Students' Perception on Learning English through Distance Education: An Online Survey Conducted in Higher Education Institutes, Sri Lanka at the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract: The importance of distance education became very significant in Sri Lanka with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic specially among the students who are enrolled in compulsory English courses, diplomas, and intensive courses via distance education. Hence, the assessment of the students' perception of learning English via Distance learning is essential to enrich the education process. This online survey was conducted among 253 students who study compulsory English Language courses via distance learning education. A questionnaire composed of questions on demographic information, language usage, and a four-dimensional instrument on student perceptions of learning English through distance education was shared online for a period of two weeks to collect data. This instrument was composed of 18 items which were related to Personal suitability, Effectiveness, Teachability, and Study Habits. Descriptive statistics were analysed using SPSS 23.0. The mean (±SD) age of the participants was 21.29 (±1.37) years. The majority of the participants were females (75.5%, n=191), 92.9%. Moreover, most of them were at the undergraduate level (91.3%; n=231). Many of the participants had no previous experience with Distance Learning Education (73.9% n=187). The average of all the items on the four-dimensional instrument was at the level of 'Neutral' or 'Disagree'. It was noted that various teaching methods should be utilised in the process of online teaching to address the needs of every student in the classroom. It will enhance their level of motivation and make distance learning a promising experience. Further, empowering the students in completing online assessments and activities on time is also recommended.

Keywords: Distance learning education, English language, COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 is the most crucial challenge that the national education systems have ever faced. Many governments have implemented policies which made the education institutions to terminate face-to-face instruction for most of their students, requiring them to switch to Distance Learning Education (Daniel, 2020). Distance learning education is used indefinitely in the modern world, and it is named as e-learning, online learning, and web-based learning as well (Moore et al., 2011). Distance learning carries both advantages and disadvantages to the English language learners. Firstly, Distance education breaks all the barriers and provides the language learner to learn a language free from the constraints of time and space (Altunay, 2019). However, Distance learning carries its share of disadvantages as well, namely the issues with the technology, isolation, sense of anxiety and low motivation (King, 2002).

The development of modern technology has expanded new horizons in education

systems all around the world, including Sri-Lanka. As a result, distance learning, e-learning, the concept of smart classrooms, access to e-libraries are used as novel mechanisms in the higher education system. As the demand for English language proficiency grows at a steady pace, many higher education institutes in the world provide distance learning opportunities for English courses, and Sri-Lanka is no exception to this. However, the importance of Distance Education became very significant in Sri-Lanka with the outbreak of the COVID-19. As per the WHO guidelines, the best mechanism to prevent the contamination of COVID-19 virus is social distancing, hence the distance learning education is widely used by many higher education institutes of Sri-Lanka as a means of continuing the academic activities. Therefore, many Sri-Lankan students of higher education institutes participate in compulsory English courses, Diplomas and intensive courses through Distance learning. Hence the assessment of their perception of learning English via Distance learning is essential.

There are some studies conducted all over the world regarding the student perceptions of learning English via distance education. However, only few studies have been carried out in the Sri-Lankan setting. However, it will be necessary to assess the student perceptions for the future modifications of the online education programs. It will enable the policymakers to pay attention to the strengths and weaknesses of teaching English via distance learning and adjust them accordingly. The research question of this study was "what is the students' perception of learning English through distance education among the students who are enrolled in higher education institutes in Sri Lanka?". Therefore, the main aim of the study was to investigate the student perceptions of learning English via distance education in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Literature indicates that there are multiple factors which affect the student's perceptions on distance learning. One of the studies revealed that students enrolled in an elective course had rated online classes positively, whereas the students enrolled in a compulsory course rated negatively (Smart and Cappel, 2006). This highlights that the level of motivation and the self -discipline of the students regarding the specific course may influence their ratings. Moreover, the level of their competency in Information Technology. is identified as a fundamental factor for the motivation shown in online classes (Smart and Cappel, 2006). It is identified that students with better exposure to technology have a higher tendency of preferring online classes (Smart and Cappel, 2006). It was noted that students' computer Anxiety (Sun et al., 2008) and the personality affects their perception regarding distance learning education. The students with extroversion personality prefer face to face interaction with the instructor and peers (Smidt et al., 2014). Moreover, some students preferred to use mobile devices on distance learning education since they think that it is motivating (Mockus et al., 2011).

