Teachers' Existing Learning Practices and Communication Skills Conducive to Online Learning

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education of the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is planning to introduce online activities/courses for their major programme, the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) from the academic year 2018/2019. The conversions of traditional face-to-face courses to online courses has come about due to the rapid expansion and development in the ICT. Nguyen (2015) has said that the physical "brick and mortar" classroom is starting to lose its monopoly as the place of learning. According to Sudarshana (2014), the world has become a global village with the ICT and Education has to move forward with the ICT. Therefore, the trend in the world today is the shift to online learning from the conventional face-to-face learning. Although the department is going to follow suit, it was felt that the department should become aware of whether the student teachers of the PGDE programme are ready to follow online courses and to do online activities before launching online courses/activities. In that sense, it was felt that trying to find out whether they have learning practices that are helpful in following online courses or doing online activities would be useful to the department. Similarly it is a fact that good communication skills of English and particularly skills with the ICT knowledge would be helpful in online usage for learning. The statistics of the use of computers in Sri Lanka and the computer literacy of the Sri Lankan public was presented in the Computer Literacy Statistics (2016) survey. The survey results reveal that 8.6 percent of the household population aged 5 – 69 years has used E–mail facility at least once during the last 12 months period. The highest e-mail usage is reported from the Colombo district (19.2%) followed by Gampaha (12.6%). The lowest e–mail usage among the districts was reported from the Anuradhapura district. However, the student teachers of the PGDE programme who are graduates of various disciplines can be expected to have a satisfactory level of computer literacy although there are no research findings to prove it. Catalano (2015) identified communication as one of the elements for better online learning. Therefore the necessity was felt to find out the situation of the Sri Lankan graduate teachers with regard to the aspects stated above towards online learning.

1.1 Objectives

1   Identify the existing learning practices of teachers which would be conducive to online learning.

2   Find the communication skills of teachers which would be conducive to online learning.

3   Identify the shortcomings of learning practices and communication skills of teachers with regard to online courses.

4   Make suggestions to further develop learning practices and communication skills of teachers with regard to online courses.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Population and the Sample

The population of the study was the batch of PGDE students enrolled in the academic year 2017/2018, approximately 3000 student teachers. These students are attached to 8 Regional Centres (RC) and 27 study centres of the OUSL. For convenience, the student teachers sample was selected only from 6 RCs.

Therefore, the sample of student teachers was selected from the student teacher groups of two RCs, namely Matara and Kandy in addition to the four Study Centres (SC), namely Galle, Ampara, Bandarawela and Ambalantota using the technique of stratified random sampling. Thirty student teachers were selected from each centre and the final student teacher sample was 180. The sample was selected from the Sinhala medium student teachers only for the convenience of managing the study.

2.3 Data collection instruments

The major data collection instrument was a questionnaire. This questionnaire was derived from the "online readiness questionnaire" developed by Williams (2010) and available under the Creative Commence license. Williams constructed the questionnaire in line with various attributes identified by several other researchers as components of 'readiness' and conducive for online learning. In the present study two major aspects out of those attributes, namely existing learning practices and communication skills were selected for investigation.

In addition to the questionnaire, a semi structured interview schedule was also used to collect additional data as well as to clarify data collected from the questionnaire from a small group of student teachers. Particularly, the interviewees were requested to provide suggestions to improve their learning practices and communication skills. The group interviewed consisted of three student teachers from each center selected on a convenient basis and the total number interviewed amounted to 18 student teachers (10% of the total sample).

Data obtained from the questionnaire and the interview was analyzed qualitatively using descriptive methods and also data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively by using frequencies and percentages.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was analyzed under two aspects, namely the student teachers' existing learning practices and the student teachers' communication skills. The first aspect consisted of 8 indicators and the second aspect consisted of 4.

Table 1: Student teachers' existing learning practices conducive for online learning

Criteria	Good		Somewhat good		Not good		Not responded	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Finish the projects started	125	69	46	26	3	2	6	3
Work keeping on track and on time	104	58	69	38	7	4	0	0
Ability to learn by hearing (Audio)	126	70	47	26	4	2	3	2
Read things and learn it best	114	64	60	33	6	3	0	0
Problem solving in a fair manner	113	63	61	34	6	3	0	0
Figure things out to learn well	110	61	64	35	3	2	3	2
Ignore distractions when studying	56	31	101	56	21	12	2	1
Planning activities in advance	113	62	52	29	12	7	3	2

(All the student teachers i.e, 180 of the sample responded to the questionnaire) According to the table, a majority of the student teachers are "Good" in all areas mentioned above except the criterion "ignore distractions when studying". However, a considerable amount of student teachers were in "somewhat good" level (range of 26% to 56%). There were also some student teachers who were in "not good" level (range of 2% to 12%).

Table 2. Communication skills of the student teachers conducive for online learning

Criteria	Good		Somewhat good		Not good		Not responded	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Learning successfully as a group (with proper communication)	144	80	33	18	0	0	3	2
Ability to communicate in English	60	34	79	44	26	14	15	8
Use e mail and other online tools (academic purposes)	90	50	60	33	27	15	3	2
Can contact somebody to solve computer related problems	99	55	59	33	16	9	6	3

According to the above table, majority of the student teachers are "Good" in selected communication criteria except "ability to communicate in English" criterion. It is clear that student teachers are capable of successfully learning with proper communication skills within the group (80%). With regard to communication in English majority were in the level of "somewhat good". A considerable amount of student teachers were in the level of "not good" except 'learning successfully as a group' (range of 9% to 15%). During the interviews five out of the eighteen student teachers revealed the difficulties of not having computers and other equipment and revealed that in their day-to-day working life they do not use e mail. Six of the interviewees mentioned the difficulties in working with the English language.

When particularly asked about what projects they have done during their studies and whether they have finished them, seventeen out of eighteen responded positively saying that they have completed all the projects of their graduate studies. During the interviews the respondents were also asked to provide suggestions on what the University could do to improve their learning practices and communication skills in English.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Majority of student teachers were good in their existing learning practices conducive for online learning and also in communication skills in English. But there were a considerable number of student teachers who responded as "not good" (range of 2% to 12%) for the existing learning practices so that it would be helpful both to the university and the student teachers who would be the prospective online learners of the teacher development courses in the future to take suitable steps to improve their learning practices. There were some who were "not good" in communication skills in English as well. These students need proper coaching to improve their existing communication skills to follow online courses successfully. If possible at least some parts of the prospective online courses should be offered in the mother tongue. Assistance should be given to improve their English language skills. As many students are capable of successfully communicating within the group for learning purposes, online courses can be designed with more online group activities. Student teachers need to be motivated to use email and other communication tools so that students could be given such kind of activities within the online course.

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