

Learning English Online from Home: The Challenges Faced by USIM BELCOM Students during MCO

Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Secara Atas Talian Dari Rumah: Cabaran Yang Dihadapi Oleh Pelajar BELCOM USIM Ketika PKP

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Abstract: Efforts to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus have been carried out on a large scale around the world, and among the measures that have been taken is to change the mode of learning among students in universities to online learning. Although various online learning platforms have been made available for student use, the level of mastery of students as well as the challenges they face to maximize the use of technology while studying from home is still understudied. This study will add to the previous research by focusing on the aspects of English language online learning processes experienced by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) students during the Movement Control Order period. This study collected qualitative data through open-ended questions which were distributed online, involving 29 first-year students from the Bachelor of English with Commerce (BELCOM). The data revealed two (2) categories of challenges – external and internal. Internet connection and environment are for external while understanding and communication are for internal. In relation to each of the challenges, the respondents also shared their coping mechanisms which are two-pronged. Some respondents just accepted those hurdles while many of them took charge and took action in solving the problems. These coping mechanisms could be used as guides for other learners facing difficulties in learning online at home.

Keywords: Challenges in Learning English Online, Movement Control Order period, Online Learning.

Abstrak: Usaha untuk membendung penyebaran virus Covid-19 telah dilakukan secara besar-besaran di seluruh dunia, dan antara langkah-langkah yang telah diambil adalah dengan mengubah cara pembelajaran di kalangan pelajar di universiti kepada pembelajaran secara atas talian. Walaupun pelbagai platform pembelajaran atas talian telah disediakan untuk kemudahan para pelajar, namun tahap penguasaan pelajar serta cabaran yang dihadapi untuk memaksimumkan penggunaan teknologi semasa belajar dari rumah masih kurang dikaji. Kajian ini akan menambah data penyelidikan sebelumnya dengan memfokuskan aspek proses pembelajaran atas talian Bahasa Inggeris yang dialami oleh para pelajar Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) semasa tempoh Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan. Kajian ini menggunakan data kualitatif berdasarkan soalan terbuka yang dibuat secara atas talian kepada 29 pelajar tahun satu Sarjana Muda Bahasa Inggeris dengan Perdagangan (BELCOM). Data menunjukkan bahawa terdapat dua (2) kategori cabaran iaitu luaran dan dalaman. Bagi luaran, cabaran-cabaran yang diutarakan adalah sambungan Internet dan persekitaran. Manakala bagi dalaman, cabaran-cabaran yang terbabit adalah kefahaman dan juga komunikasi. Selari dengan setiap cabaran yang dinyatakan, para responden juga menyatakan cara mereka mendepani cabaran tersebut. Didapati mereka sama ada mengharungi cabaran tersebut tanpa berbuat apa-apa ataupun

mengambil tindakan untuk menyelesaikan masalah yang dihadapi. Mekanisma yang diambil oleh pelajar-pelajar dalam mendepani cabaran ini dapat dijadikan panduan bagi pelajar lain yang mengikuti pembelajaran atas talian dari rumah.

Kata kunci: *Cabaran Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Secara Atas Talian, Tempoh Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan, Pembelajaran Secara Atas Talian*

Introduction

The 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) or better known as the COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, China, in November 2019 and cases involving this virus have increased drastically in most countries around the world (Chan et al., 2020). The rapid outbreak of the virus has also caused a negative impact on most countries, especially in major aspects such as health, economy, security and social (Atkeson, 2020). Following the outbreak of the pandemic, numerous countries around the world have encouraged their citizens to stay indoors, on top of implementing some preventive measures such as social distancing, lockdown, and movement control order (Lin, 2020).

The field of education was also significantly affected, with almost 120 countries suspending face-to-face learning sessions and replacing them with online learning (Azzi-Huck & Shmis, 2020). In Malaysia, most students, including university students were forced to conduct their online learning sessions from home, which initially provoked various reactions, and also raised new issues such as the challenges they face when conducting learning sessions. While these measures were necessary to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the prolonged online learning process involving long periods of time tend to have a negative impact on students (Azzi-Huck & Shmis, 2020). Shahzad et al. (2020), on the other hand, argued that most school teachers and university lecturers were happy and supportive of the decision to carry out the process of teaching and learning online.

