Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Emergency Forced Remote Education in Learning English

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The Covid-19 has changed the education landscape around the world including Malaysia. Malaysia has been experiencing the Movement Control Order where learning activities are forced to be in a form of remote learning. Although online learning is commonly used in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions, this study argues that the emergency forced remote education and remote online education are not the same. This study investigates students' experience in learning English via emergency forced remote education. Students from eight English classes were requested to answer survey at the end of the semester. It was found that majority of the students were satisfied with the English course despite the challenges they have faced in completing the tasks and assessments given. The empathetic approach implemented has helped the students to gain positive learning experience. Based on these findings, possible ways to improve the course design and delivery are discussed and future studies are suggested.

Keywords: Covid-19, English language course, emergency remote online education, higher education, Malaysia.

1.0 Introduction

Like any other countries around the world, Malaysia has launched a Movement Control Order (abbreviated as MCO) starting from 18th March 2020 as the number of Covid-19 reached 900 cases. The Covid-19 not only poses danger to human health, it also affects the economy and the livelihood of the people. On 15 April 2020, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has requested the educators to shift their traditional classroom to distance learning to ensure learning activities are not disrupted. As a result, educators and students were required to work from home and the teaching and learning sessions were conducted using online platform such as Whatsapp, Telegram, Google Meet and ZOOM.

Although online learning may sound as an ideal solution to curb this pandemic situation as Malaysia is moving towards the Industrial Revolution 4.0, it is hard to ignore the geographical and economical context of Malaysians. High speed internet is a luxury in which not everyone can afford it especially for those who are in rural areas. Students coming from bottom income families struggle not just with the internet connection, but also with the infrastructure they are living in. Starting from 1st April 2020, the Malaysian government has announced to provide free unlimited data until the end of MCO. Unfortunately, internet connection is still a major struggle for students to participate in online learning.

The emergency forced remote education creates a new experience for both educators and students and it requires further investigation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' perceptions towards emergency remote online learning for their English class. It is hoped that this research will enlighten the educators on the problems faced by the students, but also help to make informed decisions while planning for the upcoming English courses.

2.0 Review of Past Studies on Emergency Forced Remote Education

A plethora of studies has been conducted on positive impacts of online learning also known as distance learning on learners of English as a second language [1], [2], [3], [7], [13]. However, it is important to highlight that although the instructors and students in higher learning institution are familiar with online learning for blended learning; emergency forced remote education offers a whole new experience. Past researchers have argued that it is important for the researchers to know the difference between online distance education and emergency remote education [5], [9]. An online distance education is a well-planned course which includes elaborate lesson plans, well-developed teaching materials and contents, and well-supported by educational technology team. In contrast, Bozkurt and Sharma [5] defined the emergency remote education as a temporary shift of instructional delivery that uses fully remote teaching rather than face-to-face or blended or hybrid course and will be return to the original format once the crisis has ended. The objective of emergency remote education is to provide quick and

temporary access to education rather than to re-create a robust educational ecosystem [9]. This quick migration from face-to-face to online is important so that the students' academic development is not at risk.

There were several challenges faced by the learners in the transition from traditional classroom to remote learning environment such as difficulties to adjust to online language learning environment and the absence of teacher mediation which requires students to be more self-directed [13]. Therefore, Chuah [6] urged the instructors to design the course appropriate to students' learning experience. In designing and ensuring an effective online learning experience, Bao [4] suggested five principles of teaching practice to deliver an effective online education. First, the principle of appropriate relevance where quantity, length and difficulty of the content should match students' academic readiness and online learning preference of the students. Second, the principle of effective delivery where the instructor should adjust the teaching speed to ensure students understand the lesson. Third, the principle of sufficient support where instructors should provide timely feedback and guidance to students. Fourth, the principle of high-quality participation where instructors should find ways to improve frequency and depth of students' participation in classroom. Lastly, the principle of contingency where instructors should have backup plans to address problems caused by either students or resources.

3.0 Methodology

Respondents

The students for the study were purposively selected among second year undergraduates who have taken English for Business Communication course offered starting from February 2020 until July 2020. English for Business Communication also known as English III is only offered for students from Faculty of Entrepreneurship and Business and Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness. English courses are the university's compulsory courses where all students in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (abbreviated as UMK) are required to enrol in three English courses depending on their English language proficiency. In this study, only students who obtained Band 1 and Band 2 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) were selected as these students had undergone and passed two English prerequisite courses in their first year. The targeted respondents for this study were 160 students; however, only 72 students responded to the survey.

