

Online Language Learning and Teacher-Student Interaction: Experience of Students and Instructors



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ABSTRACT: Online language learning has become a household term after the Covid-19 pandemic which has played havoc all over the world. To avoid disruptions in educational activities, the education providers, mainly at the tertiary level, switched to virtual learning using different platforms. This study investigates the strengths and weaknesses of online language learning from the perception of ESL students and their instructors and pays attention to the occurrence of teacher-student interaction in online classes at a Sri Lankan university called the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. A preliminary survey with a larger number of students was followed by a concise online survey with a part of those students. Discussions were held with the volunteer students and selected instructors were met personally for interviews. At the end of the discussions, written submissions were obtained in response to open-ended questions from the students and instructors. The findings revealed that students preferred to have traditional learning due to the reasons connected to their cognitive development and prevailing technical issues in online learning. Instructors also preferred traditional learning to online learning. However, both students and instructors felt that students' performance anxiety was lower in online classes that induces them to have teacher-student interaction. It was also revealed that only those students whose language proficiency is higher involved in interaction while others remained passive irrespective of online or traditional classes. Hence, future studies are needed to investigate how students' anxiety influences students' involvement in classes and the pedagogical training needs of the instructors.

KEYWORDS: Online learning, Traditional classes, Interaction, Anxiety, University ESL classes

1. INTRODUCTION

Online language learning is not a new phenomenon in the world, because of the rapid development in communication technology which increased the demand for online language learning (Compton, 2009). In Sri Lanka, online language learning was introduced suddenly in early 2020 after the Covid-19 pandemic has started to play havoc in the world. This resulted in shifting the mode of teaching to virtual learning for almost all the courses at the higher educational institutes and private schools. Until such time, in Sri Lanka, there were other kinds of remote learning, mainly at the Open University of Sri Lanka, which was the only higher educational institute to offer degrees in the distance mode. In this study, online language learning could be defined as any learning activity that takes place using a virtual platform synchronously and mainly using the Zoom platform with or without video. The traditional or face-to-face learning refers to classroom learning with the presence of an instructor. This study investigates the strengths and weaknesses of online language learning from the perception of students and instructors and pays attention to interaction in online classes.

Sri Lanka, which is a small island in the Indian Ocean, has a population of just over two billion people and has 15 national universities and a few other degree awarding higher educational institutes. Each year, more than 30,000 students are admitted to different courses. At universities, courses are held face to face throughout the semester. University teachers are encouraged to teach in a student-centred approach to students. Only after the Covid-19 outbreak universities switched to online platform all of a sudden, mainly the Zoom app has become popular to conduct video-based synchronous teaching. The switching was not an easy task for the university teachers as this was the first time for more than 90% of the university teachers to teach online (The Lanka Education and Research Network-LEARN).

This study was conducted at the Department of English Language Teaching of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL), where the researcher has been working on the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) degree programme. The online language learning has been taking place at the department for nearly nine months at the time this study was conducted. The university requested all the faculties in the university to go with online teaching after the Covid-19 outbreak which brought the country to a standstill beginning from April 2020. This direction was made as a result of the advice from the University Grants Commission (UGC), Sri Lanka. This was the first time for almost all the universities to conduct classes online and these online

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classes were facilitated by the LEARN (The Lanka Education and Research Network), a government-subsidized firm, which provides specialized internet service for educational and research purposes and is governed by the national universities and the UGC. After the introduction of online learning, the universities, the UGC and LEARN organized a few training sessions for the academic staff on online teaching and maintaining VLE (Virtual Learning Environment).

In Sri Lanka online teaching and learning has become a mandatory requirement at universities and private schools. However, only the secondary level government schools did not take up this task because of the unavailability of the technological facilities. It was observed that online learning had reached a splendid growth at the first two quarters of the year 2020 for the very obvious reason of the Covid-19 pandemic. Daily Zoom users through 'LEARN' have grown from 9 to 12 to around 45,000 each hour (LEARN, learn.lk). This number includes the clients. This number is comparatively higher when compared with the total student population in Sri Lankan universities which was estimated to be around 100,000 internal students and other over 300,000 external and postgraduate students (University statistics, UGC, 2019) who used Zoom on daily basis.

Language classes were also conducted online and the Zoom app was more popular in Sri Lanka for online classes compared to others (e.g. Microsoft Team) because of its convenience, easy access and flexibility. At the SEUSL, the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) was continued and the VLE was used as a platform to share the learning materials, while the direct teaching via Zoom continued synchronously. The class size was around 55 students per group and an instructor was given in-charge for a group for teaching and handling online assessments, especially formative assessments. Some of the issues reported in online classes in general at SEUSL were the network coverage issues for students who live in remote regions and also the students, especially female students, were reluctant to turn on their videos. Lack of interaction between instructor and students was also reported by some instructors. Hence, despite the fact that online learning has made language learning possible with a lower cost (Godwin-Jones, 2003), less interaction between teacher and students has been an inherent problem in online learning (Hampel & Hauck, 2004). This view was registered earlier by Hron and Friedrich (2003) and Robertson and Klotz (2002) who argued that online learning promotes independent studies so that personal interaction between teacher and students may not be facilitated.