This study employed the qualitative methods approach, involving twenty-nine (29) Bachelor of English with Commerce (BELCOM) first-year students from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), focusing on students' challenges in learning English online during Movement Control Order (MCO) period. The findings from this study may be useful to formulate the next steps that should be taken by all stakeholders in the field of education, especially in Malaysia, to ensure that the quality of education will continue to improve even if the world is hit by a pandemic.

Literature Review

The massive spread of COVID-19 beginning 2020 has forced educators to rely on alternative methods to teach as the usual face-to-face classroom sessions were no longer possible. Online learning together with various online platforms became the talk of the town. They, however, did not come without challenges and issues that had to be dealt both by educators and learners. This section will discuss the challenges faced by educators and learners in conducting and undergoing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emerging Trends & Challenges of Education and its Coping Mechanism in the Age of Covid-19

The spread of COVID-19 has paused the pace and scenario of life as we know it. Worldwide lockdown affected the lives of people, families, and communities. Educational institutions are shut down to flatten the curve of infections transforming the life of approximately sixty billion students across the globe (Jain, 2020). According to UNESCO the life of underprivileged learners is impacted because they do not have other learning opportunities other than schools, colleges, universities while parents are unable to facilitate the learning of their children due to limited educational resources. Moreover, the transitions from traditional classrooms to virtual platforms are riddled with human and technical challenges, financial constraints and lack of peer interaction and contact which are crucial for learning and development.

Over in Europe, studies have outlined the emerging challenges due to the technology-based mode of learning. It is claimed that less time was spent in learning. According to the Schul-Barometer (School Barometer) survey, which took place from 25 March until 5 April 2020 and targeted at Austrian, Swiss and German students aged between 10 and 19 years, students' weekly learning time during the COVID-19 lockdown is reduced by between 4 and 8 hours, compared to when schools are open (Huber et al. 2020). It was also claimed that students who are confined at home with their parents due to COVID-19

may feel more stressed and anxious (Di Pietro et al, 2020). In Britain, Attanasio et al. (2020) provided evidence of widening disparity in socio-emotional skills among British children of different socio-economic status. Inequality is found to have increased especially for boys at the bottom of the distribution.

COVID-19 Online Learning in Malaysia

In Malaysia, technology and online learning have long made their debut. Studies conducted locally have shown promising results related to technology and education. More and more educators have been found to embrace the idea of blended learning in their courses, for example in Computer Architecture and Organization (Sidek et al, 2020), Arabic language course (Wan Daud & Abdul Ghani, 2019) and Economics (Khoo et al, 2020). Educators have used technology to conduct virtual classrooms (Ekici, 2017), hold online discussion forums (Omar et al, 2018) and conduct assessments (Khairil & Mokshein, 2018) among others.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, online platforms were used as supplementary teaching platforms to disseminate knowledge to students as part of blended learning to use in classrooms. However, due to the unprecedented attack of COVID-19, the push for total use of technology in education has dominated the Malaysian education landscape. As face-to-face teaching and learning processes are no longer possible, educators had to look for alternative ways to conduct classes, deliver lessons and conduct assessments. They began to experiment using online platforms in their effort to continue the process of teaching and learning (e.g. Google Classroom (Tamin & Mohamad, 2020), YouTube channels (Chung, Subramaniam & Dass, 2020) and Google Hangout Meet, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, video conferencing, WhatsApp and Facebook (Juhary, 2020). These drastic changes are not without challenges to both educators and learners. In Malaysia, like most countries in the world, the Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated that its education system lacks digital preparedness. Many teachers are not techno-savvy and are forced to adapt to conduct their classes online (Ya, 2020).

