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Teachers and Students Perceptions Towards Online ESL Classrooms During Covid-19: An Empirical Study in North Cyprus

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Introduction

In the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) classrooms, English is not taught as a second language at the school level (Toklu et al., 2021). However, it plays a significant role in universities (higher education) as the republic hosts many international students (Barzani et al., 2021; Kaymakamoglu & Yiltanlilar, 2019). Most of the universities have English Preparatory Schools (Language Preparatory Centers for the students to teach English) (Koprulu et al., 2017), and these schools employ modern technological tools like other Turkish institutes (Çiçek, 2019). During the Pandemic, the preparatory schools also utilized contemporary online classroom applications (Miralay, 2020), specifically the BigBlueButton/Zoom app (see Čižmešija & Bubaš, 2020). In addition, the teachers were already familiar with modern technologies as they used to utilize them in face-to-face classes (Ahmadi, 2018). Henceforth, the latest technological applications appeared to be integrated into online ELL classrooms (Çiçek, 2019) to enhance the effectiveness of teaching in language learning processes (Çiçek, 2019), making the ELL classes audio-visual face-to-face.

The present study identified the difficulties international students faced during online ELL classes in English Preparatory School(s). Moreover, the usage of current technological applications that were used in online classrooms was also evaluated. Finally, the study assessed the effectiveness of persuasive techniques by ESL teachers, which played a significant role in achieving effective teaching in ELL classrooms. Therefore, the current research endeavored to address the following research questions:

a) What type of technology do teachers/students utilize in online ESL classrooms to attend lectures in TRNC?
b) What are the difficulties teachers/students face during online classes?

c) How do these hurdles affect teachers' persuasive teaching?

Significance of the Study

In all areas, including the education sector, the internet and new online apps-mediated technology acquired prominence; this is seen more clearly with the emergence of the Covid-19 Pandemic as the COVID 19 virus imposed a worldwide closure on educational institutions. To this end, student-teacher views of online ELL classrooms need to be understood to make the process run smoothly and effectively. Therefore, the present study is significant in how it helps ESL educators, teachers, and decision-makers take practical steps during this time or any future instances of similar emergencies.

Theoretical Framework

In any international online classroom setting, the role of the English language is significant primarily when these classes are delivered by ESL teachers (Karim et al., 2019). Although most international technological apps-mediated communications (Yao & Ling, 2020) utilize the English language as the medium of communication (Lio & Wakabayashi, 2020), its importance is enhanced when teachers use it to deliver lectures specifically in English Language Learning (ELL) online classrooms in an international setting. Often, in ELL classrooms, teachers utilize various techniques and approaches for language teaching (Barzani & Rayan, 2021; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). However, problems happen when teachers and learners use the English language, specifically in ESL classroom settings (Sooryah & Soundarya, 2020). For instance, according to Ahmadi (2017), ESL teachers' methods facilitate the learning processes in ELL settings.

Consequently, technology keeps a significant position, for effective learning, for both learners and teachers (Akhmedov & Shuhkrat, 2020; Eady & Lockyer, 2013; Gençlter, 2015; İşman, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Pourhossein Gilakjani et al., 2013; Pourhossein Gilakjani, 2014, 2017; Shyamlee, 2012). Specifically, after the emergence of COVID-19, face-to-face classes entirely shifted to technological apps-mediated online learning (Bourekkache & Kazar, 2020; Cheung, 2021; Vladova et al., 2021). In addition, in recent years, various researchers have also conducted experimental studies incorporating contemporary social media apps (i.e., WhatsApp or Telegram) integrating them into online ELL classrooms (Abu-Ayfah, 2020; Tahounehchi, 2021). In former face-to-face classrooms, technology usage could be smooth as the teachers would be proficient in utilizing it. However, after the abrupt disaster of COVID-19, a new type of apps-mediated technology emerged (Daniel, 2020; Sibert et al., 2020), specifically for live online classes in the form of blended learning (Zhao, 2020). Due to this abruptness, apps-mediated technology also brought various problems and challenges to students during online lectures (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Ahmadon et al., 2020; Aslan, 2021; Moawad, 2020).

Methodology

The present study aimed to unveil teachers' and students' views and preferences about online education imposed by the Covid-19 Pandemic. To achieve this, a qualitative data collection method was utilized. This utilization of such a research method would help to obtain in-depth answers.

Participants

The researchers collected data from 30 teachers and 50 students from 4 Universities situated in 3 cities of Northern Cyprus. However, for this study, in the context of the Pandemic, the researchers re-interviewed 10 ESL teachers (who had taught at least two semesters through apps-mediated online ELL)

and 10 ELL international students from various countries taking English Preparatory courses in Cyprus International University and Near East University in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Data Collection Instruments and Data Analysis

Data were collected qualitatively using interviews via two sets (teachers and students) of open-ended questions. During the interviews and the main questions, prompt questions were also asked as to better address the issue under investigation. The collected data were analyzed following specific steps: First, the data were transcribed. Next, the transcribed data were read several times, and they were categorized under themes. Then, they were re-read, and final categorizations under each theme were decided. Finally, the data saturation was estimated, achieving thematic saturation (Lowe et al., 2018).