Even though several studies have come out of online learning focusing on Sri Lanka and further afield, studies that investigate the issues and potentials in online language learning are limited including teacher-student interaction in online ESL classes. Hence, a systematic study is needed at SEUSL which is a peripheral university and runs the online education with limited resources and technical know-how. Therefore, at the backdrop of the fact that studies that deal with online language learning with an emphasis of teacher-student interaction are limited, this study on students' perceptions towards online learning as well as instructors' experience in conducting online classes is worth investigating. Even though the pedagogical challenges of instructors are an important and neglected area of investigation, within the scope of the study it was not considered. Further, this study had the following research questions:

1.1 Research Questions

RQ1: What perceptions do the ESL students have of online learning vs traditional face-to-face learning, especially with regard to teacher-student interaction?

RQ2: What perceptions do the ESL instructors have regarding the online learning, teacher-student interaction and the challenges in online teaching?

RQ3: What suggestions could be made to make online learning more successful?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning or virtual learning carries the meaning of conducting academic activities in a remote manner using technology as a platform where students and teachers do not meet face to face (Wang & Chen, 2013, as cited in Sun, 2014). However, the traditional view of online learning is changing with enhanced face-to-face teacher-student interaction (Sun, 2014) with the introduction of video conferencing technology. Nevertheless, in a country like Sri Lanka with a larger number of students in classes, including ESL classes, and with limited resources this synchronous interaction may not be possible.

"The definition of a virtual classroom is the use of a video conferencing system to bring together a group of people, usually a trainer and learners, who can see each other, share documents and visual displays, talk via audio or chat and undertake interactive activities individually or in groups. It is therefore a remote, synchronous activity, unlike e-learning (which is remote and asynchronous) or conventional classroom-based training (which is face to face and synchronous)" (Marshall, 2019: Blog- Global Learning and Development).

In this literature review, I focus on studies that dealt with students' perceptions of online learning and the experience of instructors, mainly their challenges.

2.1 Students' perceptions of online vs traditional learning

In a study conducted by Sun (2014), the learners reported that the most challenging thing is learning online completely. They reported many challenges that include lack of interaction and practice with peers, no immediate feedback, lack of group discussion

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and having less communication with the teacher. The students also stated that they felt lonely in online learning. Li (2016) in his study among Chinese students investigated the online language learning experience of Chinese undergraduates as well as teacher-student interaction in synchronous online classes. In the study, it was revealed that students tried to communicate with their teachers by sending text messages. In addition, they had the facilities to communicate through audio and video channels. Questions asked by the teachers were replied through text chat messages but there were technical issues in communication and also the teachers without waiting for students' answer/s after having asked questions moved to the other activity.

Many studies have considered face-to-face classes as beneficial over the online classes because students' facial expressions and body language are important for the teacher (Murphy, 2015). The teacher can identify the inactive or quiet students and deal with them too in face-to-face classes. Manegre and Ali Sabiri (2020) also reported that students would always like to learn from a teacher in a physical classroom.

In Sri Lanka, even before the Covid-19 issue the feasibility of introducing or expanding the online education has been discussed. Rathirane (2013) looked into the successfulness of the Bachelor of Business Management (BBM) online Degree Programme that was introduced at the University of Jaffna. The study revealed that there was higher number of dropout rates among the participants of online learning. The main reason for this nature was the attitudes of the students who were accustomed to traditional teacher-centred classrooms. When the online education was introduced, they had to share many responsibilities and thus a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching was a burden for them.

Liyanagunawardena, Meiji, Rassool and Williams (2014) investigated the feasibility of introducing online learning at a Sri Lankan university. The study revealed several issues connected with online learning such as inadequate infrastructure facilities, the lack of access to computers and the internet, and limited computer knowledge of the students. The same findings were echoed in another reported study (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, Rassool & Williams, 2014) too.

In Sri Lanka, in the recent past, even though there were several studies that dealt with general potentials and issues of online learning, studies concerning online language learning have been limited in number. Hayashi, Maddawin, Garcia and Hewagamage (2020) identified the implementation of massive online learning for the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Their study revealed that though the implementation is successful in a country like Sri Lanka which is comparable to developed countries, the shortage of resources and training needs are prevailing. The requirement of training for online teachers was also expressed by Rameez, Lumna and Fowsar (2020) but they focussed on online learning in general. Similarly, Dvir and Schatz-Oppenheimer (2020) found in a study in Israel among the novice teachers that there were three challenges and opportunities related to three central categories: technological, pedagogical and educational system.

