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BARRIERS IN ONLINE LEARNING FACED BY TERTIARY LEVEL LEARNERS

Prof.Dr.(Mrs).S.Ravindran

Professor

Department of English Language Teaching

University of Jaffna

Email: ravindran_shan@yahoo.com



Dr.S.Ravindran

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Abstract

English as a Second Language (ESL) Teaching and Learning have long been provided through face to face mode. It is by the end of 2020 a drastic change took place all over the world due a pandemic called COVID 19. Now almost all the countries are carrying out the teaching learning activities through online mode. This study explores the barriers in learning ESL through online mode in Sri Lanka. Three hundred and thirty students from the tertiary level were taken as subjects for the research. A qualitative and quantitative research methodology was utilized. The study was carried out with the main objective of identifying the barriers in learning through online mode and to put forward the remedies. A pre and post online written tests were conducted and the performances of the participants were taken as data for the study. The students' views on online education and their feedback on the barriers in learning ESL through the online mode, and teachers' views and observations were taken as data for the study. The interview with the staff and their observation were utilized along with the literature review to triangulate the data. The findings disclose the fact that not only the English language skills but also the IT and computer literacy were inadequate and many other factors related to these were found to be the barriers to learn English at the tertiary level. The study recommends that the learners should undergo special training to pick up these skills and the teachers and administration should take necessary steps to reduce the online learning barriers to learn ESL like that of the face to face mode.

Keywords: English as second language learning, tertiary level learners, online learning, barriers in online teaching and learning.

Introduction

English as a second language is a compulsory component for the award of the degree at the tertiary level. The participants are from the first year Faculty of Arts and this is the first time they are learning through online mode. Due to the pandemic

they follow lectures including ESL only through online mode. The researcher has created a what's App group for the participants to share, guide, to inform about the lectures and other activities and to carry out the learning, teaching and testing along with the zoom lectures. There is crucial need to

teach and learn through online due to the rapid spread of COVID 19 and the increase in death rate immaterial of age and sex. Today due to the pandemic the online mode is found to be the only option to conduct meetings, business transaction and especially education from the primary level. The online instructions, teaching and learning have now become a daily routine of learners and teachers. In the introduction of each new mode of learning the teachers and students encounter various barriers.

Background of the study

As it is a developing country the facilities for teaching and learning are neither adequate nor equally distributed in Sri Lanka -the researcher's context. There is only gradual development in IT and computer skills in the island. The teachers and learners have limited technological and IT knowledge. Therefore there are lot of learning and teaching barriers and challenges.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to explore the barriers in learning ESL encountered through online mode and to find necessary solution and remedial measures to reduce the barriers and enable learners to achieve their targets.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the tertiary level learners face lot of barriers in learning through the online mode.

Research problem

Numerous researches have been conducted on barriers to online learning. But in developing countries particularly like Sri Lanka, the online concept is still in infant stage. The quality of online learning in institutions of higher education has been a growing concern for during the past several years. The students are facing lot of challenges in online learning. They are unable to state about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the online education they have received. There are various factors that shape students' online learning experiences. All these have prompted the present study and its investigation to explore students'

barriers in learning towards the quality of online education.

Research Questions

Answers to the following research questions were sought in this study.

1. What are the major barriers of students who are receiving online education?
2. What are the barriers the lecturers face while teaching through online mode?
3. How do those barriers contribute to the quality of online education?

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study which need to be addressed. First, the participants in this study were hesitant to use online mode to respond to the questionnaire survey. Out of the three hundred and fifty participants only two hundred and twenty five responded.

The teaching and handling of the lectures varied due to the individual characteristics of the lecturers with regard to how he/she presented the course content and communicated with students. Therefore, the characteristics of the lecturers, the use of different causeway of technology, the layout, the design and the interface were all different. Third, the classes were across disciplines and were taught at different levels.

Definition of Terms

This study adopted the term of *online education* identified by Paulsen (2002). According to Paulsen, online education is characterized by

- a. the separation of teachers and learners (which distinguishes it from face-to-face education),
- b. the influence of an educational organization (which distinguishes it from self-study and
- c. private tutoring), the use of a computer network to present or distribute some educational content the provision of two-way communication via a computer network so that students may benefit from communication with each other, teachers, and staff. According to Khan (1997) online learning is an innovative approach for delivering instruction to students

in remote places, online learning also includes all kinds of learning that are transmitted across the computer.