Research instrument

This study used google form survey as the research instrument. Students were given two weeks to complete the survey after the course ended. The link to the survey was shared to the targeted students via WhatsApp. The survey consists of 21 questions related to their personal background, learning preferences, perceptions on the content delivery and assessments, and suggestions for course improvement. The survey combines 5-point Likert scale closed questions, ranking questions, and open-ended questions to gather feedbacks from the students. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data for the study.

The English Course Design Before and During Covid-19

English for Business Communication is initially designed to be conducted in a face-to-face classroom. When the Covid-19 strikes, UMK has opted to cancel all face-to-face classes and mandated all faculties to transfer their physical classes to remote classes as an initiative to prevent the spread of the disease. This pandemic situation occurred in the fourth week of the semester. Therefore, the decision made by UMK has resulted in few changes to the course as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of English for Business Communication course before and during Covid-19

	Before Covid-19	After Covid-19
Course Learning Outcomes	Covers on four skills Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing	Covers on three skills Speaking, Reading and Writing
Teaching and Learning Activities	Face-to-face : 34 hours Non face-to-face: 8 hours	Fully non face-to-face (remote learning)

Assessments	a) E-listening test – 10%	a) E-reading assessment - 20%
	• In the classroom	• E-campus platform is used for this reading assessment. The quiz is uploaded in e-campus and students are given one hour to complete the task.
	• Instructor controls the audio and the students access the questions in e-campus platform	
	• The submission is done online.	b) Roleplay – 40%
	b) E-assessment (report writing) – 15%	
	• The draft for report writing assignment is to be done in the classroom.	• Students are given mock roleplay (10%) to familiarise them with the platform and method used. The mock roleplay can be done via Whatsapp voice note or video recordings. The same method is used for the roleplay (30%).
	• The submission is done online.	
	c) Roleplay (pairwork) – 20%	c) E-assignment – 40%
	• In class presentation	
	d) Presentation (group work) – 15%	• Two parts: a multiple-choice quiz and a report. The duration for multiple-choice quiz is one hour and the report is two hours. Students must complete both parts within 48 hours.
	• Students work in group and the topic of the presentation is given. The marks are given individually.	
	e) Final examination (reading and writing) – 40%	• The system is set whereby once a student clicked on the designated assessment; they must complete it within the time given.
	• Two sections: reading and writing.	

From the comparison above, it shows that many considerations have been made by the instructors in deciding the workable plan for this emergency forced remote education. Number of assignments were also reduced and the methods of performing the assessment were tailored to suits the current condition of the students. English instructors were encouraged to be innovative and creative in making sure all the intended learning outcomes can be achieved. The instructors were given the autonomy to decide on suitable applications such as ZOOM and Google Meet to be used in their classroom. The instructors were also actively participated in discussion and sharing sessions of new approaches and methods to mitigate the challenges faced by instructors and students. The eCampus, a learning management system (LMS) developed by UMK was used as a main platform to deliver and manage all types of content, quizzes, videos and documents to facilitate learning. Previously, the platform was only used to complement the face-to-face instruction in classroom as the course was designed as blended learning. The Covid-19 has indirectly forced the teaching and learning process to be fully conducted outside of a physical classroom.

4.0 Findings and discussion

Demographic profile

Among the 72 students participated in this study, 86.1% of the respondents are female students and 13.9 % of the respondents are male students. All students (100 %) obtained MUET Band 2, which is equivalent to CEFR Level B1 and can be considered as "Intermediate User" of English. Most of the students are living in rural areas (71.4%) and the remaining are living in sub-urban areas.

Perceptions of English for Business Communication Course

The students were asked about their opinion regarding the English course, majority of the students provided positive response as 48.6% of the students rated it as 'Excellent', 37.5% of the students rated it as 'Very Good' and 12.5% of the students rated it as 'Good'. It was found that 62.5% of the students were comfortable learning English from home. Most of the students (76.4%), claimed that they prefer to be on-campus rather than stayed at home. The same preference was also reported by Kuama and Intharaksa [10] where they found that university students still preferred learning English in face-to-face classroom and they considered the students as not ready to learn independently. Half of the students (55.5%) considered their class time as appropriate although they

mentioned that they were available at any time in a day.