2.2 Benefits and problems of online language learning (OLL)

The online language learning has been in practice in other parts of the world since the year 2000 (Blake, 2011). Hence, it becomes popular once the students are familiar with and have accessibility to technology. In some studies, OLL has been valued by students positively (Manegre & Ali Sabiri, 2020). Manegre and Ali Sabiri also believe that online language learning could be a better alternative for traditional classrooms because they believe that students learn faster in virtual classrooms. On the other hand, Kobzar and Kuriata (2015) claim that students prefer to learn under experienced teachers irrelevant of the mode of teaching; online or traditional. That means teachers' role is important in any kind of classes. One reason why Manegre and Ali Sabiri consider online language learning important is because it is deemed to reduce students' performance anxiety, which, otherwise, would be higher in a face-to-face classroom. This situation is considered to be increasing the second language production.

The common technical problems in online learning are frequent interruptions in internet connections, poor connectivity, etc. However, Manegre and Ali Sabiri (2020) consider that advances in technology continue to minimize these interruptions gradually. Another inherent problem of online courses that is often criticized is the lack of teacher-student interaction (Murday, Ushida & Chenoweth, 2008). However, synchronous classes via Learning Management Systems (LMS) have overcome this issue too. Students can make use of online chat, whiteboards, and videoconferencing technology to help foster vital learning communities in second language instruction (Wang & Chen, 2007). Similarly, Barry (2019) also describes that the features of virtual classroom systems, specifically the video, chat, and text features, provide the opportunity for students to maintain interaction, enhance the students' engagement in classes and bring a sense of community.

In Sri Lanka, in online classes, which are usually held via Zoom platform, students participate from home and they do not like to switch on the video. This happens for two reasons. One is to increase the quality of the meeting as the voice becomes distorted when the video is on. In fact, conducting classes with the video has been difficult as the class size is usually above 55 and consumes a lot of data with the limited bandwidth. Other one is connected with the culture. The majority Muslim female students would not prefer to expose themselves in the Zoom which has been stigmatized as an unsafe social media for privacy if the videos are on. Interestingly, this situation prevails in the West too. In the American Cornell university, in a survey conducted by Castelli and Sarvary (2021) among the undergraduates enrolled in the Investigative Biology Laboratory course revealed several reasons for not switching on the video. Some of them were they were concerned about other people being seen behind them and their

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physical location being visible. Some other reasons were students felt that others would look at them, and weaker internet connection.

2.3 Interaction in online language learning

The concept of student-centred learning which was advocated by the UGC in the past has been put under a question after the online teaching has been started. Interactive learning has been considered important for effective teaching and learning and the teacher-learner interaction as well as learner-learner interaction is necessary for constructive learning even in online learning (Sun, 2011). This concept has already been established in the constructive learning point of view as well as sociocultural view of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Wang and Chen (2007) consider that interaction is an integral part of a communicative language learning process just like previous other researchers (Hall 1995; Lantolf 1994; Long 1996; Mitchell & Myles 1998; Swain & Lapkin 1995).

Even though the possibilities are available for developing interaction in online language learning classes, teachers may not be confident, experienced and may not have the skills to develop online interaction (Ernest, Heiser & Murphy, 2013). This situation could be even worse for a country like Sri Lanka which experienced an overnight shift to online learning due to the compelling situations. The major problem teachers report is the lack of interaction in online language learning. Sun (2014) notes that in online language teaching there is lack of interaction between teacher and learners as well as among learners. McLoughlin and Lee (2010) call for more student participation in selecting, and designing through personalized, customized and adaptive approaches. They also claim that online teachers face a problem of changing traditional teacher-student relationship. That is, they envisage that the traditional teacher-centred approaches are being shifted towards a more participatory approach. Sun (2014) also argues that online learning has been shifted from teacher-centred approaches towards a personalized, multi-dimensional model of teaching.

3. METHOD

This study employs a mixed methods approach which used quantitative surveys and personal interviews. Both ESL students and their instructors were the participants in the study. Survey questionnaires, shared online with the students, were used to collect data, while face-to-face personal interviews were held with the instructors. The surveys were administered at two stages. At the first stage a common survey questionnaire was circulated online via using google form. These questions focused on basic information about online learning. In the preliminary survey, 708 students participated from two faculties: Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language (FIA) and Faculty of Arts and Culture (FAC), 370 students and 338 students respectively. In the second stage, 203 students responded and they were from the Faculty of Arts only. This was a convenient sampling because the session was on for the second year Arts students only and that they were selected.

Students were informed of the objectives of the research and they could make the choice of participating in the survey. The instructors were approached and their consent and free time were found by a research assistant for discussion, of them eight were available. They were met individually and after the discussion they were asked to submit their written answers for the discussed questions. All the instructors had more than four years of teaching experience at the time of the interview. In addition, four of them have followed a Master's degree in TESL/linguistics and the rest are following presently.

In the follow-up survey 203 students responded out of 338 students in the second year batch, of them there were 12 male students and the rest were females because in the university admission female-male ratio was 90:10. These students who participated in the survey had been studying English as a Second Language and they had been grouped into six different ability groups. Following this survey, the students who took part in the survey were requested to join a Zoom meeting on a later date for a focus group discussion and only a few (less than ten students) joined it. Others might have been busy or did not want to join. A few of them submitted written answers at the end of the discussion.

