SHAPING THE NEXT NORMAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: INSIGHTS FROM A POST-PANDEMIC ONLINE TEACHING CONTEXT IN A SRI LANKAN STATE UNIVERSITY

P.D.S.N. Dissanayake[*]

Department of English Language Teaching, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Sudden proliferate use of online education was a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic which rampaged all over Sri Lanka. Traditional face-to-face classes were shifted to digital space to deliver a non-stop education to the students even under a resource-limited and unprepared environment. The Department of English Language Teaching in the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka also undertook this test of resilience offered by the pandemic. Instead of well-planned and expert driven online English courses, emergency eclectic online English courses were conducted for large student groups, in response to the health crisis. It was abruptly initiated amid many roadblocks such as logistical challenges, digital divide, unfamiliarity with Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) applications and ambivalent curriculum and assessment adjustments. At the early stage, as quick e-learning solutions, only the study materials such as PDFs and PPT presentations were uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS) and the students were asked to study them along with forums for any clarifications. As the next development, voice-embedded PPT presentations were utilised. Thereafter, Zoom lectures were introduced with free data allocation by the university. In this manner, incorporation of technologies into the teaching and learning process was made in terms of "a combination of forms of instructional technology, including traditional forms of learning used in conjunction with web-based, online approaches" (Southgate and Murphy, 2011, p. 6) or blended learning and fully online learning without meeting physically.

The literature has highlighted both pros and cons of online education with regard to the convenience, applicability, quality and outcomes it brings in practice. Cost saving in terms of time, money and travel, ease of accessibility from any location, active and impartial learning have been identified as advantages whereas poor monitoring and interaction, improper assessments, technical issues, social isolation, lack of immediate corrections, focusing on theory rather than practice have been considered as disadvantages (Shahzad et al., 2020, pp. 2-3). Drawbacks of virtual learning can lead to a negative impact on students' language performance and development (Al-Rawashdeh et al., 2021). According to Hartshorn and McMurry (2020), the shift from traditional to virtual mode itself is a new stressor for the learners. As examined by Haththotuwa and Rupasingha (2021, p. 158) in a study based on public and private universities in Sri Lanka, a majority of students prefer to use online learning aided by LMS and Zoom after the commencement of in-person teaching in universities. The researchers suggested that such methods would be more convenient and effective in the future. In contrast, the mixed method study conducted by Priyadarshani (2021) identified that though the teachers of a postgraduate degree programme were satisfied with online classes, they did not assume that conventional classroom teaching could be replaced by online classes. According to Civelek, Toplu and Uzun's (2021) study, Turkish EFL teachers were not as positive as expected towards online instruction due to online delivery issues, inadequate technological knowledge and skills, lack of students' motivation to participate in online sessions, etc. The study conducted in a Romanian university by Coman et al. (2020) also revealed that technical issues followed by teachers' lack of technical skills and poor teaching style as well as students' lack of interaction with teachers and poor communication in online platforms were the problems that shaped ESL students' negative

perspectives of online learning. Thus, the benefits of online learning highlighted in other studies diminished in value, due to the disadvantages that were accentuated in these studies.

Even though online English education has the capacity to provide unique opportunities to undergraduates and educators, it is important to examine if e-teaching is the best replacement for traditional onsite teaching, or if there are other possible alternative options to create an inclusive learning environment while retaining the opportunities of digitalization towards the next normal.

Distance English courses were improvised with a favourable response from the undergraduates and teachers with the closure of the Wayamba University at the beginning of the spread of COVID -19 pandemic. Accordingly, followed by a step-by-step improvement of online delivering methods, distance learning became the new normal in English teaching with the use of Zoom and LMS platforms. As time passed, it reached the post pandemic era, where a passive response to e-learning and e-teaching could be observed from both undergraduates and teachers in contradiction to the enthusiasm they initially had. It was conspicuous to note that the students' attendance and involvement in online classes were poor and diminishing.