Literature Review

Even though several studies have been published on online learning there has been a paucity of research conducted on the barriers of both the students and the lecturers faced by switching from face to face to online education. Nowadays, most of the universities are using computer based teaching and learning. In developing countries, many courses are taught through the internet and this kind of learning is called online learning. Carnevale (2000) reported that Nick Smith (D, Michigan), the chairman of the House of Representatives science subcommittee on basic research, expressed about the quality of internet-based courses in May of year 2000. Smith further stated that he remained skeptical of the quality of online learning, "... students who take courses through online mode don't interact as much as their peers in traditional courses, and that they may walk away with knowledge but not with an understanding of how to think for themselves (p. 51.)". (2001). Willis, Davis, and Chaplin (2013) have pointed common barriers prevent students from participating in online learning and make them prefer traditional courses

Materials and methods

Three hundred and fifty students were selected from the 1st year Arts English Language group. They were asked to participate in pre and post tests on writing skills via zoom for the purpose of this study. A qualitative and quantitative mixed methodology was utilized. The lecturers' and participants' views were collected by interviewing them. The teachers' observation on the barriers in learning ESL through online mode was obtained. At the beginning two hundred and seventy students participated. Among those who have completed the ESL proficiency level test, one hundred and fifty students' proficiency in writing skills was gauged. A writing skills test was conducted at the beginning and at the end of the first semester. Literature reviews on the research topic were used to triangulate the data derived. To achieve this

objective, a questionnaire on the online learning barriers of the participants and lecturers were designed and administered and the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were checked.

Data analysis

Data were gathered and analyzed. In responding to the questionnaire the participants disclosed the fact that the lack of knowledge in information and computer technology, infrastructure ,net facilities, weather constrains, power cut, poor signal, and individual characteristics of lecturers and other factors as the barriers in learning through the online mode . The lecturers expressed their observation on the participants' learning behavior through the online mode. They disclosed the fact that the students had problems in adjusting to the online mode of learning. They further stated that the students were tested and found to be in various proficiency levels in writing skills at the beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester the performance of the participants showed improvement but not to the expected level. When compared to face to face lectures the participants' proficiency level in writing skills has not improved remarkably. The lecturers have observed that the participants have not put many efforts in writing assignments. To avoid this the researcher has utilized Google forms to conduct exams for the other skills. Except for a few students others have down loaded and even copied paragraphs to write their assignments. Lecturers disclosed the fact that due to lack of computer and IT skills and infrastructure problems some participants do not attend lectures and they come out with excuses about signal problems. The lecturers regret to say that it was difficult to spend more time on the slow learners and those who have low proficiency in writing skills as they do in face to face lectures. Except a few, majority of the participants did not interact with the lecturers and other students in online lectures. More time has to be spent on technical issues which make it difficult to train them in having online lecturers. They generally tend to get help from others while doing a test. At the same time the participants came out with their views on online learning expressing the barriers in learning ESL. They stated that they need more guidance in

operating their PCs, joining classes, sending assignments, responding to the lectures; interact with the lecturer and other batch mates. They also stated that their lack of learning facilities, and computer and ICT literacy are major barriers.

Results of the study

The results indicate that the online learning infrastructure is an immense barrier that obstructs the utilization of online learning in Jaffna University. Also, there are statistically significant differences in the barriers that were faced by students while they were using online learning based on gender and studying year variables in favor of female and male students of first year respectively. However, despite these features, there are still some constraints that limit students from using the online learning. The results of the study revealed that the chief barriers to using e-learning comes out of several inadequate teaching experiences, change of learning mode-no past experience, not attending online lectures regularly, lack of motivation, personal cognition ,challenging online learning resources, poor inadequate support for learning through online modes ,boredom and various other factors. On the other hand, these barriers are considered as huge lack of familiarity with a new environment, structure, materials and strategy, as well as a lack of time. In fact this can be reported as one of the main barriers from the student's point of view. Moreover, the results of the study revealed that there is an interaction between gender and teaching year variables. Finally, in light of the results, the study recommended that additional efforts from decision makers and teachers should be taken to reduce the barriers in teaching and learning through online mode.

Conclusion

In fact, this study has documented some of the students' barriers and shed the light on the process of online learning at the researcher's context. The students' barriers were found to be in considerable degree. Effective online learning necessitates great efforts from the academic institution, administrators, staff and students. The academic institution should keep in mind to enhance the online learning in terms of providing suitable

training for teachers and providing financial support to update the labs with modern equipment and stimulating educational programs. Prior to students' enrollment, special online learning induction programs should be conducted to raise the students' awareness of the importance of online learning. It is also significant to tackle any obstacle that may occur in technology. Further studies are needed to improve the online learning integration with traditional learning and to reflect the reality of online learning in the higher education institutions.

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