4. FINDINGS

The findings are presented in two sections. Section 1 describes the preliminary survey which was administered to the students in two faculties. A preliminary survey was planned because the survey questionnaire was to be administered via online using google form and the students were not familiar with online surveys so it was decided to have a preliminary survey with a few questions to get the students to become acquainted with the online survey.

4.1 Section 1: Preliminary survey

The preliminary survey was used to find the basic details of the students who were to commence their semester II academic studies in the year two. In both faculties, female students' intake is higher than the male students and it is the general pattern each year in the faculties, as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1: Student number gender-wise in the faculties

| Faculty | Male | Female | Total |
|---------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| FIA | 88 – (24%) | 282 – (76%) | 370 |
| FAC | 45 – (13%) | 293 – (87%) | 338 |
| Total | 133 – (19%) | 575 – (81%) | 708 |

The age of the students ranged from 20-22 years and 97% of the students fell into this category. Around ninety-three percent of the students from each faculty have studied in their mother tongue, Tamil, up to their advanced level¹ classes while others had followed English medium instruction or bilingual instructions. The bilingual instruction usually includes Tamil and English.

Table 2: Medium of instruction of the students

| Faculty | Bilingual instruction | English Medium instruction | Mother tongue instruction |
|---------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| FAC | 5% | 2% | 93% |
| FIA | 7.5% | 0.5% | 92% |

It was revealed from the survey that 98% of the students possess smartphones and of them 90% have internet connection, as indicated in Table 3 below. These figures are the same for both faculties. It was also found that some remote regions which are located far from the cities do not have access to connectivity from any network provider. Twenty percent of the students from FAC and fifteen from FIA claimed to have laptops but only five percent of them used it for participating in online classes via Zoom because of the issues in connectivity. Students felt that connecting via a smartphone is easy for them and some network providers made the data cost free for Zoom classes via the LEARN which is the government subsidised private firm.

Table 3: Availability of smartphones and laptops and self-learning of English

| Faculty | Smart phone % | | Internet connection % | | Laptop % | | Self-learning of English online % | |
|------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| | Available | Not available | Available | Not available | Available | Not available | Use internet | Not using |
| FAC | 98 | 2 | 90 | 10 | 20 | 80 | 15 | 85 |
| FIA | 97 | 3 | 89 | 11 | 15 | 85 | 19 | 81 |

Further, it was reported by the students that only a few of them used internet to learn English by themselves. These percentages were 15 and 19 for FAC and FIA respectively.

4.2 Section II

Following the preliminary survey, only the students from the FAC were requested to fill another questionnaire which was also circulated online. The selection of students from the FAC was based on the convenience of the researcher because the sessions were in progress for them and the instructors were able to meet the students of the particular faculty more frequently. In the follow-up survey, 203 students responded out of 338 students in the second year batch, as mentioned above. These students had been studying English as a Second Language, grouped in six different ability groups.

Of these students, 95% used phones for online learning, whereas only 5% used laptops to participate in online classes. Hence, none of the students who used laptops owned them but they had to borrow them from family members.

4.2.1 Network coverage of the students

Regarding the network coverage, 45% of the students reported that they had average coverage, while 27% of them stated that their network coverage was poor to very poor. Frequent failure of the students' online connections and distorted connections were reported by both the students and the staff. Students' geographic locations also influenced this. Most of the students in the FAC are from remote regions of the eastern province. Figure 1 explains these figures.

¹ Advanced level is the upper secondary classes and the examination at the advanced level is used to admit students to universities on a competitive basis.

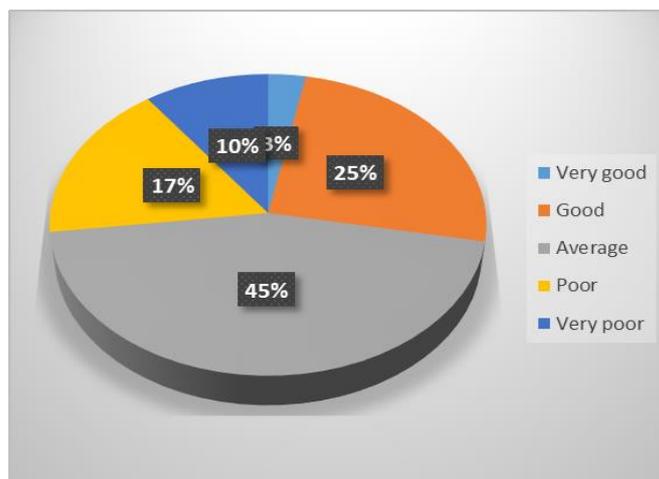


Figure 1: Network coverage of the students

4.2.2 Interaction in traditional vs online classes

Fifty-nine percent of the students reported that they ‘sometimes’ asked questions in traditional classes, while 27% claimed to have asked questions ‘always’ or ‘usually’. These percentages are more or less the same for online classes. Even though students reported like these, reality may be different as revealed by the instructors. In both online and traditional language classes only the students who are in the proficient language groups responded to instructors’ questions and they asked questions of the instructors. However, both students and instructors agreed that the fear or anxiety of asking questions or answering questions was less in online language classes. Table 4 explains these.

