From Impossible to Possible: A Research Review on the Effectiveness of Learning English online During the Pandemic at Tertiary Level in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The unexpected shift to online teaching from face-to-face was a noteworthy phenomenon to all students and teachers in Sri Lanka which affected English Language Teaching (ELT). However, e-learning commenced in Sri Lanka at the Open University of Sri Lanka, way before the COVI-19 pandemic emerged, where the first-year core course in English language regardless of the discipline has been a face-to-face delivery. The traditional face-to-face mode of lecture delivery unexpectedly shifted to online since 2020 due to COVID-19 which resulted in the temporary closure of the physical delivery of all university courses including English. Now it has been more than two years and it is essential to examine the studies conducted locally on online ELT at tertiary level. Eventually the present study has discovered twenty-four studies which were conducted in the said research context analyzing how these studies examined online ELT strategies, their effectiveness, how was it proven and whether any further steps are required to make it effective. Consequently, in most of the local research conducted, undergraduates possess a negative attitude to online learning due to technical flaws and inconveniences experienced when learning from home. In addition, all these studies recommend that leaners and academics be given more practice in online teaching and learning. These findings and conclusions can be utilized to decide on the adequacy of research conducted on online ELT in the local tertiary level context and whether any such scholarly research recommends that online ELT requires revision. Eventually, these conclusions can initiate the designing of a model for online ELT for local undergraduates. Following the findings, the study concludes that online ELT at local universities relies on the teaching practices, prevalence of effectiveness and strategies followed, concern paid and followed to fulfill further requirements for the development in effectiveness. Consequently, it is expected to inspire the implementation of effective strategies for online ELT for undergraduates. However, since most of these conclusions have been arrived at based on studies focusing on undergraduates' perspectives, it is essential to cross-examine the information obtained from both learners and lecturers via a mixed method approach, so that future transitions to the online approach can incorporate the best practices followed by both lecturers and students.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Teaching English Online, Tertiary Level Education, COVID-19 Pandemic

I.   Introduction

As a global link language, teaching English as a Second Language English has been given priority in the local education system in Sri Lanka, from secondary school and this continues into the tertiary level as well. Therefore, English is delivered as a core module in the first year of university education, adhering to the Subject Benchmark Statement as stated by the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council in 2010. According to the said statement, teaching English at the university should support both receptive and productive skills of undergraduatesfor competent, clear, and coherent communication (Quality Assurance Council, 2010). This

facilitation should consist of adequate resources, best instructional strategies, and assessments,so that the preplanned Learning Outcomes (LOs) are achieved by the leaners (Ko et al, 2013).

These expectations were challenged in April 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic made a shift in the face-to-face delivered education system in the world to a different paradigm. In Sri Lanka this was the same and the temporary termination of physical education has forced more than 91% of learners globally to adapt themselves into online learning providing no other alternative (2020, UNICEF). On the other hand, the influence of the pandemic did not bring education to an end,rather it paved the way to continue teaching online. As a result of fostering the novelty of the approach, it has created strategies and teaching practices and this is similar in the Sri Lankan context, and these were increasingly used in the local higher education sector, both synchronously and asynchronously. However, e-learning was first initiated in the 1980s in Sri Lanka, with the establishment of the Open University of Sri Lanka but that was different to the phenomena discussed in the present study. In fact, this e-learning commenced in courses which were designed and approved officially to be delivered face-to-face, as a solution, to continue education amidst the pandemic.

Thus, with regard to the English language course, which is offered in the first year of the university education, lecturers, students as well as administrative staff commenced adapting to the novel approach and familiarizing themselves with the online resources since they did not have time to pretest the effectiveness of this transition. It also has to be noted that in thelocal education system, students come from diverse social backgrounds. This is similar in tertiary level education and face-to-face English language learning bridged students to a common context which paved the way for the language to be used together unlike in online learning which affects this learning pace. This stems from the fact that everyone does not have the same capacity in accessing relevant devices and some might not have a positive learning context at home (Daily FT, 2020). Thus, debates pertain to the distinctions between onsite and online English Language Teaching (ELT), which causes the present study to review strategies taken for online ELT in the Sri Lankan tertiary level context and how much they have been effective.

Overall, the following questions have to be answered when initiating to examine the effectiveness of online ELT in the Sri Lankan tertiary level context.

- How has the research analyzed the online teaching practices used in ELT at tertiary level Sri Lanka?
- Overall, according to the local research, has online ELT in the Sri Lankan tertiary level been effective?
- How has it been proven effective?
- As per the local research, are any steps required to make online ELT of the research context more effective?