To understand the issues faced by educators, Mohd Yusuf and Ahmad (2020) conducted a study to investigate the challenges educators had to deal with. Employing qualitative research methodology, 20 faculty members were given a Google form with open ended questions via WhatsApp. The participants answered the questions and responses were thematically analysed. Results show that the educators

found it difficult to conduct their lessons as the students were less focused and some were without basic technological learning tools. Infrastructure availability was also a challenge as the educators found that the learning platform provided was not satisfactory and Internet access was also a major issue. The challenges highlighted by teachers conducting online classes were also mentioned by Tamin and Mohamad (2020). In their study, the participants used Google Classroom application as the platform for teaching and learning. While the teachers in their study were familiar in using technology to teach, to switch to online teaching and learning and totally depend on Google Classroom application to teach posed challenges to them. Apart from limited access to technology devices such as computers and network connection, they also cited lack of training in delivering lessons virtually.

Issues and challenges related to online learning are not limited to teachers and educators only. Numerous studies have shown that students also face issues when having to continue lessons and classes virtually due to the pandemic. A quantitative research conducted by Wan Hassan et al (2020) on 39 students of Diploma in Culinary Arts at Langkawi Vocational College, Kedah who took the subjects of Basic Food and Cookery, Final Year Project 1 and Introduction to Hospitality Industry found that students faced challenges in terms of Internet access, ICT knowledge in using the application and motivation to study virtually. This is rather worrying as the challenges are the basis for successful online learning to materialise. In another quantitative study by Omar et al (2020) involving 680 students from public universities and a few other higher learning institutions such as Polytechnics, and University Colleges, the researchers investigated students' readiness for online instructions and expected assessment practices in online environment, as well as the types of support required from their university. The researchers found that the respondents were ready in terms of having the necessary tools for online learning and appeared to have high expectations of support of the institutions and the lecturers. Despite positive responses in terms of readiness of the respondents, the issue of Internet connection was reported.

Mixed responses were gathered from a study conducted by Chung, Subramaniam & Dass (2020). They conducted a study on Online Learning Readiness among university students in Malaysia amidst Covid-19. The respondents in this study were online and distance learning students in the largest university in Malaysia covering its 13 branches. It was found that the students were not ready for online learning due to

lack of learners control, self-directed learning and online communication efficacy. Not surprisingly more than half of the students stated that they prefer not to continue with online learning, given a choice. It was also found that the biggest challenge was poor Internet connectivity and limited broadband data despite the free 1 Gigabyte of broadband data offered by telecommunication companies especially when lectures were live-streamed.

Coping Mechanisms

Interestingly, in a study conducted on secondary teachers in San Pablo City, Philippines, De Villa & Manalo (2020) had recorded several themes on coping mechanisms as attempt to address the challenges of online learning. These include positive well-being, time management, openness to change, peer mentoring, and collaboration. In another study, Mheidly et. al (2020) has developed an Infographic presenting the coping strategies to be adopted as means to tackle the challenges of online learning. Among their worthy recommendation on coping strategies is students should be allowed to have frequency of breaks between online lectures to allow them to release eye strain as well as to gauge their attention.

With similar issues reported by researchers in terms of challenges faced by both the educators and learners, it is believed that a more comprehensive study involving more respondents nationwide to come up with the right coping mechanisms formula is needed. This to ensure that fundamental issues and challenges are addressed so that online learning and virtual classrooms can be carried out effectively.

Methodology

The following section describes the method taken along with the research context and instruments involved in ascertaining the predicaments faced by students specifically in English language learning classes during the pandemic period. Subsequently, qualitative data were collected for this study to explore the challenges and coping measures taken by the students when having to continue their language learning lessons via online. Additionally, a purposive sampling method was used for the selection of respondents, that mainly involved a small number of first year students undergoing their language classes at a public university in the country.

Research Context

The study involved 29 students of Bachelor of English with Commerce (BELCOM) program, who were in their first to third semester of study when the data was collected. All respondents were volunteers who consented to participate in the research study. Their proficiency level ranged from Band 4 (Satisfactory User) to Band 5 (Proficient User) according to the Malaysian University English test (MUET henceforth).