Literature also revealed that the students' satisfaction on the course work depends on the perception of support (Gilbert et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2011). Further, it was noted that insufficient resources and updated material destructively affect students' perception of distance learning. Moreover, the six barriers that online learners face were identified. They are following the schedule and studying regularly; getting hold of classmates and finding a suitable time for working together; pairing/teaming up and working

collaboratively; ensuring constant engagement with the class; keeping self-motivated and being a self-directed learner and socialising (Sun, 2014). Further, a study conducted in Indonesia revealed that the students have more difficulties in learning Grammar and vocabulary via distance education when compared to direct interaction with the instructor (Budiman, 2015).

A research study carried out in Thailand revealed that students with low English proficiency remain as the most disadvantaged in the process of distance education (Kuama and Intharaksa, 2016). Another study aimed at assessing the students' language learning strategies in a Moodle-based language learning program has identified that the involvement of the modern technology in language teaching and learning has adverse effects on learner autonomy due to the challenges in the new forms of technology (Khabbaz and Najjar, 2015).

Many studies have been conducted in Turkey to assess the student perception on learning English through distance education. One of them has revealed that the students have felt a sense of relaxation with e-classes conducted on an Advanced Reading course and it has made those students more familiarised with the new learning environment (Yuzer et al., 2009). Another study carried out among a group of university students revealed that the virtual classes conducted on distance learning education had given them an excellent opportunity to practice during the lessons without restraints of time and place. However, it was noted that they were not satisfied with the technical issues related to distance education (Altunay and Mutlu, 2010). A research study conducted among the Turkish students who were enrolled in EFL (English as a Foreign language) course revealed that they were not happy about the examinations and assignments conducted via distance education. (Ekmekçi, 2015).

Further, they were very much impressed on the distance education when considering the easiness to follow lectures at any place and at any time of the day. A study conducted among EFL learners who study via distance education revealed that the learners' lack of self-directed behaviour towards language learning (Özüdoğru and Hismanoglu, 2016). The reasons behind the lack of self-directed behaviour were the high responsibilities attached to adulthood, insufficient skills and the experience that they have gained from secondary school (Altunay, 2013). Another research conducted among freshmen students revealed that majority of the participants preferred face-to-face instruction over distance education (Özüdoğru and Hismanoglu, 2016).

Methodology

The data collection of the study was initiated two months after the government announced to conduct distance teaching in the higher education institutes in Sri Lanka with the outbreak of COVID-19 and once the ethical approval for the study was granted from the Ethics Review Committee, Faculty of Medicine, K.D.U. An online questionnaire developed in English was shared on the social media networks (i.e. Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber) during a period of two weeks to receive the completed questionnaires. The survey targeted on the students who are in their freshman and second year, those who study compulsory English language courses via distance learning education. The consent for attending the study was also taken online from the participants, once the purpose and the objectives were explained through an online statement before the questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted among ten University undergraduates to determine the difficulty level of the items,

ease of understanding of concepts in the items, any discomfort when responding, and the appropriate length of the instrument before the data collection. The students who have participated in the pilot study were removed from the main study.

A questionnaire consisted of two sections (Section A and B) was used for the data collection of this study. Section A composed of questions regarding demographic information and language usage. Section B was adapted from an instrument developed in a previous study (Altunay, 2019) regarding student perceptions of learning English through distance education. This instrument was composed of 18 items and six dimensions which were related to Personal suitability (items 1,6), Effectiveness (items 7,11), Teachability (items 12,15), and Study Habits (items 16,18). The Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was 0.864 (Altunay, 2019). Response to each item was scaled on a Likert scale of one to five (1- Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree). The descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were performed in SPSS 23.0 in order to find the mean differences among the variables.

Results

Socio-Demographic Data

During the given two weeks, 253 participants had responded for the study. According to the data, the mean (±SD) age of the participants was 21.29 (±1.37) years. Majority of the participants were females (75.5%, n=191), 92.9% were Sinhalese (n=235) and 43.5% were from Western province (n= 110). When considering the learning programme of the participants, 91.3% (n=231) were at the undergraduate level, and 38.3%(n=97) of the study participants were Law undergraduates. The study revealed that many of the participants had no previous experience

with Distance Learning Education (73.9% n=187). However, 79.4%(n=201), 78.7% (n=199), 53.8% (n=136), 38.3% (n=97), 44.7%(n=113), 1.2%(n=3), 0.4%(n=1) were using LMS, Email, Google Class Room, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype respectively for distant learning purposes during this period (Table 01).