As a result, the present study compared the attitudes of English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduates and teachers towards online instruction before the pandemic and after the pandemic. "Since attitude stands out as an important factor, students' attitudinal change is paramount in the effectiveness of e-learning usage. This must be taken into account in designing and implementing e-learning systems." (Weerathunga et al., 2021, p. 20). This is equally applicable to teachers as well. Thus, the study focused on the ESL learners' and teachers' reactions and reflections and pedagogical concerns fore-grounded by the socio-affective dimensions (Thomas et al., 2013). The experience gained by teachers and learners is the most important source of evaluation.

The objectives of the research were to explore the ESL undergraduates' and teachers' interest in online instruction, and the factors that shaped their thoughts and experiences. Accordingly, the study intended to determine a feasible way of English education to be the next normal. This study is needed because the knowledge of these attitudes helps practitioners to make a wise selection over timely instructional modes while addressing the practical issues of remote education to meet the needs of ESL learners.

The following research questions were answered through this study;

1. Is there change of attitudes towards online teaching and learning amongst undergraduates and teachers after the pandemic?
2. What is the feasible replacement for fully online English teaching and learning at tertiary level in the next normal?

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study that attempted to identify if there was a change of the undergraduates' and teachers' attitudes towards online English education after the pandemic and their preference for the mode of future education. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), qualitative research provides rich description and natural and holistic representation of a phenomenon. To this end, a variety of qualitative data collection instruments were incorporated. Five online focus group discussions were conducted with first year undergraduates via Zoom, to get more in-depth answers. There were approximately ten students in one group. Since the students rarely provided detailed responses in questionnaires, focus groups were selected. Accordingly, the discussion was steered through follow-up questions in a way it generated more insights, especially collective views and needs. Since the number of participants was high, interview was not a practical tool.

In fact, three in-person semi-structured interviews with three English teachers revealed their attitudes towards online instruction. The same teachers were requested to maintain reflective journals based on the 4Rs model of reflective thinking (Ryan and Ryan, 2011 adapted from Bain et al., 1991), as systematic personal records related to their e-teaching experiences and an honest analysis of their own teaching. The model included four stages namely reporting, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing which ultimately helped them to reframe future practice and professional understanding by drawing links between experiences and ideas. All the qualitative data were analysed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive approach of thematic analysis which involved a systematic way of familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. It was a flexible and transparent approach. Furthermore, participants were selected through convenient sampling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As per the findings, there was a change in both ESL undergraduates' and teachers' attitudes towards fully online education when they reached the post-pandemic era. Even though they expected online education to be a better alternative to carry out academic activities remotely, with experience they had realized that it was not what they expected and the reality was very unconducive. They had expected that institutional support and adjustments to instructional designs and teaching and learning process would be provided in due course. Nevertheless, both negative attitudes and low motivation on online English instruction were identified when conversing with the participants. There were large online classes including nearly 150 students (the Faculty intake was very high and the provision of instructors was inadequate) where a single teacher was struggling to teach with the available technologies and time. Several reasons for the transformation of the participants' positive attitudes into negative perceptions were identified under four categories namely attitudes related to technological issues, attitudes related to emotional issues, attitudes towards socio-economic issues, and attitudes related to assessment issues, based on thematic analysis.

With regard to attitudes related to technological issues, an insufficiency of right conditions for online English education had gradually discouraged the participants to actively engage in the teaching and learning process. Managing extra large online classes and learning in such classes had been arduous for both learners and teachers. Although certain options were available on Zoom such as break out rooms, student participation had been very low there. For students, physical presence was the need over online presence. As stated by a student, "I like to be with other students in the class and learn. It is more fun and I feel that I'm learning. I think online learning is boring". It can be regarded as the natural and biological human behaviour to interact with others. As a result of passive participation of students, teachers had lost their enthusiasm. It was underscored by the teachers that certain strategies like scaffolding and authentic speaking in ELT were difficult to be sustained in online space. According to a teacher, "English teaching is not always easy to be done online even though there are tools. Engaging the students in large classes is the biggest challenge. They rarely speak." Students' reluctance to speak in online platforms was also a highlighted factor. In fact, the learners and teachers had rarely switched on their cameras during lectures. This is the cultural influence as commented by a participant in this way: "I feel shy to show my face to the whole class." Privacy, personality issues and unfamiliarity with this type of interaction could be reasons for this view.