Table 4: Interaction in online classes

| Interaction in classes | Scale | Traditional face-to-face English classes % | Online English classes % |
|--|-----------|--|--------------------------|
| Do you ask questions? | Always | 9 | 7 |
| | Usually | 18 | 15 |
| | Sometimes | 59 | 55 |
| | Rarely | 9 | 16 |
| | Never | 5 | 7 |
| Do you answer questions? | Always | 33 | 30 |
| | Usually | 41 | 35 |
| | Sometimes | 22 | 25 |
| | Rarely | 2 | 7 |
| | Never | 2 | 2 |
| Do you feel shy or anxious in answering or asking questions? | Always | 5 | 4 |
| | Usually | 11 | 8 |
| | Sometimes | 47 | 33 |
| | Rarely | 17 | 22 |
| | Never | 20 | 33 |

4.2.3 Students’ perception of online vs traditional classes

Students generally agreed that in the traditional classes they could read materials easily and could get the help from the peers compared to the online classes. Around 75% of the students agreed/ strongly agreed with these claims as displayed in Table 5. They also stated that while being in traditional classes they felt comfortable but at the same time only 27% agreed with the statement that being in traditional classes is fearful for them because the lecturers might ask questions.

Table 5: Students’ perception of online vs traditional classes

| Statements | Agreement in % | | | | |
|--|----------------|----|----------------------------|----|----|
| | SA | AG | Neither agree nor disagree | DA | SD |
| 1. In the traditional face-to-face classes I can read materials easily compared to online classes. | 30 | 44 | 18 | 7 | 1 |
| 2. In the traditional face-to-face classes I can get more help from friends compared to online classes. | 31 | 44 | 14 | 10 | 1 |
| 3. Being in a traditional face-to-face classroom is good for me. | 44 | 42 | 9 | 3 | 2 |
| 4. Being in a traditional face-to-face class is fearful because the lecturer may ask question or ask me to do an activity. | 7 | 20 | 30 | 36 | 7 |
| 5. In the online class I can’t get any help from friends compared to traditional face-to-face classes. | 18 | 45 | 25 | 10 | 2 |
| 6. I can’t do group tasks in online learning compared to traditional face-to-face classes. | 26 | 49 | 15 | 7 | 3 |
| 7. In online classes it is difficult to read materials compared to traditional face-to-face classes. | 20 | 47 | 20 | 9 | 4 |
| 8. I have problems in attending online classes due to connectivity issues. | 40 | 21 | 20 | 10 | 9 |
| 9. I have a noise free (silent) environment at home to attend online classes. | 35 | 15 | 5 | 20 | 25 |
| 10. My lecturer's connectivity is good. | 30 | 35 | 20 | 10 | 5 |
| 11. My lecturer's voice is always audible (I can listen to). | 35 | 20 | 15 | 25 | 13 |

SA- Strongly Agree; AG-Agree; SAD –Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat Agree; DA- Disagree; SD-Strongly Disagree
 The majority of the students (63%) pointed out that they were unable to get any help from friends in online classes compared to traditional face-to-face classes. Twenty-five percent of the students remained neutral with this claim. Moreover, 75% of the students mentioned that they were unable to involve in group activities and reading the materials online was a problem for 67% of the students. A considerable number of students (61%) had connectivity issues too. Hence, their opinion on having a noise-free environment was divided into 50% and 45% between agreement and disagreement respectively. Students also generally agreed with the statements that their lecturers’ connectivity was good and their voices were audible. However, for the latter only 55% had shown their agreement.

Students’ preference of learning

Students preferred to learn English in the traditional face-to-face classes. They felt that the learning environment is good in those classes. Also, students opined that traditional classes were good for teacher-student interaction. 75% of the students had preferred to have traditional classes, opposed to only 14% of the students who liked online classes. A similar percentage of students personally liked traditional classes. Figure 2 depicts these findings.

