

Attitudes of Tertiary-Level English Learners in Sri Lanka Towards Online Learning: A Study Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract— The global COVID-19 pandemic has become a hindrance to the education system. To secure both student lives and the continuation of studies, the traditional education system has been compelled to shift to virtual classroom mode which links both teachers and students online. In order to investigate the student attitudes towards the new virtual classroom concept, an online questionnaire was shared among a sample of hundred tertiary level ESL students from state universities across Sri Lanka. The research followed a mixed method. The questionnaire was structured employing varied types of questions and a Likert Scale to collect data. The key findings reveal that the majority of students face varied issues as a consequence of the abrupt change to online learning. In addition to that are issues such as acceptability struggle, ESL classrooms with different teaching/learning approaches, the struggle of merging them with the online learning concept, inability to develop language skills, students being unaccustomed to online tests and being distracted by external barriers. Moreover, learners from developing countries like Sri Lanka face various challenges such as signal strength and technological affordability.

Keywords— *online learning, ESL learner attitudes, COVID-19 pandemic*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global Covid-19 pandemic caused tremendous changes to the human lifestyle in such a way that within a period of fewer than two years, every activity has come to halt due to travel restrictions and lockdowns. Consequently, in daily functions, many public sectors were forced to shut down disrupting many lives along with their economies. Owing to 21st-century technological developments and innovations, people started exploring new ways to resume their daily work. Amongst them, the education sector took a major leap by shifting the traditional classrooms to virtual classrooms. Online

learning/E-learning/web-based learning any name deems came to light during this era.

Online learning is a classroom where a group of students and their teacher connect via an online platform with the help of electronic devices. Online learning has to come to the spotlight with the benefits it offers such as flexibility, convenience and most of all security.

A. Literature Review

A considerable number of studies have been done on virtual learning related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Agung et al (2020) conducted a study on English majoring Indonesian students who revealed connection issues, inability to access resource materials and assignments. Similarly, Febrianto et al (2020) conducted an attitudinal research on some college students that revealed similar issues with internet access, lack of financial support to afford devices and internet packages thus, contributing to negative attitudes. Additionally, Agormedah et al's (2020) study on Ghanaian university students revealed that the students had a positive attitude toward online learning. However, they stated some issues the students had with regards to affordability of devices, internet access, and unawareness that hindered their online learning process.

As the above studies reveal, common issues such as accessibility to the internet, connectivity and device affordability are the most common issues with regards to online learning.

B. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Despite the benefits of online learning, a shift from one method to another on such short notice has its downsides on the victim. Human mindset functions in a manner to establish themselves in a long-term habit. Thus, adapting to a sudden change causes inconvenience. Amidst these psychological issues lies the practical issues such as lack of awareness, employment of strategies, resource collection and its dissemination.

Moreover, the sudden shift from traditional classrooms to online classrooms has left both students and teachers in a difficult situation especially, language learning due to its different requirements such as interaction and active engagement in classroom activities. Therefore, the researchers intend to explore criteria such as; affordability of internet access and devices, language skills development in physical vs online settings. Thereby aiming to answer the questions;

- i. What are the attitudes of undergraduate ESL students in Sri Lanka towards online learning?
- ii. Do they feel online learning is effective for a language class?

C. Significance of the Study

This study signifies to perceive the efficacy of online learning with issues such as affordability and connectivity, and to the extent language skills could be developed in a virtual environment. In collecting this data, the researchers aim to propose possible solutions to the underlying issues.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. General Goal

This study aims to measure tertiary level ESL students' attitude in Sri Lanka towards online learning during the Covid 19 pandemic. Additionally, the research observes how the students' self-analysis of the development of their second language speaking and writing skills during the virtual learning period has affected their overall attitude towards online learning.

B. Research Type Population and Sample of the Study

A mixed-method was employed in the analyses of this study. The quantitative data was analysed statistically. For the qualitative analysis, patterns and common points were sought in the gathered data and analyzed descriptively. The sample used in this research is represented by undergraduate students of state universities in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire was distributed amongst the Eleven (11) major state universities in Sri Lanka. A sample of 100 respondents was selected for the study.