To find the answers to these questions, the present study reviews research conducted on overall online teaching that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, at tertiary level in the Sri Lankan context and studies specifying online ELT occurred in the same research context.Currently, only a few studies have been conducted so far on evaluating prior studies and this research review providesa comprehensive evaluation which initiates and further stimulates the discussions in developing and executing the best practices in delivering effective online ELT at the local tertiary level context.

II. Methodology

The study reviewed already published scholarly work on online ELT at the local tertiary level since 2020 during the pandemic.First, the present study reviewed studies conducted on overall online teaching of the selected context and then expanded into review on studies which specified the ELT, with regard to teaching practices used and their effectiveness. Twenty-four research studies were gathered from online data bases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, SAGE Online, EMERALD, and ResearchGate, to find answers for the mentioned research questions.The selection of research was done based on studies conducted since the commencement of online ELT in 2020 due to the pandemic.

III.   Data Analysis

Teaching Practices

As per the results of the study conducted by Chandradasa and Galhena (2021), in their study on the usage of Zoom for e-learning in the Sri Lankan university education system during the pandemic, it was found that undergraduates' preference on using Zoom relies on its positive influence on reaching their goals in performance, motivation, performance, convenient online learning experience, which allow ease in communication with peers and teachers, saves money and time in referring and recording the materials.As a result designers of the Zoom add more characteristics to develop the capability in accomplishing the users' goals. Thus, when using Zoom for online teaching, it is essential that teachers allow students to engage more in online learning experience (Chandradasa&Galhena, 2021).   A similar conclusion has been arrived at by Mohamed Riyath et al (2022) who conclude that, participation for Zoom lectures relies on students' perspective on its effectiveness and convenience to their learning. Thus, lecturers have to be trained and lessons have to be revised to make online teaching effective (Mohamed Riyath et al, 2022). However, these studies do not discuss the type of teaching practices which make Zoom learning effectivefor online English Language Teaching (ELT). In addition, if the study obtains data from the lecturers, that would have provided their perspective on the usage of Zoom and rather than relying only on students and these studiesshould have used interviews or observations to validate the survey responses of the undergraduates.

In another study conducted on online teaching at a local university, Khashunika et al (2021) emphasize that effective online learning occurs when the teaching strategies are adapted to the online mode. However, the study uses only asample of 14 students and the respective lecturers representing one university, and this selection limits the conclusion to be generalized.

Similar issues related to technological access and devices, which is highlighted by previous studies, is further emphasized by Madhuwanthi et al. (2021), according to whom, the undergraduates selected for the study face considerable technically related issues and further, that the students require skills in identifying the issues encountered and to see whether they can resolve these by themselves. This challenge caused due to lack of technological equipment, access, and competency is further enhanced when the learners struggle in comprehending the lessons and noting down notes due to the monotonous delivery of online lessons without a break (Madhuwanthi et al.,2021). When revising the online teaching or addressing any of its issues, it is significant to be noted that many students mostly connect to online teaching via smartphones using the hotspot (Haththotuwa & Rupasinghe, 2021). However, these findings are based on data collected via a survey and they do not specify learning English online.

As many undergraduates in Sri Lanka do not have prior online learning experience, the academics should utilize diverse teaching strategies and provide technological assistance for them when required, which facilitates each learning style and learner autonomy (Sudusinghe& Kumara, 2020). This results in stimulating the learning process which in turn creates a positive attitude in them towards online learning (Sudusinghe& Kumara, 2020). Not only teaching, but also the conducting of online assessments according to a proper schedule makes learning effective and autonomous (Sudusinghe& Kumara, 2020). However, learners in the study conducted by Sudusingheand Kumara (2020) are not content with the online teaching practice, and they prefer face-to-face teaching more than online delivery.This preference for face-to-face learning is prevalent for online ELT as well (Prasangani, 2020).

Academic staff may need to change their teaching approaches utilized in the
"conventional classroom" while adopting digital skills to reach remote students
efficiently

Prevalence of Effectiveness and Strategies Followed

As discovered by Khashunika et al (2021), online teaching provides opportunities for problem-solving and creativity-building activities. As a result, undergraduates expand their synchronous online learning by initiating events to be conducted online (Khashunika et al.,2021). Nevertheless, Madhuwanthi et al (2021) finds out that learning from homehinders,and does not facilitate effective learning due to external disruptions. Due to these disturbances, academics even record their lectures to facilitate the students who miss them due to network coverage issues (Haththotuwa & Rupas inghe, 2021), and students tend to watch lecture recordings, but still they have mentioned that most of the time the lecture recordings uploaded are incomplete. Moreover, undergraduates also feel disturbed when they experience network difficulties especially duringonline assignments or examinations and all these make learning stressful (Madhuwanthi et al., 2021). Overall, these problems pertaining to accessing technical devices, internet and inappropriate atmosphere for online learning have been identified as causes that hinder effective online teaching in the local university education (Prasanth et al, 2021). However, the study conducted by Prasanth et al is a survey focusing on online learning in general rather than specifying learning English online.