During the data collection stage, the respondents were undergoing their online learning classes for the courses taken for the particular semester. Accordingly, majority of the respondents were residing at their own homes across the country while accessing the courses online via various online learning platforms identified by the institutions as well as their course lecturers. Two modes of online learning classes were employed namely the asynchronous and synchronous modes for all the courses taken such as the use of Microsoft Teams or Google Meet platforms for synchronous learning, and the University's Moodle learning platforms, i.e. Global Open Access Learning System (GOALS) USIM that acts as repositories that integrates various online learning applications for easy access during their asynchronous online learning sessions.

Research Instruments

The research instrument involves using Google form that requires the respondents to describe and explain their online learning challenges and coping mechanism employed. Participants were given the opportunity to answer the Google form at their own pace. However, the submission for the Google form by the students was monitored by the researcher to ensure that all respondents submitted. As the qualitative study is part of a bigger research, the session for answering the Google Form was conducted at the early stage of data collection.

This qualitative study is part of a bigger research. However, for the purpose of this paper, the students were asked the following questions:

1. What was the biggest challenge you faced in learning online and how do you cope with it?
2. What other challenges did you face when learning online and how did you cope with them?

Research Procedure

Prior to the data collection, an online group was created using the WhatsApp application as a communication platform between the respondents and the researchers.

Accordingly, participants were briefed on the aims of the study as well as the description of the procedures for data collection. Respondents were required to answer a Google form during an allocated time that was scheduled earlier. They were allowed to ask questions when in doubt whilst they answered the Google form. The two open-ended questions in the Google form are regarding the challenges faced. The respondents were invited to firstly share ‘the biggest challenge’ that they had to endure during the pandemic and secondly describe ‘the other challenges’ that they faced. Both required them to elucidate their coping mechanisms. Responses from the google forms were analysed thematically according to the biggest challenge and other challenges faced as well as the coping mechanism used. The challenges were further categorised into internal and external factors.

Findings

There are two (2) main themes revealed by the data gathered – external and internal. In other words, the challenges faced by BELCOM USIM students in undergoing online learning at home during the Movement Control Order can be categorised into external and internal factors. Each of the categories is made up of two (2) related challenges which are Internet connection and environment, and understanding and communication, respectively. Figure 1 illuminates the findings.

Figure 1: Challenges

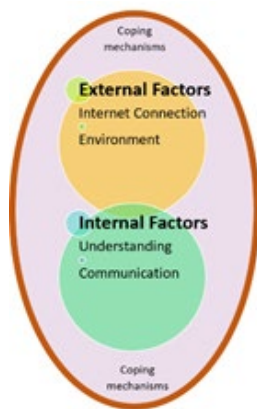


Figure 1 summarises the challenges faced by the respondents. The two (2) inner circles represent the two (2) main themes by the respondents – external and internal factors. The former includes iInternet connection and environment while the latter covers

understanding and communication. The oval background shows that the respondents had their own coping mechanisms in their effort to overcome their challenges.

This section elucidates the themes taken from ‘the biggest challenge’ beginning from external factors - iInternet connection and environment, and followed by internal factors where findings on understanding and communication are discussed. The elucidation then continues with ‘the other stated challenges’ category. Both of these categories include discussion on their respective coping mechanisms. The themes are accompanied by the extracts from the data as evidence where ‘SS7’ signifies that the data extract is from student number 7. The extracts are verbatim as shown in inverted commas which are either on their own or embedded. They can also be summarised and included in the sentences.

Biggest Challenge - External

Theme 1: Internet Connection

Internet connection issues seem to be one of the recurring themes in the survey. “Bad Internet connection due to bad weather” (SS6) or “not stable” Internet connections are claimed to be the cause of the students’ inability to hear the lecturer or other students very well during online class sessions, “sometimes, when the Internet connection is not stable whether, in lecturer side or any other my classmates, I cannot hear what are they saying completely” (SS11). One student claimed that she could not understand some lessons because of bad Internet connection; “I can't understand some lessons due to Internet problems” (SS28).