C. Instrument of Data Collection

This research study was conducted through a questionnaire developed through careful analysis of literature. Following the standard ethical protocols, the questionnaire was self-administered and the

respondents' consent was taken before proceeding with the questionnaire. Overall, the questionnaire included twenty-two (22) questions. The chosen analyzing model for the questionnaire consisted of four types of questions: ten (10) yes/no, three (3) multiple-choice, five (5) Likert-scale, and one (1) open-ended question. The four types of questions were organized under four (4) major themes: learner background, technological access related information, learner personality, and self-assessment on academic improvement.

D. Validity and reliability of the research instrument

Participants being tertiary-level students were assumed to have no major problems in processing an online questionnaire. Moreover, based on their proficiency level in academics, it was assumed that they have the capability of assessing their language improvement at the most basic level. Furthermore, the questionnaire was provided under the two mediums: Sinhala and English to ensure the respondent's understanding of the questions.

E. Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data collection tool for the study was the questionnaire designed using an online survey tool. It was distributed using social media platforms and was opened for responses for five (5) days. Initially, the collected data were categorized and summarized to obtain a better classification. Numerical data were analyzed through spreadsheet tools, and charts were designed to acquire a better projection. Considering qualitative data, identification of the common themes and relationship between data was built through visible repeated patterns in the responses. As the final summarizing, links between the findings, the research aim and hypotheticals were built up descriptively.

III. Results

The statistical data collected through the questionnaire are listed below. Fifty-one per cent of the participants revealed that they are familiar with online learning while 49% revealed that they are not familiar with the online learning method. Eighty-seven per cent of the participants claimed that they face network issues when joining classes. Sixty-five per cent ranged their income from 25 000 to 35 000. Four per cent of the participants mentioned that their income is below Rs.25 000. Twenty per cent, 5% and 6% of the participants have ranged their family income from Rs.35 000 to Rs.45 000, Rs.45 000 to Rs. 55 000, and over Rs.55 000 respectively. Seventy-one

per cent of the participants chose mobile phone as the main device for online lessons while 29% chose laptop or desktop computer. The majority (76%) of the participants agreed to the fact that their English language classroom is different from their other classes.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results obtained can be discussed section-wise in the following manner.

A. The effect of the participants' economic background on their attitudes towards online learning.

According to the cost of living index 2021, the estimated average living cost of a family of four is Rs.404,51 and the estimated monthly living cost per person is Rs.10 112. Per the data, the family income of the majority of the participants is in between Rs. 25 000- Rs. 35 000 and below 25 000 (69% of the participants).

Compared to the cost of living index, the majority of the participants have an average or below the average income. Correspondingly, the majority accepted that they face financial problems regarding data packages (65% of the participants). Furthermore, the majority of them (71%) claimed that they use mobile phones for online lessons while 29% of them claimed that they use laptops or desktop computers. The majority of them commented that the data cost and device cost are unaffordable while the rest mentioned that they have no issues except for the low network bandwidth. Therefore, the economic background of the learners directly influences their attitudes towards online learning.

Table 1. Co-relation between the economic background of the participants and their attitude towards online learning

Question	Family income	Which device do you use to join classes?	Do you face monetary issues concerning data packages?
	Below 25 000- 4% 4 participants out of 100	Mobile phone- 71% 71 participants out of 100	Yes- 69%- 69 participants out of 100

Responses for each trait	25 000- 35 000- 65%- 65 participants out of 100	Laptop/ desktop- 29%- 29 participants out of 100	No- 21% 21 participants out of 100
	35 000- 45 000- 20%- 20 participants out of 100		
	45 000- 55 000- 5%- 5 participants out of 100		
	Above 55 000- 6%- 6 participants out of 100		

B. The English Language Classroom And Online Learning

The majority (76%) of the participants agreed with the fact that their English language classroom is different from their other classes. They reach the agreement that English language sessions are more interactive, engaging and student-centred, however, network/ internet connection issues often hinder these kinds of interactive sessions.