Analysis and Findings

This part presents the analysis and findings of the study. The results are presented under three themes: *Perception of Attitude Domain, Learning Satisfaction Domain, and Challenge Domain.* First, the results of teachers' perceptions are depicted, then those of students are illustrated.

Teacher Perspectives

The perspective of teachers in three scopes has been investigated. These include attitude to online education, the perspective of effectiveness, and perception of usability.

Perception of attitude domain

The analysis of the collected data regarding the attitude domain indicated that most of the teacher respondents were in online education and had a positive attitude about it. However, these positive perceptions were due to different reasons. For example, T4 attributed this to ease of interaction globally.

> T4: *Online ESL education creates further chances for interaction across the world. It unlocks access to learning (for some) in new ways. Therefore, I completely have a positive attitude towards it.*

In the same line, T7 stated:

> T7: *Honestly, I have a very positive attitude towards online ESL learning. It might be strange for some, and at least for now, yet with time pass by, and we learn more about online language learning, most people will change their negative opinions.*

Perception of effectiveness domain

Regarding the effectiveness of online ELL compared to traditional teaching and learning, the analysis of the data revealed discrepancies. Several respondents (6 out of 10) believed that online language learning would be effective if performed appropriately using effective platforms and methods. To this end, T1 and T9 stated:

> T1: *Online ELL is effective when utilized appropriately. However, we are forced to shift to this new teaching apps-mediated method; this doesn't indicate it is not useful. However, we [teachers]*

should now have to change the teaching methodology and adapt to the best apps. The traditional methodology won't work in online classes.

T9: *Being an online ESL teacher is all about flexibility, creativity, and the willingness to be open-minded and try new things. If we try, our online learning would be as just effective as in-class one.*

On the other hand, many teacher respondents stated different opinions. They believed that online language learning, at least, cannot replace traditional in-class instruction. Based on the data analysis, it was revealed that they primarily see online ELL as ineffective, at least in some regards. For instance, T5 and T10 argued:

T5: *For now, to be honest, I see it [online learning] as complementary and should not be a replacement. It is not effective as on-campus language learning. You can't manage the lesson well, students' engagement is not enough, and assessment is not well performed.*

T10: *When I have an online class, sometimes it feels like I am just speaking to myself. The feedback from students you get in the class just by looking at their gestures, postures, and facial expressions are completely absent. You don't see or hear all the communications you have in the real class. I admit this is, to me, the major weakness of online education.*

Perception of usability domain

This domain addressed teacher perceptions regarding the use and usability of online learning regarding the challenges and difficulties. The responses to the open-ended interview questions showed that the process was not as straightforward as traditional ELL classrooms. There are difficulties while performing lectures online. The results also revealed that the teachers did not follow one online platform. However, a variety of apps are used. T6, T7, T8, and 10 stated:

T6: *Though virtual education saved students' academic year, it was full of challenges too. These challenges were not only towards students; teachers faced many difficulties as well. The shift was new to all of us. We were not completely prepared for that. In the beginning, students are somehow enthusiastic, but after some time, they often feel bored.*

T7: *I have struggled using instructional methods that are more attractive to students like in the classroom because the conditions are not possible. The instructional time tends to be shorter because of the limited time I use applications such as Zoom so that my learning steps are adjusted to the existing conditions.*

T8: *Difficulties in setting up online systems are too complex or because of poor networks. Some students don't have cell phones or laptops. Next, during online lessons, occasionally, the condition of the student's home is less helpful, for example, (interference from younger siblings or students who are disturbing).*

T10: *Students are not familiar with the online platform; not only students' teachers as well. There is no harmony; different platforms are used, which causes another difficulty.*

Students Perspectives

   To address the students' perspectives, they were asked to respond to open-ended questions. Therefore, to better understand these attitudes, their perspectives were divided into three domains: perception of attitude domain, learning satisfaction domain, and challenge domain.