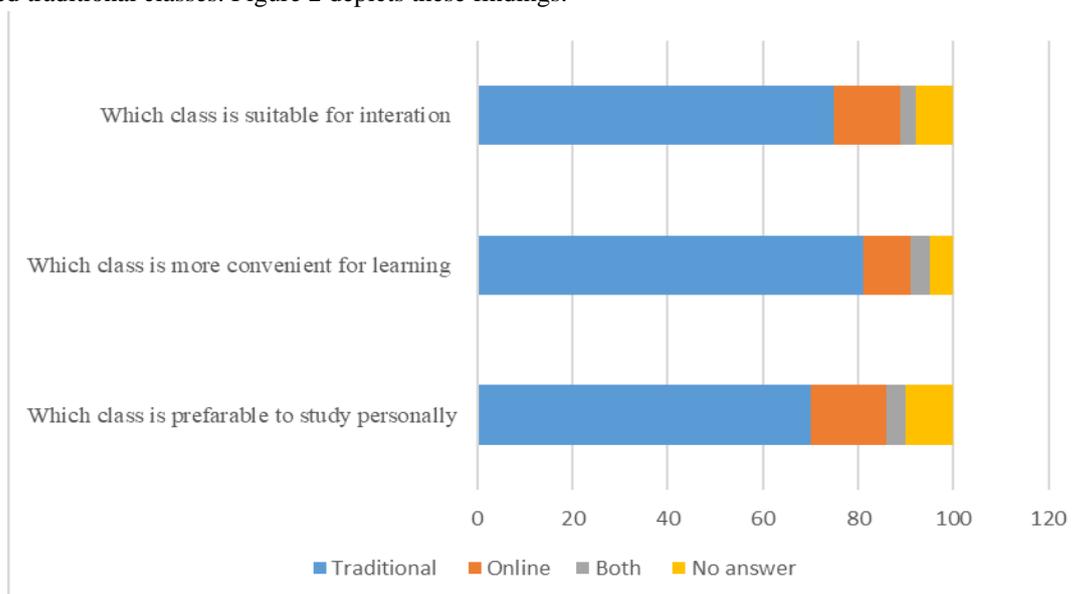


Figure 2: Students’ preference of learning

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4.2.4 Advantages and disadvantages of online learning

The main advantages of online learning students considered are that it saves time, and is easy and convenient for studying from home. The students also reported that they did not feel shy or nervous when they tried to talk to their instructors. Otherwise, in the traditional class they felt anxious.

However, looking at a mobile screen for a long time has been a problem for them and the coverage or connectivity issue is high. Seventy percent of the students reported the coverage issue that led to distorted voice, and disconnection. At home when they were online there were distractions from family members too.

4.2.5 Advantages and disadvantages of traditional learning

Students expressed that studying in face-to-face traditional classes in the presence of a teacher is more easy to understand the lessons and effective. Students were unable to adapt to the sudden change of online learning as they were used to face-to-face learning. None of the students reported any disadvantage of traditional learning.

4.2.6 Students' responses at the end of focus group discussion on online vs face-to-face learning

The students' responses to the open-ended questions varied from the ones they reported in the survey questionnaire. Most of them preferred online learning though they explained the technical difficulties they faced during online classes. S1, S2.... refer to the students.

S1:

Learning English via Zoom is effective. Because we feel learning English through Zoom is more comfortable as learning face to face. Instructors teach English in the same way you teach in the physical classroom. Therefore, we could learn English effectively via Zoom than other lectures. But only the major issue we face when learning via Zoom is that the network issue.

S2:

In my point of view, I see both online learning and face to face learning in the same way. The only problem we face when learning online is the problem of inadequate network connection.

S3:

I feel that learning online is the most effective one when comparing with face to face or traditional learning. Because when teacher asks question in the face to face classroom we feel difficult to answer the question. But if it is the online classroom we feel more comfortable to answer as we are behind the screen. As others said that the only problem we face when learning online is the network issue. For an example, today I was participating in the lesson but I couldn't understand the topic we studied today because of the coverage problem.

S4:

I agree that learning language online is effective when comparing with other subjects. But the problem is that if the power goes out we could not continue learning the language. Moreover, if teacher asks question when learning face to face we find difficult to answer as we face together but answering when learning online is much easy and comfortable.

S5:

The problem with online learning is that as we learn the language from home environment, the external sounds and other disruptive noises restricts the amount of learning. Further, it is very difficult to concentrate in the class among other noises.

S6:

I like to learn English via online but sometimes, when the voice gets break we cannot follow the lesson in a coherent way. Other than that I am fine with Zoom learning.

The students' responses should be treated with caution because only ten students participated in the online discussion and of them six had sent the written responses. These students are from group 2 of the ability group which consisted of the good performers. Due to their free schedule they were able to participate in the discussion. For these students, learning via online or traditional classes would not make any difference. On the other hand, instructors' view was different from the students' as explained below.

4.2.7 Instructors' responses to the open-ended questions: whether online learning is preferable to traditional learning.

All the instructors except T5 and T7 reported that the traditional learning is preferable to online learning and for them a learning environment is available only in traditional classroom learning. Responses expressed by some of the instructors are given below. T1, T2... refer to the instructors.

T1: As far I am concerned, the students show more interest in traditional classroom than in virtual classroom. It is difficult to ensure that the students are progressing with the activities and discussions within the allocated time. Usually, the activities and discussions end up taking more time than initially planned because, it takes much time and effort to make the students engage in the classroom activities actively unlike the traditional classrooms.

T2: I do not think students show more interest in online teaching compared to the traditional classroom since most of the students in my group use smartphones for online learning they get distracted by messages and notifications they often receive and it leads to diversion which means they do not concentrate on the lesson.

