Online Learning and the Future of Higher Education in ESL

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Abstract

Teaching of English as Second Language (ESL) has been moved to online classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, little is known about the present-time advantages and disadvantages of total online ESL learning. This literature review is focused on the results of existing studies and provide recommendations for the future. Studies were included in the review if they were designed as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods empirical endeavours that explored how ESL students and teachers perceive the presently-delivered ESL online learning in higher education.

Eight studies met the inclusion criteria for the review. They identified some of the challenges of total online ESL learning: problems with Internet and devices, limited student engagement, limited social interaction, unsatisfactory educational provision, and eyestrain. Advantages were recognised: students' familiarity with the digital world, increased access to learning, and heightened participation of shy students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a difficult time for, teachers and students have worked hard to overcome many challenges. Technology has enabled students and teachers to teach away from institutions to keep safe. This review showed teachers should improve their digital proficiency, use discussion groups and forums to increase student engagement, and ensure sufficient one-to-one feedback. Future researchers should explore the benefits and challenges of online ESL learning.

Introduction

1. Introduction

1. 1. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered educational delivery throughout the globe. Statistics by UNICEF (2020) indicate that 84% of countries have moved their educational provision online. Presently, university students'

learning unfolds via videoconferencing tools such as Zoom, Google classroom and teachers use chat applications such as WhatsApp to send material and platforms such as Kahoot and Quizlet to create online assessments (Gamage et al., 2020, p.292). Technology has advanced to a stage where students can stay away from the classroom and still engage in classes during one of the most difficult times in human history. However, there exists a widespread debate on whether online learning should be the future of higher education. While some scholars argue that digital learning could deteriorate educational quality (Abedoyin & Soykan, 2020, p.9), politicians contend that we should abandon the traditional classroom model and reimagine education with online technology at the forefront (Herman, 2020, par.5).

In the past studies have revealed that digital platforms can improve students' material comprehension and knowledge acquisition (Nguyen, 2015, p.309; Panigrahi et al., 2018, p.1). These studies, however, were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. The present-day situation is different from technology-mediated education that unfolded in the past since students are forced to switch to digital platforms (Adnan & Anwar, 2020, p.46). For this reason, the current situation appears more reflective of 'crisis learning' than 'normal' online learning (Pace et al., 2020, p.2).

Scholars stress the need for more studies on the advantages and disadvantages of educational delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic (Abedoyin & Soykan, 2020, p.10). One identified need is to explore the efficacy of online learning in English as a Second Language (ESL) context in university settings (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.51). This focus is important because English language skills may increase students' employability for remote jobs, which are becoming the norm due to COVID-19 (Kniffin et al., 2021, p.64). This literature review study responded to this research need.

1. 2. Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions

This literature review aimed to synthesise the results of studies that explored university students' and teachers' perspectives of online ESL learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specific objectives were to (1) identify advantages and disadvantages of the present-day online ESL learning and (2) arrive at recommendations for the future of ESL teaching in higher education. Research questions that drove the review were

formulated as follows:

> **RQ1:** What are the advantages of online ESL learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
> **RQ2:** What are the disadvantages of online ESL learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
> **RQ3:** What are the implications of identified advantages and disadvantages of online learning for the future of higher ESL education?

1. 3. Organisation of the Literature Review

The results section describes the characteristics of included studies and thematically analyses these studies' findings on the disadvantages and advantages of online learning. When discussing results, the review identifies implications for the future of online ESL learning in higher education. Before concluding, the limitations of this review are recognised as well.

2. Literature Review

The literature was searched to reflect this review's aim to understand students' and teachers' perspectives of online ESL learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting papers for this review firstly it had to be published after 2020 (i.e., after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic). To be considered for inclusion, studies needed to had explored either ESL students' or ESL teachers' perspectives of online learning during the pandemic. Studies' participants had to be teaching or learning in higher education settings. Finally, the review sought to include only studies that collected data, using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed research methods.

3. Results

3. 1. Disadvantages of Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic
3. 1. 2. Problems with Internet and Devices

Six studies recognised that online learning is challenging due to limited access to fast and affordable Internet (Adnan & Anwar, 2020, p.48; Agung et al., 2020, p.230; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.63; Famularish, 2020, p.117; Maican & Colorado, 2021, p.793; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020, p.5). Both students and teachers contended that they often do not have sufficient signal strength and Internet quota for online learning. Many students in these studies said that they have access to smartphones but not to laptops. This issue was seen as problematic because much of the online lessons' content is not accessible on phones.

3. 1. 3. Limited Student Engagement

Online learning was perceived insufficient for safeguarding students' engagement in five studies (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.65; Agung et al., 2020, p.233; Famularish, 2020, p.116; Gao & Zhang, 2020, p.27: Maican & Cocorada, 2021, p.793; Shahzad et al., 2020, p.6). Teachers said that students are often not punctual and do not submit coursework on time. Similarly, students argued that they often fail to submit assignments because of limited Internet connection or because they need to borrow devices from parents or siblings. Teachers found it challenging to engage students, and students reported feeling bored and unmotivated during lessons. They were prone to distraction because they were learning from home and had their family members present. Attending lectures on phones and laptops was also distracting because students frequently received messages from friends.