Coping Mechanism

From the analysis it is found that there are two distinct ways the students manage the situation. They either find a way to overcome the challenge or they let it slide, putting up with the inconvenience. The first group of students offered a few ways to cope with the lack of connectivity. One student resorted to using mobile data (SS6), another student tried to find “the best place for better connection” (SS22) to be able to access online lessons. Another student stated that he simply asked the classmates to repeat information whenever he could not hear very well or “just record the whole session in the class” (SS11). Another way to cope with the connectivity issue is by “seeking help from the family” (SS18). In comparison with the efforts taken to

overcome the bad Internet connection by a group of students, one student did not choose to take any action instead she “just bear with it because I can't do anything about it”. (SS28).

Theme 2: Environment

The next biggest challenge in learning English online is the environment. This issue refers to the physical presence of the lecturer, as “it is not easy to focus when the lecturer is not physically there” (SS3), the disturbance from family members at home, as “Having to open the mic and camera when the siblings loudly watching YouTube, talking, and interrupting” (SS8), requiring many tasks at one time, as “Doing multiple tasks at once” (SS19), maintaining their English speaking skill, as “To maintain my English speaking skill” (SS26), and also being “Sleepy” (SS5).

Coping Mechanism

To cope with the environmental challenge, respondents provided parallel responses to the challenge. For example, when SS3 faced difficulty to focus without the physical presence of the lecturer, she “respond a lot to lecturer during classes”. For SS5, she coped with her problem of sleepiness by “having a class with a glass of coffee”. For SS8, the problem of noisy/disturbance from the family members was solved by the support of her mother who “my mother recently just bought us a top bunk and i managed to get the top bed and i stay up there to study, attend class, and sleep. I no longer have to stay at the dining table to attend class or do assignments anymore. When i attend class, usually my siblings will get out of the room or if they are willing to stay in the room they will keep quite after i yell.” For SS19, when she faced multiple tasks at once, she tried to cope with by “Manage the time”, and SS26 “Talk with my friend with English a lot, sometimes” in order to maintain her English speaking skill.

Biggest Challenge – Internal

Theme 3: Understanding

The next issue that was identified as the biggest challenge in learning English online is understanding. Some of the responses gathered found that students felt “its confusing to do the task” (SS7) and they had problem “to keep up” (SS23) understanding the content. Others had difficulty understanding some topics, as said by SS14, “Did not understand some topics during classes”, problem understanding well and

complex terms, as said by four (4) respondents – “It is hard to understand well” (SS15), “Understanding complex terms” (SS20), “my understanding of the lesson” (SS21), and “To understand what have been teach” (SS24). Another participant said that “Learning online is harder to understand than normal learning” (SS25).

Coping Mechanism

The analysis also revealed the coping mechanisms that respondents took in order to help or solve the problem of understanding in the lecture/class. One of the ways mentioned was seeking help from others like their friends and lecturers. This is shown by four (4) respondents - “ask my peers and friends” (SS7), “rewatch the class record and ask friend about it” (SS14), “Ask friends, reread lecture” (SS20), and “self-study, ask friends & asks lecturer” (SS21). Other than that, respondents also “Do my own research and study with the materials that lecturers have provided” (SS15), “try to keep up” (SS23), “I tried to read the book” (SS24) and “More focus during class” (SS25).

Theme 4: Communication

Another issue that presents a challenge to online English learning is communication. Most of the communication issues involve group interaction or interpersonal communication. There are three strands or types of concerns voiced around the issue of communication. A few students were concerned about the lack of interpersonal communication and the associated social interaction processes; “not able to communicate properly with new friends and new teachers” (SS4), “lack of in person interaction” (SS10). Another set of students were more concerned with their assessments and learning process; “not being able to efficiently complete group assignments” (SS2), and “hard to discuss when it comes to group assignment” (SS29). One student is concerned because the lack of in person interaction did not offer opportunities to cultivate or support her speaking skills; “to maintain my English speaking skill” (SS26).