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T5: *From my experience and the feedback collected from the students it is obvious that most of the students prefer learning (specially) English online than in the traditional classroom. The reason they put forward is, they could learn English without fear and anxiety than learning in the traditional classroom.*

T6: *I think most of the students don't show interest in online learning compared to traditional classroom. The students may feel isolated and also it will be tiring to sit in front of a machine for hours and hours. More students are not active in online classroom than traditional classroom. They keep quiet as we can't see them. Therefore, as teachers we need some training to make the class alive.*

T7: *It depends according to the level of students. The students who are very active are still active in the traditional classes as well as in the online classes. Some students are same in all the situations. But, the change I can observe is, the students who feel shy talks more and show more attention in online classes rather than traditional classes since they feel somewhat comfortable in online classes.*

The instructors' views exemplify that they have mixed opinion regarding online vs traditional learning. Some of them favoured traditional learning, while others favoured online learning.

4.2.8 Do you think students involve in more (or less) interaction in online English classes compared to the traditional classroom? Briefly describe.

The instructors' views of which class is good for teacher-student interaction were also obtained. Their views varied as some of them stated that in online classes interaction is high, while others claimed in traditional classes.

T2: *Students involve in less interaction in online classes compared to the traditional classroom. In my opinion, the online class seems to be far better to get an increased level interaction among the ability group. But the lower level students on the other hand are becoming more reluctant to come forward and they show a kind of unwillingness to take part in speaking activities especially.*

T3: *The interaction is less in online classes than the traditional classroom. Only a very few number of students respond to questions in online teaching. In fact, most of the students' microphones are muted most of the time. Furthermore, I was able to note that some students do not respond even when their names are called out. Many students use chat options to convey any messages or send answers for the questions rather than conveying messages orally. Though using chat option is also a way of interaction, I believe it creates a passive classroom.*

T4: *I feel interaction in online class is more. In traditional classroom they take much time to open their mouth. However, in online classes they are less anxious to open up. It varies from class to class and a few notable students take part eagerly. Most of them are quiet.*

T5: *I cannot simply answer either yes or no for this question. Sometimes the interaction is more and sometimes it is less. But, when it comes to online English classes, some students try to talk in English more (even though if they know they would make mistakes) than in the traditional classes because they are not visible to the audience.*

T6: *I think students interact more in online classes. They talk freely without hesitations when compared to the physical classes. Also they come forward to take roles when teaching oral activities. I can see some students are alive and they talk well in the classroom. But in some classes always few interested students come up with their ideas while others be as passive learners.*

T7: *I think students involve less interaction in online English classes compared to traditional classroom. I am not saying that there is no interaction in online classroom. But there is no interaction between students.*

T8: *Students interact a lot in online classes than traditional classes. At the same time, some of the students are not interacting in both classes. Talking about the interaction in online, the active participants are always engaging in interaction. Despite of interest among, they are unable to involve due to lack of coverage. When we give them interaction task some students actively participate with teacher, pairs and group. Even if we ask them based on name or registered number they don't interact. So, the student's interaction in online classes is less compared to the traditional classroom.*

According to instructors' views, interaction in online classes takes place to a certain extent as the students feel less anxious. This interaction depends on the language proficiency of the students. Only those students who are proficient in language ask or answer questions and participate in classroom activities such as discussion or role plays. Even though this takes place in traditional classes also, the online classes, according to the instructors, facilitate the interaction.

4.2.9 Do you think students' classroom performance anxiety (fear to speaking/answering in front of peers) is less in online ESL classes?

Instructors answered positively to this question. They felt that since the students are staying off the video, they feel confident to answer or ask questions. However, the assertion that only those students whose language proficiency is higher have less anxiety should be investigated further in the future studies. Some of the answers given by the instructors are given below.

T1: *Yes. Students' speaking anxiety is lower in online classes. They are ready to answer the questions and respond to the discussions and do not tend to feel uncomfortable. Yet, they tend to respond only when they are individually called.*

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T2: *Yes, I do. According to my classroom observation, students feel free and independent in online learning which leads to less performance anxiety. Students respond confidently in online classes, even if they cannot answer the questions they keep their microphones muted and send the answers via chat option privately. Hence, I think students do not fear in online classes.*

T3: *Yes, it may be because they don't face students or teachers directly. (There is no face to face interaction) which may have reduced their anxiety and shyness. It is true. They have a kind of carelessness / negligence.*

T4: *Yes, according to my own understanding and observation, students seem to participate and interact more with the teacher and their peers in online language classes because they feel safe and comfortable to talk being behind the screen.*

T5: *Definitely the anxiety level is low when they perform in online classroom in front of their peers. The reason is they are more comfortable to talk behind the screen.*

4.2.10 What suggestions do you have to improve the online teaching and learning?

Instructors suggested the ways to improve the effectiveness of the online learning. Some important suggestions were centred around the need for teacher training, developing interaction and enhancing student participation.