Perception of attitude domain

Regarding the students' attitudes towards online learning, the data analysis revealed that most respondents held a negative view. In other words, a substantial majority of the respondents prefer on-campus ELL. The opposing viewpoints were due to various reasons, such as students' interest, ineffectiveness, difficulties of understanding, and the like. For instance, *S1* and *S2* said:

   S1: *Honestly, I don't like online ELL because I think it is not as effective and interesting as face-to-face language learning. Though my perception changed a little bit after I took a semester online, yet again I firmly prefer the classroom to be in front of a screen which is very tiresome.*

   S2: *Well, you know, it might be somehow inappropriate if I say I HATE ONLINE ELL, but this is what I feel. I don't prefer it at all, and I hope that we can turn to normal classes sooner.*

   Similarly, though some students stated that online learning was effective in terms of timesaving and transportation ease, they still had negative attitudes compared to in-person ELL. For example, S5, S6, and S9 stated:

   S5*: To me, though it was easy. I mean easier in terms of being home and saving more time, yet academically speaking, it is ineffective, at least for ELL. So, if you are asking my opinion and preference, I would say I like being at university than learning virtually.*

   S6*: Basically speaking, I can't say online ELL is total, ineffective. There are good sides to it. It helps you to be home and continue your education without travelling to university each day and paying the transportation. It is one of the good points. But, again, despite this, I say do not like it, it is not easy to follow, and you get tired and bored soon.*

   S9: *Online ELL was good. I could work and study remotely. However, I say and speak frankly, I am with on-campus language learning in real a classroom. I like being at university; it is more interesting.*

Learning satisfaction domain

   The second domain was devoted to addressing the students' perceptions about online ELL satisfaction. Likewise, most of the respondents were not happy with online language learning and believed that it did not satisfy their ELL fulfilment to a great extent. Reasons underlying this belief were communication difficulties during online ELL lessons, engagement in discussions, the contradiction of assessment and online platforms, and the like. In this line, S4, S7, and S10 argued:

   S4: *Online ELL lectures are not satisfying; they are not effective as well. Sometimes the lecture ends, and I can't get what was the lecture about.*

S7: *Saying the truth, these online ELL lectures are not effective at all. You cannot participate in discussions like you can do in real classrooms. I mean, we have student engagement which is one of the basic ways of language learning. So that, I can say they [online lessons] do not fulfil my learning satisfaction.*

S10: *There is no harmony; each of my classes has a different way of management online [instruction] that made it feel disorganized. They do not follow one method or sometimes one online platform.*

Challenge domain

Students were asked to mention any challenges and difficulties they faced during online ELL to address the challenge domain. The responses were scrutinized to uncover in-depth all the problems' students faced. The analyzed data revealed that these difficulties were of two types: external factors, such as unstable internet connection, electricity, and internal ones, like management, online platforms, access to proper devices, internet literacy, and concentration difficulties. For instance, S3, S8, and S10 argued:

S3: *Well, I am definitely, better in class. I feel in-class learning is better not because the material was different, but because the location was different, the method and way of teaching differed. Speaking openly, I have problems with the online apps they use. They cause many difficulties to me.*

S8: *From what to start! There are many difficulties and hurdles we faced during online lectures. Electricity, internet connection, difficulties of understanding, and lack of knowledge of using those online apps. These were the most common problems.*

S10: *I do think that in-class learning is a better option for many students. Even though I find online classes bearable, but there are many challenges. For example, having many cuts due to poor internet connection is one of the issues.*

Discussions and Conclusions

This study aimed to examine students' and teachers' perceptions of online ELL, which focused on their attitudes towards online language learning effectiveness, and the challenges they faced during online classes. Most of the participants (teachers/students) opted to attend traditional on-campus lessons rather than online ones. However, a remarkable number of teacher participants showed positive attitudes towards online education. The in-depth analysis of the data revealed that the positive attitudes held by the teachers did not indicate that they preferred online classes to in-person ones. In response to the effectiveness domain, the results uncovered those teachers did not find online classes much effective. A remarkable percentage believed that it was entirely adequate if performed appropriately using relevant/suitable online apps-mediated platforms and utilization of proper teaching methods. As Arifah (2014) clarified, teaching methods used to be changed in the modern world according to the changes or advancements in technology. Therefore, to make online education effective, teachers should follow new ways of teaching.

On the other hand, some teachers believe that online education was not adequate compared to face-to-face education. To support their argument, several reasons are stated: lack of human interaction, difficulty in student engagement, feedback, and the like. However, most of the student participants noted that online education is ineffective. In other words, the results exposed that most of the students stated online education was not a satisfactory way to learn.

Furthermore, most of them noted that using different tools and platforms makes the process more difficult. Ultimately, both participants (teachers & students) argued that they faced various challenges and difficulties during online education. These challenges included external factors, such as unstable internet connection, electricity, access to proper devices besides internal ones, like time management, concentration difficulties, and student engagement issues. To recap, due to these techniques as well as non-technical problems/challenges, teachers could not fulfil the needs that the study hoped to fulfill

Ultimately, the results demonstrated that e-learning has a more significant role in the future, but it cannot completely replace face-to-face learning. A comprehensive online learning transfer is exceptionally challenging. However, the benefits of e-learning cannot be ignored. So that, the barriers to embracing online learning must be understood, and corrective steps must be taken to respond to them.

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