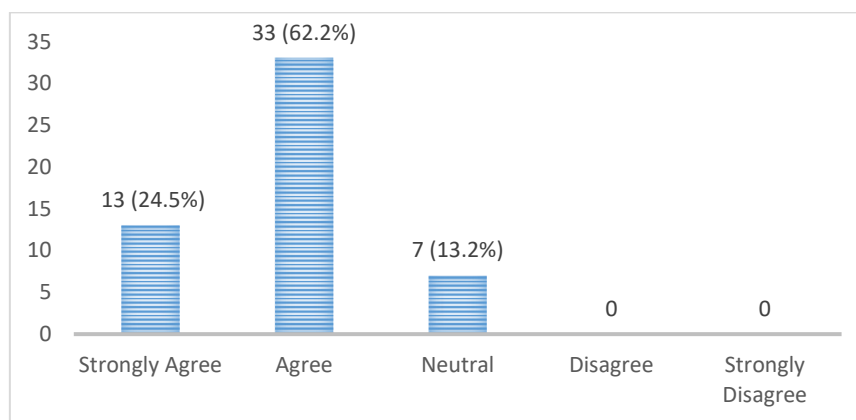


Figure 4: The Use of Padlet, Kahoot and Smartv3 During Online Learning Supports the Interactivity in the Teaching and Learning of Oral Communication Skills

The open-ended questionnaire responses of the participants supported the same result. A study by Rogerson-Revell (2015) found that learning activities that integrate various technologies can motivate students to engage in the course content. In another study by Ellis (2015), using Padlet to let students post comments on an online wall can improve their learning experiences as they engage with materials posted by other students. These findings proved that learner-content interaction is vital for the students to stimulate their engagement in the online classroom.

“It is because we can read answers from others which mean we can got knowledge and information from other answers. Beside, activity like recording video also good for me. The reason is we can share our opinion and accept the other opinion” – R6

“Smartv3 really give me extra learning since it’s another platform to improve communication” – R15

“suddenly I like online learning platform such as Smartv3 because it helps a lot in learn English and communication skill” – R18

“the usage of the technologies or online teaching platform (smartv3) really help student to learn English which they can gain a lot of information to enhance the knowledge and communication skill” – R20

“my perception of online learning is very good like padlet because we can share and gain more knowledge from friends” – R21

“my perception of the usage of padlet is good. We can upload the video we record by ourself and share with the others friend” – R22

“online learning platform can make us can to reference and learn more from others” – R28

Few participants stated that Smartv3 and Padlet made learning simpler because they could access and complete their learning at any time and from any location, were at ease receiving feedback and sharing opinions with their friends, and helped remind them of their weekly assignments or assessments. Online learning is the ideal method for teaching and learning speaking skills because it provides flexibility in terms of time and location (Arkorf & Abaidoo, 2015). Ying et al. (2021) stated that learners value flexibility and immersive learning because they can access information outside class based on their time availability. This is significant because most of the students were at home at the time of the study, so flexibility and engaging learning are essential to staying motivated.

“It make more easy for students to learning english everywhere, anytime and so on” – R51

“it helps students improve their English proficiency and make life easier” – R45

“very useful to me because sometimes I will forget about the homework and I can check back by using Smartv3” – R39

Besides developing their communication skills, online learning and teaching platforms also aid their listening skills. This finding resonates with several studies by Jabeen & Thomas 2015; Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Rajendran & Yunus 2021; Puteri Rohani et al., 2021, which found online learning was able to develop students' English listening skills.

“the usage of online teaching platform is very good for me because listening exercise I can repeat the audio to improve my listening skill” – R40

“learned how to correctly listen clearly and correctly the pronunciation of native speakers” – R53

Research Question Three: What are the Challenges Students Encounter During Online Learning?

During Covid-19, students and teachers had no options except online learning to conduct classes, as face-to-face class was not allowed. As indicated in the previous section, while most participants had favourable opinions of online learning for teaching oral communications, some found it challenging as they encountered a few obstacles which caused them to become disinterested in online learning. Many cited internet connections as the main reason for them when it came to online learning. The finding is expected as many studies found a similar problem. During the period of covid-19, most participants stayed at home, and some lived in rural areas where internet coverage was limited. The finding is in accordance with studies conducted by Vo and Pham 2021, Das et al. 2021, Tuyen and Lian 2021 and Azleen et al. 2020. Those studies revealed that students were unsatisfied with the online classes during the Covid-19 period due to the internet connectivity.