Amidst these issues, in the research conducted by Yang et al (2022), many Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) mention that they provide relevant online video conferencing platforms for lecturers to conduct their lectures. However, the same study discovers that more than half of the statehigher education institutes do not provide standardpedagogical progress for lecturers with regard to online teaching, unlike non-state higher education institutes. In addition, the state HEIs do not provide internet facilities for their academics in contrast to most of the non-state institutes. The research highlights that most of these HEIs facilitate the students and academics with the respective video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams along with the execution of the institutes' Learning Management System (LMS). In addition to these online platforms, as per the study conducted by Haththotuwa & Rupasinghe (2021), PowerPoint is used widely as a facilitator for teaching, but it has to be examined whether it is the same with online ELT as well.

Going beyond general online learning, it has been stated by many students that their English learning is more stimulating and collaborative, but it is negatively affected by poor network bandwidth or other technical difficulties (Dilahara et al., 2021). Furthermore, Dilahara et al have examined how the language competency is enhanced via online teaching, and it is noted that except speaking, all other three language skills, namely reading, writing and listening, are not enhanced in online ELT. (Dilahara et al., 2021). However, even speaking is hindered when the connection drops due to poor bandwidth issues. On the other hand, students do not tend to enjoy practicing the writing skill online (Dilahara et al., 2021).Eventually, when it comes to assessments, many students have the same negative attitude due to inadequate time that they have in typing and submitting their response on time as well as the inconvenience they experience when attempting the tests from home, online (Dilahara et al., 2021).

Further Requirements

According to Khashunika et al (2021) undergraduates believe that lecturers need to have more awareness in using technology so that they can practice delivering lectures effectively, online. In addition, it is essential to address the inadequacy of technological facilities such as computers and laptops, along with access to the internet, by providing the devices and internet connection for students at a lower rate or providing loans to purchase the said facilities (Khashunika et al, 2021). In addition, many students mention that they cannot afford the cost of data and the said devices (Dilahara et al., 2021), which has made them reject or refuse online learning.

Consequently, all students get to prepare for online learning and educators can guide them in familiarizing them with the online platforms and techniques. This is also highlighted by Yang et al (2022)who identify the necessity in developing and maintaining the technological resources which would support the educators in preparing and familiarizing themselves with those resources; this wouldresultinengaging in effective online learning because, as it is discovered,the content and assessing of Leaning Outcomes (LOs) of the face-to-face learning might not align with the online learning approach. Thus, as Yang et al (2022) proposes, the curriculum

of traditional learning has to be revised to develop the quality of local tertiary level education. However, this has to be further studied with reference to online ELT with a more diverse undergraduate population of Sri Lanka.

Also, as highlighted by Madhuwanthi et al (2021), the university is required to pay more attention to how online teaching methods can be usedto cater to diverse learning skills of the undergraduates. In fact, the academics can be provided with 'pedagogical-oriented professional development' to assist varied learning requirements in online learning (Yang et al, 2022).

With regard to local online ELT at the tertiary level, it is suggested to have a diverse set of practices in teaching, with the aim of targeting to develop the four language skills and assessing them in a way so that students do not feel discomfort by external barriers (Dilahara et al., 2021). In addition, Kumari & Jayasinghe (2021) suggest that awareness sessions or workshops have to be conducted; these willassist in guiding the students and let them familiarize themselves and solve their doubts with regard to various pedagogical platforms which develop students' autonomous learning and competency in the four language skills. Finally, the study done by Prasangani (2020) emphasizes the necessity of an online learning policy.This study suggests the importance of having a proper policy for online learning in Sri Lanka

IV.   Conclusion

When examining these studies, it can be concluded that most of the studies highlight the negative attitude that students have toward online learning mainly due to technological barriers and the inconvenience of learning from home. In addition, all these studies recommendthat leaners and academics be given more practice in online teaching and learning. However, most of these studies have arrived at these findings based on general online learning or online ELT that is also based only on students' perspectives.Therefore, these conclusions have to be cross-examined on specifying learning English in local universities based on both learners' and lecturers' information collected via a mixed method approach.

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