3. 1. 4. Limited Social Interaction

Six studies reported that online learning diminishes the quality of social interactions (Adnan & Anwar, 2020, p.48; Agung et al., 2020, p.232; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.68; Famularish, 2020, p.116; Maican & Cocorada, 2021, p.793; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020, p.7). Students remarked that they do not enjoy communicating with peers digitally and that they missed face-to-face interaction. They also found it challenging to complete group assignments online. Teachers added that they could not strengthen their bonds with students because they were interacting digitally. From their

perspective, students appeared distant and uninvolved, which limited the ability to connect to them.

3. 1. 5. Educational Provision

Some issues of educational provision in online learning was identified in three papers. Teachers interviewed by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020, p.66) and Gao and Zhang (2020, p.28) said that they have no experience in providing education in digital settings. They are often ill-prepared for lessons, which reduces the quality of educational delivery. Teachers added that tailoring the online learning experience to students' learning styles is much more difficult online than in face-to-face settings. They also noted not being able to give personal feedback easily in online environments. Students in the study by Shahzad et al. (2020, p.6) similarly thought that digital platforms lack a 'personal touch', making them feel that teachers cannot focus on their needs.

Students in the research by Octaberlina and Muslimin (2020, p.5) and teachers in the study by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020, p.69) remarked that spending much time in online learning environments provokes eye strain.

3. 2. Advantages of Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic
3. 2. 1. Students' Familiarity with the Digital World

The findings of three studies indicated that online learning is easy to implement because students are familiar with the digital world (Adnan & Anwar, 2020, p.47; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.64; Famularish, 2020, p.119). Students contended that they feel qualified to use laptops and smartphones for digital learning and that they are familiar with online communication.

3. 2. 2. Increased Access to Learning

Three studies revealed that online learning is beneficial because it increases learning access (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.64; Gao & Zhang, 2020, p.27; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020, p.6). Teachers argued that moving to digital learning environments diminishes the barrier of limited classroom size and helps include more students in lessons from once. Students similarly remarked that online learning allows accessing lectures remotely, which reduces the geographical barrier to education.

3. 2. 3. Increased Participation of Shy Students

Teachers in one study thought that online learning increases the participation, courage, and confidence of shy and introvert students (Gao & Zhang, 2020, p.29). These students were argued to find it easier to communicate online than in face-to-face settings because they feel safer to express their opinions when attending lectures from home.

4. Discussion

4. 1. Summary of Results

This review showed the challenges of total online ESL learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students have limited access to Internet and laptops, tend to be disengaged during lectures, and do not enjoy communicating digitally. Teachers have noticed the bond with students has shifted and have limited experience in digital learning environments, and the leap to tailor educational delivery to students' needs has been difficult. Both participant groups experience eye strain due to too much computer time. Online ESL learning appears advantageous because students are familiar with the digital world, can access lectures remotely, and are more likely to participate if they are usually unable to contribute to traditional face to face classes due to feeling shy.

4. 2. Implications for the Future of ESL Learning

The results imply that online learning will have to adapt in higher ESL education. If student's dislike learning digitally and report limited engagement, their educational performance could suffer over time. Education that relies on Internet connection and laptops is problematic because it may discriminate against students with limited financial resources. This can be readdressed if all students can be provided with equipment either by governments or institutions where funding allows. This is an opportunity to move away from paper and pencil and adapt to changes in society and technology and utilize it to ready students for the modern world and use of technology. Though face-to-face learning stimulates interactions and psychological health (Duncan & Fiske, 2015, p.36), the use of these tools can be integrated into to classroom as well as being assigned for out of class activities. Online learning could harm teachers' and students' eye sight, this has to be taken into consideration and regular breaks from the screen should be implemented. Finally, the

recognised benefits of digital education have to be combined with face-to-face classes and an ideal balance can be reached. In ideal situations, students who wish to access lectures remotely could enrol in distance learning courses, and shy students could be assisted to express themselves using alternative methods.

It is apparent through that a return to the traditional classroom will be welcomed and beneficial to students. Until this goal can be achieved, ESL teachers can address some challenges of digital educational delivery though they need support and training for effective use of the tools to ensure a learning gap does not arise between regions and schools. To overcome the issue of limited student engagement, teachers could implement discussion groups and online forums as frequently as possible (Nuewirth et al., 2020, p.10). They could attend seminars on using digital learning platforms and tailor online lessons to students' unique needs (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020, p.73). Teachers could also organise one-to-one online sessions with students who need individualised feedback (Gao & Zhang, 2020, p.32).

4. 3. Limitations of the Review

Most studies included in the review were conducted in Asia. Only one study from Europe has fulfilled the inclusion criteria, and no studies from Africa, Australia, and North and South America were located on the topic. Because of this, the obtained results cannot be generalised across continents. Future research should explore the perspectives of online ESL learning in higher education with the benefits and pitfalls of a continued digital educational delivery and relevant recommendations for the future of ESL learning.

5. Conclusion

This research reviewed studies on the perspectives of online ESL learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results suggested that digital learning is still in its infancy because of technical problems, limited student engagement, lack of satisfaction with digital communication, teachers' failure to ensure high-quality educational delivery, and eye strain. There are advantages, such as students' familiarity with the digital world, increased learning access, and enhanced

participation of shy students and the most important factor of keeping society safe by staying at home.

Based on these results, the review suggested that online learning could be infused with classes and elements used in the future. Teachers have adapted their online teaching during the pandemic, and this essential work has enabled students to carry on with their studies. Teachers can implement discussion groups and forums, learn how to use and maximise the benefits of digital platforms in class and out of the classroom, and offer individual feedback sessions to students who need them. Still, it was contended that, after the COVID-19 pandemic, ESL institutions should make use of the advancements in technology when there is a welcome return to the classroom.

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