Coping Mechanism

From the analysis it is found that the coping mechanism is parallel to the type of concerns voiced by the students. The set of students who were concerned with the lack of interpersonal communication and the associated social interaction processes offered solutions to facilitate their communication with their

classmates and teachers. Some of the solutions were “get as familiar as I can with friends and teachers” (SS4) and “talk with my friend with English a lot, sometimes” (SS26). The set of students who shared a concern about the lack of interpersonal communication having an adverse effect on their tasks/course work offered solutions such as polishing ICT skills to expedite their group assignments “improving my ICT skill so everyone can do the assignment” (SS2) and setting up group discussions “make a group to discuss” (SS29).

One student who claimed that the lack of communication did not help improve her English speaking skills (SS26) stated that she had guidance and held speaking practices with friends “always make speaking practice with the guidance from friends” as her coping mechanism to overcome the challenge.

OTHER CHALLENGES

The respondents were given a chance to share other problems that bothered them while they were going through online learning during the pandemic. Out of 30 students, six (6) of them did not have any complaint. From the rest of the students, the data revealed that ‘the other listed challenges’ can be categorised into external and internal factors. The former refers to two aspects. First is the learning environment which the respondents considered as not conducive while the second aspect is the technical glitches that they faced. The internal factors, on the other hand, denote the self-realisation of their own shortcomings.

The external factors affecting the conduciveness of their learning environment include the situation of staying at home. A few students listed having to do house chores (SS1; SS3; SS20), facing family issues (SS1; SS23; SS24) and being at home that is noisy and uncomfortable (SS11; SS12), with noisy siblings (SS7), and even pets (SS11) as the external contributing factors which make learning online not a positive experience. They also penned about not having the normal students’ lives like going to the library (SS6) and discussing with friends (face-to-face) in doing group assignment. Besides that, they also expressed their concerns over the technical problems encountered while learning online. These problems raised red flags because they hamper the main medium of online learning. Students complained about the unstable Internet line (SS10; SS19; SS30), the high price for the data (SS2) and also the unreliability of the devices and electricity in the area (SS28). Further, SS30 linked the fluctuating Internet connection to the

unpredictable weather. These external factors only came about due to the respondents going through online learning at home.

The internal factors shared by the respondents arose from the realisation of their own inadequacies. The main factor that became a challenge for them can be seen centred around time management (SS29; SS5; SS4; SS21; SS25) where SS5 blamed it on the change of bedtime while SS25 admitted not being able to juggle time between family and learning online. Further, SS4 pinpointed procrastination to be a reason and SS21 confessed that it was due to lack of motivation and discipline. Although SS26 did not acknowledge time management to be the challenge, it could as well be because she wrote that she could not stop watching movies. This might lead to the problem of time management too. However, SS13 gave the most alarming factor which is mental health. This should raise a red flag but the coping mechanism that she shared shows that the situation is controlled.

Coping Mechanism

It has been revealed that there are two extreme ways taken by the respondents in handling the challenges faced. They either accepted the challenges and moved on or took charge of the challenges and solved them. The girl who wrote ‘mental health’ as her problem did the former. She penned “I didn’t [do anything]. I just go with the flow. Maybe I will seek help after this semester and pandemic done” (SS13). SS2 and SS3 also wrote that they had gone through the stress without taking any action. Another respondent just “cried” (SS24) when faced with stress due to family issues. It could be seen that not many respondents just gave in and accepted the situation. Instead, most of them actually took charge and also took action.