C. Attitudes Towards Developing Speaking Skills

The majority (61%) of the participants agreed with the fact that their speaking skills are developed because of online sessions. As the comments reveal, the shy and introverted students that do not speak much in physical classrooms tend to speak more in the online sessions. For them, online learning has become a motivational factor. Therefore, online learning has a positive effect on the learners' speaking skills. However, as the majority mentions, the speakers often get disconnected from the sessions due to network issues and it takes a lot of time to reconnect.

D. Attitudes Towards Developing Listening Skills

The participants mentioned that during listening activities they often encounter hearing problems due to network issues (87%). Some participants have mentioned that during their recent listening activities they could not hear anything at all. Therefore, on the topic of developing listening skills through online lessons, the majority of the participants bear negative attitudes.

E. Attitudes Towards Developing Writing Skills

The majority accepted that their writing skills do not develop through online lessons. According to their comments, when typing in word processing software, they know that the software would detect the spelling errors so that they can immediately correct them. As a result, they would not pay attention to spelling at all. Moreover, there is no room for one-to-one feedback sessions. Therefore, unless compulsory they do not do many writing activities and even skip sessions that are focused on developing writing skills.

F. Attitudes Towards Developing Reading Skills

According to the data collection, the participants have a neutral attitude towards the effect of online learning on reading skills. On a Likert scale scaled from 1- 5, the majority has selected the 3rd scale. All in all online learning has a positive impact on developing speaking skills but a negative impact on the other three language skills.

G. Attitudes Towards Online Tests

The majority (67%) of the participants do not like the concept of online tests. As they comment, the majority is not fast enough to type and submit the answers within the given time. Some students comment that online tests do not feel like tests. Therefore, they cannot do their best in the tests. Some have also mentioned that they get easily distracted during online tests because they are at home and cannot take the tests seriously. Thirty-three per cent mentioned that they prefer online tests because most of the time the tests are open-book and they feel more comfortable at home and can concentrate well on the test.

H. Acceptability/ Adaptability Struggle

As the data reveal, 49% of the participants are not familiar with the online mode of learning. According to Volkow (2012), the human brain takes 66- 254 days to become fully familiar with a new routine. Similarly, as the university students are used to the in-class learning background it will take a while for them to become fully familiar with the virtual class and online test concepts. Some of the participants' comments regarding online lessons are quoted (as it is) below.

"It is not 100% comfortable and success than in class learning",

"Lecturing in lecture hall is much better",

"Physical lectures have more impact on education than online learning",

"It's not real"

"Hard to concentrate"

"I can't learn properly"

"Environment matters when learning"

The above comments reveal that the students are still not ready to accept the change in learning background and are passing through a period of acceptability (adaptability) struggle which directly influences their attitudes towards online learning.

I. Frustration and Anxiety Issues

According to the responses, there is less space for collaborative group projects and pair work. In cases where the teachers ask individual questions, they feel as if they are targeted or threatened because of the physical absence of their peers. Accordingly, the majority feels as if they are deprived of social interaction that might lead to increased stress, frustration, anxiety, avoidance of lessons and notable behavioural changes.

In addition, there was no correlation between gender and attitudes towards online learning. There is no correlation between the seniority level of the students and technological awareness and attitudes towards online learning either. Overall, the network issues and the financial situation play a major role in the participants' negative attitudes.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can arrive at that the traditional/physical classrooms still hold a higher preference among the learners based on the issues related to internet access, connectivity, affordability of devices and lack of the achievement of learner outcomes. Therefore, the researchers suggest that the authority should take necessary steps to provide required data packages and ensure the students are well-equipped to attend online classes, strengthen signal locators to minimize connectivity issues and enlighten the educationists to take the maximum advantage out of the online platforms and the tools it has to offer. Additionally, the students should be provided with the required psychological guidance to beat the anxiety and frustration. If these primary issues are resolved, the attitudes of students towards online learning may change.

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