“Yes. Failed internet connection” – R6

“Slow internet connection may make accessing course material frustrating.” –R20

“Yes. It is wifi problem sometimes when i want to access in online learning” –R25

“I had difficult time to submit my work during online learning because I used my own data and the internet was slow” – R26

“Hard to upload video because of size video too large” – R27

“Challenge when want to do online learning, internet network are slow” - R35

“Sometimes, while do the live classes, i can not enter the live. But i'm sure that it is not because the internet connection” – R52

In addition, a few participants commented that they were easily distracted because their surroundings were not conducive to studying. Not every student has the luxury of having their own room, as some of them have to share with their siblings, which may affect their study routine. In addition, some participants wrote that staying at home means dividing their attention and time between class and house chores.

“Cannot focusing on it and maybe will disturb by others things.” – R15

“im enjoying but it was hard sometime because there are another commitment also at home that i need to do and it was disturbing my concentrated” – R45

“a lot of distractions such as friends ask me to hang out together, not focused and there is commitment at home” – R47

“I can't focus. Too many distraction” – R48

Few participants preferred having classes and discussions in the traditional classroom. They claimed online classes would encourage laziness as there was no teacher supervision, leading to students submitting work at the last minute and lacking enthusiasm. This finding supports the findings by Azleen et al. (2020), where online learning affected students' learning motivation and interest to continue enjoying the new learning environment.

“more prefer to discuss in class is better” – R8

“Meeting and solve everything class” – R11

“online platform for teaching is not very encourage for my opinion. This is because students will do task in online platform last minute” – R41

“smartv3 is give advantage for lazy student. So, this is no good for us” –R43

“Feels more comfortable which students can eat or laying down comfortly while the online classes running” – R49

Conclusion

This study examined low-proficiency undergraduate students' perceptions of online learning in teaching English communication skills. As evidenced by quantitative and qualitative findings, most participants had a favourable opinion of online instruction for teaching oral communication skills. The participants stated that the interactivity of online learning has made it appealing to them. Dailey-Herbet's (2018) indicated that the interactivity of online classes has three communication categories which are communication between i) learner-learner, ii) learner-instructor, and iii) learner-content. Based on the study's findings, the online learning conducted in the study tick all three boxes. The result also revealed that online learning provides accessibility with information that can be accessed whenever and wherever needed. It could lower the learners' anxiety as they engage with classmates and teachers without embarrassment. Further, the use of online learning in communication classrooms helps develop their communication and listening skills. The response from the participants showed that with an online teaching platform like Smartv3, it was easier for them to listen to the audio track repeatedly and improve their pronunciation of difficult words.

However, despite the students' positive responses to online learning, the findings also revealed that most participants faced internet problems. The slow internet connection at home and the limited internet data pose a significant challenge for them to continue with online classes. These even prevented students who resided in rural areas from attending the class. If this situation persists or another pandemic happens, the Malaysian government should strive to improve and expand internet coverage throughout the country. Albeit the popular opinions in favour of online learning, instructors should not neglect the other opinions as Kobayashi and Little (2010) state, "The instructors should be aware that many variables including the proficiency level of students, the length of time they have used the program, the limitations of the program's interface as well as the learner's own level of computer literacy can affect learner perceptions and satisfaction with blended learning", (p.115). To fully utilise the benefit of online learning and increase students' engagement, teachers should do further testing on available online applications and determine which online application could offer greater benefits in the teaching of language learning. Besides, the university is also responsible for providing and equipping teachers with the necessary tools and training to facilitate online teaching and learning.

Limitations of the Study

It is essential to acknowledge the limitation of the study. First, the data for the study was limited to the sections taught by the researcher. The researcher decided not to include other classes from other teachers as those classes were not entirely conducted synchronously throughout the 14 weeks and the differences in online applications used. Thus, a comparison study between all classes of oral communication skills is recommended to validate the current findings and obtain more comprehensive views of the issue. Second, as stated in the preceding section, the researcher only used Smartv3, Padlet, Webex breakout room, and Kahoot during online learning. Hence, it is interesting to study different online learning applications used by other teachers in teaching English oral communication skills to gauge the effectiveness of those online applications in improving students' communication skills.

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