The data revealed that some respondents took action on their own while a few engaged help from other people. Regarding taking action, SS4 disciplined herself by “list[ing] all [her] work with the due dates so [she] would not procrastinate” while SS29 “[tried] to prepare [her]self early” in order to complete work on time. In a similar vein, SS25 “[made] a study schedule and follow[ed] it strictly’. Furthermore, SS9 and SS22 both shared that they created their own comfortable and suitable place for studying. In terms of overcoming the poor iInternet connection, SS10 and SS19 “[went] to Internet centre” and “[drove] out looking for line” respectively. However, interestingly, instead of being tough on oneself, SS26 rewarded herself for a job done. She wrote, “made [watching movie] as a reward if [she] managed to settle one work [task]”. Based on their

sharing, it seems that these respondents faced their challenges by taking their own action.

Besides working on the solution by themselves, some of the respondents sought help from other people. SS7 admitted asking for his parents' help while SS11 "engaged younger sister to settle the pet problem and used earphones during class". The latter elucidates how the respondent solved the problem of noisy pets and noisy siblings during her online classes. Similarly, SS12 "negotiated with family members" and SS20 "[told] family [about] the timetable" for the classes in finding solution for having to do house chores during class hours. One of the respondents actually "[stayed] with aunt and uncle "(SS23) during the weekdays in order to get good connection for online classes. Moreover, these respondents also asked their friends' help in coping with the setback of online classes. SS21 wrote, "[I am] always keeping up with my friends in finishing assignments and tasks, so we can support each other" and this echoes too in SS30's statement when he wrote "I will ask my friend for important information".

Discussion

Based on the findings, it is seen that there are four (4) main challenges under two (2) main themes faced by students when learning English online – Internet connection, environment, understanding and communication. The two (2) main themes are external and internal factors. The findings have shown that although respondents faced different challenges, they tried to cope with the challenges in their own ways.

The problem of Internet connection and technical problem (external factor) can be linked to findings reported by Tamin and Mohamad (2020) who found limited access to technology devices such as computers and network connection as the challenges that teachers faced when conducting online classes. This is also supported by Wan Hassan et. al (2020) who reported the challenge of Internet access and ICT knowledge in using the application. In addition, Omar et. al (2020) and Chung, Subramaniam and Dass (2020) also reported Internet connection or poor Internet connectivity as the challenge students face with online instruction.

Other than that, the issue of understanding when learning English online can be linked to a study by Mohd Yusuf and Ahmad (2020) who investigated the challenges educators had to deal with. Although the samples for the study were educators, the findings reflect what the challenges that the students faced. Their findings reported that educators found it difficult

to conduct their lessons as the students were less focused and some were without basic technological learning tools. When students are less focused, it could lead to the problem of understanding the content being taught in the class.

The respondents who responded that the environment as their biggest challenge can be linked to findings by Di Pietro et. Al (2020), who reported that students who are confined at home with their parents due to COVID-19 may feel more stressed and anxious. This is also supported by Wan Hassan et. al (2020) who reported students facing the challenge in terms of motivation when studying virtually.

The responses that respondents provided on how to cope with the challenges can be linked to findings found by De Villa & Manalo (2020), who recorded several themes on coping mechanisms as attempt to address the challenges of online learning – positive well-being, time management, openness to change, peer mentoring, and collaboration.

Conclusion

In tapping the challenges faced by USIM learners of English Language in online learning sessions specifically during the Movement Control Order period, two-pronged challenge was discovered namely external and internal challenges. These external and internal challenges were explicated by the respondents by relating to Internet connection, environment, understanding, and communication realms. Despite the challenges highlighted by the respondents, it was interesting to note that most of them, if not all, employed coping mechanisms in managing the obstacles that they have faced. The outcome of this study is a contribution to the field of online learning specifically to online curriculum developers and language practitioners to be more thoughtful in planning, developing materials and implementing online teaching-learning with suitable online-learning features and educational modifications. As for the parents, the findings are expected to create awareness on the struggle of their children at home in coping with distractions and sometimes not-so conducive atmosphere for learning to take place effectively. The coping mechanisms shared by the learners in this study would act as guides for other learners with similar obstacles in online learning atmosphere to reduce their academic stress associated with it.

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