The students were also asked about the content delivery of the lesson. 91.7% of the students considered the speed of the lesson as 'the right amount' where they also agreed that the instructors managed to explain the course materials clearly, provide useful materials (94.4%), and provide prompt feedback to their work (94.4%). A research found that learners' satisfaction towards off-campus learning can be determined by investigating their attitude towards the instructors, perceived ease of the online platform and perceived usefulness of the course and materials[3]. Therefore, it can be inferred that the students were satisfied with the course. 69.5% of the students claimed that they were comfortable to voice out their opinion in online meeting and Whatsapp group. 87.5% of the students found that the assignments were helpful for them to understand the course. It can be inferred that the course managed to provide a positive learning community although they were off campus. The importance of creating supportive virtual community to motivate the students was also mentioned by Wang et al [13] where students may help each other in their learning process and students will not feel alone, demotivated, and isolated.

The students reported that they enjoyed doing reading quiz (40.3%) more than writing a business report (34.7%) and performing a role-play (25%). Half of the students (50%) claimed that role-play was the most difficult task to do online. Among the reasons highlighted by the students were difficulties to discuss the topic with partner when they were far apart, poor internet connection, and demotivated due to waiting time for the response from the partner. This suggests that the students prefer to have individual task rather than working in pair or group if they have to undertake remote online class. This finding contradicts with a research conducted by Gillet-Swan [8] where she found that students showed preference to do group presentation and assignment via online medium, but still prefer live interaction for individual task.

73.6% of the students were satisfied with the amount of time given for them to complete the tasks or assessments. This indicates that the instructors have successfully reduce the anxiety for the students who have problem with their internet connection and provide appropriate amount of time to help students to prepare for the lessons and assessments.

Challenges faced by the students and suggestions to improve the course

It is important for the instructors to understand the difficulties faced by the students to participate in the lessons. 77.8% of the students mentioned that the biggest challenge learning from home is due to poor internet connectivity. The students explained that some of the videos posted by the lecturers were too big and consume a lot of internet data. Students also reported that poor internet connection was also big problem especially when they attempted for quizzes and were only given one chance to the quizzes. 16.7% of the students also reported that limited facilities to support learning was also a challenge for remote online class. Gillett-Swan [8] found that university students although showed preference towards online learning, they still want to have face-to-face learning to fully engage in the course because they were frustrated with limited resources and other family commitments.

Besides internet connection, 56.9% of the students mentioned that family commitment is also one of the challenges of learning from home. Students claimed that they have to help their parents doing online business and casual despatch services during the Movement Control Order to earn money for the family. Stoessel et al, [11] stated that personal factors can influence students' participation in an off-campus learning environment. Therefore, it is important for the instructors to design the course by providing flexible time for the students to manage and participate in the lesson.

It was also found that some students considered the challenges derived from their own selves. The students were reported to have poor time management (27.8%), low motivation to participate in the course (26.4%), and easily distracted from participating in the course (23.6%). Similarly, Bao [4] found that students have difficulties in learning off-campus due to their lack of good learning attitude such as lack of self-discipline when they are self-isolated at home. Therefore, it is important for course designer to create an enjoyable and effective online learning environment to stimulate and motivate students in learning.

Students were also asked on their suggestions to improve the course. Some of the suggestions made were to have more meeting in Google Meet or ZOOM in order to have an active discussion with the instructors and friends, create quizzes in Google form instead of using eCampus because of difficulty to stay online in the platform, use application which does not require an excessive amount of data for the internet.

5.0 Recommendations

It is important for the instructors to remind themselves not to be too ambitious by providing overwhelming materials for the students. It is recommended for the instructors to plan and allocate specific time for online meetings at least three times in a semester so that teachers can monitor the students' progress. It is also important for the university to provide training facilitation for both students and teachers so that they are familiar with how to use the platform to ensure the course runs effectively. Instructors can try to find application that does not consume much internet data. For example, avoid from using large size video to help the students to reduce data for their internet and use ZOOM instead of Google Meet because Google Meet consume more data. Flexibility is important but it must come with good monitoring from the instructors to ensure that the students are heading in the right direction. Similarly, Wang et al. [13] reminded that although online learning can provide learners with more freedom to learn, this alone is not sufficient to engage students in the learning environment.

Future research can investigate on students' autonomy and motivation to create students' profile and identify their needs and preference in providing a better learning setting for the course. Future researchers can also focus on teachers' perceptions of emergency forced remote education focusing on impact of this sudden change to their professional development.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important for the instructors to be more considerate towards their students during this difficult time. Flexibility and negotiation are important to ensure that no one will be left behind. By providing support for example giving extra time for students to complete the task if the student has personally contacted the instructor can at least help to reduce their burden and indirectly will create a positive and supportive relationship between the instructor and the student. Based on the findings and feedbacks received from this study, it is recommended that the course instructors to have better plans for the upcoming remote learning that will start to enrol virtually in October 2020.

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