Technical support was considered important to reduce the breakage in online classes and the students should be facilitated to own laptops for studies. The sessions should be conducted with the video on to bring in a real classroom environment. Training both teachers and students is a must for the successfulness of the programme. The teachers can be trained to use the online platform effectively. For example, making use of breakout rooms and promoting cooperative learning.

Integrating more interactive activities is also useful. The teachers should also make use of various digital tools such as PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, educational applications and so on for language teaching and learning. The teachers and students should be well-trained to use VLE and other online platforms in order to have an effective online language classroom.

Students' participation and support are highly needed to continue online teaching-learning process. Students must be encouraged to participate in the classroom actively as they are in traditional classroom. Having a noise-free environment for students and attending the online classes with the video on? are also important. A fixed timetable should be maintained for language classes so that students would be ready for the classes in advance.

As an additional support for students, the online lessons can be recorded and uploaded for the access of the students. Periodical evaluation and providing feedback of the online classes to the students can possibly increase the successfulness of the teaching.

5. DISCUSSION

This study is connected with students' and instructors' perception of online vs face-to-face learning arising from a survey questionnaire and interview discussions. Therefore, the findings should be treated with caution since students' answers sometimes may not reflect the real situation. Observation of classes by the researcher could have minimised this limitation but the schedules of the classes did not permit the observation possible in the present study.

The sudden introduction of online learning has been a burden for both students and instructors but the way they overcome the adoption of innovation is appreciable. Being a developing country, Sri Lanka has efficiently handled the crisis situation.

The findings of the study indicate that most of the students who participated in online classes used a smartphone whereas using laptops could be useful for studies for easy reading of materials and better comprehension of lessons. However, the majority of the students did not possess a laptop for their studies and higher data consumption of laptops have also influenced the use of laptops. Network coverage was a common issue for the majority of the students. Only 28% of the surveyed students mentioned that their coverage was good/very good.

Even though students reported that they interacted in classes with the teachers, the reliability of their responses was a question. However, the students and the instructors agreed that the classroom anxiety for the students is lower in online classes. One reason may be that they stayed in online classes off the video. Hence, the future studies should look into this further. Sun (2014) reported lower level of interaction in her study including lack of practice with peers, no immediate feedback and lack of group discussions. Even though to some extent students could use text messages for online interaction, the results of the present study did not bring it to the surface. Li's (2016) study among Chinese undergraduates reported that students made use of text messages to communicate with their instructors. Marshall (2019) also explains that there are more possibilities for interaction and peer discussions in online learning where competitions, quizzes, breakouts, etc. could be practised in online classes.

Despite the claim for lower anxiety in online learning, students and instructors generally preferred to have traditional classes for several benefits such as reading materials is easy, they feel a conducive learning environment, and getting peer helps is also possible in online learning. These findings go along with the findings of Murphy (2015) and Manegre and Ali Sabiri (2020). They stated that learning in a physical classroom in the presence of a teacher is preferable because they claimed that the teacher can identify the inactive or quiet students and deal with them too.

However, an opposite result was obtained in a study with the Lebanese university undergraduates where the students reported to have had higher anxiety and depression due to online learning after the Covid 19 issues (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021). Similarly,

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another study conducted among Bangladeshi students (Kaisar & Chowdhury, 2020) revealed that students became anxious about their online learning due to the facts that there were lack of interaction, peer and group work, etc.

The future studies should consider how students' anxiety could influence the language learning in online classes and also how the pedagogical training needs of the instructors affect the online language teaching and learning. More qualitative data should be collected in future studies too.

6. CONCLUSION

Earlier argument of whether face-to-face or online learning is better has now twisted to argue, as Blake (2009) claims, how the online learning could be made more effective. Now, more and more studies bring in the need for online pedagogy, especially for language learning. The online learning is going to be in the higher education sector all over the world for a number of reasons, other than the pandemic situation, that include lower cost, technological development and also could be as a result of paradigm shift in education.

In the study context, as well as the other Sri Lankan universities, many of the students used smartphones to participate in the Zoom classes. Only a small fraction of the university student population afforded to possess laptops for learning. Though this affects the quality of learning, students felt that using smartphones was much more convenient for them because of the connectivity and network coverage issues in laptops. Teacher-student interaction is noticeably absent in certain classes, especially with weaker student groups and lack of response to teachers' questions is also a frustrating fact for the instructors. Moreover, the class size is considerably higher, around 60 students in one class which causes difficulty to handle and develop other activities and group works.

Even though there are more constraints in online learning, proper use of technology, the support of the government to provide more facilities for the students and getting the students motivated towards online learning are important. If students are adequately trained to use technology for language learning, as Lai, Shum and Tian (2016) claimed, their participation in online learning would increase. 'As more students become comfortable with online learning and online media, they are likely to use this method of learning more often' (Manegre & Ali Sabiri, 2020: p. 5). Therefore, it is wise for the educational authorities to train the teachers, motivate the students and provide adequate support including financial assistance. Hence, future studies should look into instructors' pedagogical training needs to get better outcome of online learning and also investigate the students' anxiety issues in online learning.

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