Table 01. Descriptive Statistics

Parameter	Status
Demographic data: Age	
Mean	21.29
Median	21.00
Mode	22
Std.eviation	1.371
Gender	
Male	24.5 % (n=62)
Female	75.5 % (n=191)
Nationality	
Sinhala	92.9% (n=235)
Muslim	2.8% (n=7)
Tamil	2.4% (n=6)
Christianity	2.0% (n=5)
Province	
Western	43.5% (n=110)
Southern	27.7% (n=70)
Central	9.9% (n=25)
North-Western	6.3% (n=16)
Uva	3.6% (n=9)
Sabaragamuwa	3.6% (n=9)
North-Central	2.0% (n=5)
Eastern	1.6% (n=4)
North	1.6% (n=4)
Learning Programme	
Undergraduate	91.3% (n=231)
Diploma	8.7% (n=22)
Stream of Study	
Law	38.3% (n=97)
Allied Health Science	26.9% (n=68)
Medicine	14.2% (n=36)
Engineering	11.5% (n=29)
Training College	9.1% (n=23)
Previous Experience on Distance Learning	
No	73.9% (n=187)
Yes	26.1% (n=66)
Method of distance learning	
L.M.S.	79.4% (n=201)
Email	78.7% (n=199)
Google Class Room	53.8% (n=136)
Microsoft Teams	38.3% (n=97)
Zoom	44.7% (n=113)
WhatsApp	1.2% (n=3)
Skype	0.4% (n=1)

Students' Perception of Learning English through Distance Education

The Students' perception on Learning English through Distance Education was evaluated from the data received from the section B in the questionnaire. Each participant's response for each item in the relevant dimension was summed, and it was divided by the number of items to receive the participant's average score for each item (Table 02).

Personal Suitability

The first dimension, 'Personal Suitability', was composed of six items and five out of them were at the level of "Disagree" (Table 02). Further, the findings of the study revealed that both male (2.42 ± 0.51) and female (2.38 ± 0.49) students' perception of the personal suitability is at a "Disagree" level. However, there was no significant difference between male and female students' views regarding distance language learning in terms of suitability (P=0.614).

Effectiveness

The second dimension 'Effectiveness' was composed of five items, and four of them were at the level of 'Neutral' (Table 02). The findings of the study revealed that both male (2.78 ± 0.65) and female (2.59 ± 0.65) students' perception of the 'Effectiveness' is at a "Neutral" level. There was a significant difference between male and female students' views regarding distance language learning in terms of 'Effectiveness' (P=0.042).

Teachability

The third dimension 'Teachability' was composed of four items and all were at the level of 'Disagree' (Table 02). Further, the findings of the study revealed that both male (1.93 ± 0.67) and female (2.39 ± 0.68) students' perception of the 'Teachability' is at a "Disagree" level. However, there was a significant difference between male and

female students' views regarding distance language learning in terms of 'Teachability' (P=0.000).

Study Habits

The fourth dimension 'Study Habits' was composed of three items, and all were at a 'Neutral' level (Table 02). The findings of the study revealed that both male (2.65 ± 1.01) and female (3.36 ± 0.91) students' perception of the "Study Habits" is at a "Neutral" level. There was a significant difference between male and female students' views regarding distance language learning in terms of 'Study Habits'(P=0.000).

Further, One-way ANOVA test reveals that there are no significant differences in all the four dimensions on their stream of study with the provinces that they are located (P > 0.05)

Items	Percentage (%)	Mean	S. D	Level
Personal suitability (1 -6)				
It is convenient for me to learn English through distance education	46.0	2.30	0.76	Disagree
Learning English through distance education is suitable for my lifestyle	48.8	2.44	0.84	Disagree
Distance education serves as an excellent mechanism to gain the English knowledge I need	47.6	2.38	0.88	Disagree
Distance education saves my time a lot	42.2	2.11	0.85	Disagree
I need the flexibility of participating in the lessons	45.0	2.25	0.68	Disagree

without time and place constraints				
I prefer learning English from home rather than going to the educational institute	57.6	2.88	1.00	Neutral
Total Mean of Personal suitability	47.86	2.39		Disagree
Effectiveness (7-11)				
Distance education makes the student more active in terms of learning English	57.2	2.86	0.92	Neutral
Distance education offers the opportunity to do various activities to learn English	51.8	2.59	0.90	Neutral
Distance education allows the students to learn English at their own pace	42.6	2.13	0.65	Disagree
Distance education helps to learn English more effectively with no distractions	54.0	2.70	0.85	Neutral
Distance education is more effective than traditional education	58.4	2.92	0.99	Neutral
Total Mean of Effectiveness	52.8	2.64		Neutral
Teachability (12-15)				
Face-to-Face interaction is necessary for English learning	46.0	2.30	0.94	Disagree
Communication in face-to-face English learning is more instant and more precise than	41.2	2.06	0.84	Disagree

in distance learning				
English education is offered better through traditional education compared to distant learning	47.8	2.39	0.87	Disagree
I need face-to-face communication to learn English	47.2	2.36	0.94	Disagree
Total Mean of Teachability	45.55	2.28		Disagree
Study Habits (16 – 18)				
I have the habit of postponing the assignments given online	65.0	3.25	1.17	Neutral
Most of the time I do not finish the homework or exercises given	68.6	3.43	1.10	Neutral
I wait until the last moment to do my homework or to study for the exam	57.8	2.89	1.13	Neutral
Total Mean of Study Habits	63.8	3.19		Neutral

Discussion

This study evaluated the students' perception on learning English through distance education with the outbreak of COVID-19 global pandemic among the students enrolled in higher education institutes of Sri Lanka. Since most of the higher education institutes of Sri Lanka have started distance education with the COVID-19 outbreak, the majority of the students have stated that this is their first experience on distance learning.

The University Grants Commission (U.G.C.) and Telecommunication Regulatory of Sri Lanka (TRCSL) have agreed with network providers in Sri Lanka to provide free access to University L.M.S. for the academic community during this outbreak (LEARN's Support, 2020). This study reveals that

students are currently taking the maximum benefit from this service as L.M.S. is the most popular learning method among the study population. The Zoom and the Microsoft teams are considered as the most convenient means of video conferencing for academic purposes around the world during this period. However, the usage of these two web applications was minimal among this study population. This might be because most of the students might have had difficulties when accessing the higher data consumption required for video conferencing. However, it was noted that the ZOOM Video Conferencing facility has also been made freely available for many academic institutes in Sri Lanka (LEARN's Support, 2020) to facilitate the students to have a better learning experience with no personal data consumption. Empowering this virtual face to face interaction method would facilitate the students to adjust to the distance learning from traditional face to face interaction in the classroom.

In terms of the dimension 'Personal Suitability', five out of six items were at the level of "Disagree". According to the responses given on the items by the participants, it indicates that the distance learning is not convenient, not suitable for their lifestyle, not serving as an excellent mechanism to gain the English knowledge and not saving time. However, a similar study conducted in Turkey stated that the study participants were at the level of 'Neutral 'on the dimension 'Personal Suitability' (Altunay, 2019). In terms of the dimension' Effectiveness', four items out of five were at the level of 'Neutral'. Further, they have disagreed with the item 'Distance education allows the students to learn English at their own pace'. It implies about the importance of obtaining student feedback on the pace of the course content delivered, whether it is tolerable or not. The study conducted in Turkey in the same context stated that the study participants

were also at the level of 'Neutral 'on the dimension 'Effectiveness' (Altunay, 2019).

All the items of the dimension 'Teachability' were at the level of 'Disagree' which means that the participants disagree with the perception of 'traditional face to face learning method is better than distance learning'. However, a study conducted in Turkey among the freshman students participating in foreign language courses revealed that the students prefer face-to-face learning over distance education (Özüdoğru and Hismanoglu, 2016). Further, the study conducted in Turkey in the same context revealed that the study participants were at the level of 'Neutral' on the dimension 'Teachability' (Altunay, 2019). The three items included in the dimension 'Study habits' were 'Neutral' and revealed that there is a high tendency of the students in skipping and postponing the assessments and activities given online by their instructors. The study conducted in Turkey in the same context stated that the study participants were also at the level of 'Neutral' on the dimension 'Study Habits' (Altunay, 2019). Moreover, another study conducted among Thailand students enrolled for a distance learning course in English revealed that the weak students would be disadvantaged by distance learning and they need self-directing guidance through a tutor (Altunay and Mutlu, 2010). Therefore, the instructors should empower each student to keep up with the deadlines on given assignments or activities.

Conclusion

The average of all the items on the four dimensions was at the level of 'Neutral' or 'Disagree'. However, there are both positive and negative aspects to be taken from this study. It was noted that the methods of teaching should be blended with various teaching methods (from sharing learning material to a virtual face to

face interactions) and to address every student in the classroom to make distance learning more enjoyable. Further, it will be necessary to pay more attention in providing the students with the necessary technical support in order to enhance their satisfaction on distance learning.

The study also revealed that the students have issues with autonomy and the level of motivation as they tend to have a delay in finishing the assignments given on time via distance education. Therefore, student feedbacks should be taken on the lessons carried out, and several interventions should be taken to empower the students regarding completing the online assessments and the activities on time. Consequently, the future studies should be aimed at assessing the students' autonomy, the level of motivation, technical difficulties and pedagogical support in order to understand the difficulties faced by the students in distance learning and to modify the system accordingly. It will enhance their level of motivation and make distance learning a promising experience.

Acknowledgement

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