As claimed by Watson (2007, p. 260 as cited in Steel and Andrews, 2012, p. 243), "the spaces in which we work, live and learn can have profound effects on how we feel, how we behave, how we perform… spaces can also limit the possibilities of our activity, restricting us to old modes of working and thinking". Thus, the online space can cause a major impact on

undergraduates' and teachers' English learning and teaching. Lingering challenges such as poor connection and internet facilities, inability to afford technical devices or unavailability of technical devices due to trade barriers had deteriorated the actual benefits of online education. It is clear that the absence of adequate study conditions due to technological issues has given rise to negative attitudes in participants.

Moreover, training for teachers with close support from the IT experts for proper instructional design and student support mechanisms was another factor which was accentuated by the teachers. Digital divide and attitudinal constraints were apparent when considering the older generation of English teachers. Further, the quality of teaching and strategies to engage students in learning even in large online classes can be achieved with the provision of proper collaboration between teachers and IT experts. Institutional leadership was also crucial in this regard. Lack of logistics and mental support for the teachers had been a factor to create negative attitudes in them.

Attitudes related to socio-economic issues also contributed to the negativity involved with remote education. As a country undergoing a growing economic and political crisis while curtailing the COVID-19 pandemic, students and teachers had started feeling uncertain and perplexed. Amid daily struggles to find fuel and food for the sake of surviving, the virtual teaching and learning demands which expect them to learn and teach from home can worsen the case especially of the undergraduates. Reliable access to internet for fully online courses will be a challenge unless institutional or government support is provided. Such provisions are uncertain as the country faces an economic crisis. Unfortunately, it was revealed that around fifteen students had left the university and found jobs to survive due to the financial issues and also due to online learning issues as the delivery mode was not compatible with them. This was a negative outcome of distance education.

When considering the students attitudes related to emotional issues, it was constantly recognized that the stagnated dreams of physically distanced freshers for a long-awaited university experience, had mentally deteriorated them. Their expectation was to be physically engaged in studies at the university premises. A student stated that "We were waiting to enter the university and meet new friends. Now we are lazy to learn from home". The link between physical activity and cognitive functions creates positive academic performance outcomes to benefit learners at every age as posited by Nicksic, Lindt and Miller (2020). Accordingly, this condition has negatively influenced the motivation of learners.

Finally, the study identified teachers' attitudes towards assessment issues as another reason for the dissatisfaction with remote education. Summative examinations were conducted by allowing students to answer a question paper using pen and paper and email the scanned copies of the answer scripts within a submission period of one hour. Thus, plagiarism, late submissions and similar answers due to facing the examination in groups were frequent. The evaluation was unreliable. In addition, paper marking had also been hectic and time consuming.

Due to the afore-mentioned factors, online English learning and teaching had been a negative experience with disrupted concentration for the participants over time. Nevertheless, the participants did not want to completely drop the online component from their practice as they went through that great experiment and it was also a requirement to move forward with the world. They manifested a favourable response towards blended teaching and learning rather than fully remote education. So, online education has its potential if it is provided with the required and right conditions.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This study uncovered that online education is still in the development stage at Sri Lankan tertiary level. It also identified many factors that affected the attitudinal change of ESL undergraduates and teachers towards online delivery under four subheadings namely attitudes related to technological issues, attitudes related to emotional issues, attitudes towards socio-economic issues and attitudes related to assessment issues. Accordingly, insufficiency of right conditions for online English teaching and learning, uncertainties and difficulties with the growing economic and political crisis in the country, stagnated dreams of physically distanced freshers for a long awaited university experience, lack of training for teachers with close support from the IT experts and institutional leaders for proper instructional design and student support mechanisms, and unreliable evaluations were identified as the reasons for this perception change.

It is impossible to assume that pure online education or distance education will become the next normal even if it is the global trend. The experiences gained from the last two years should not be disregarded. It is high time for us to recalibrate and reposition our English higher education by focusing on strengths and gains of online education. As we reformulate the delivery as per the educational landscape, the same mistakes must not be repeated and what worked well must be retained to gain the maximum value of English education. Inclusivity and individualization of education are of paramount importance in this regard while maintaining the standards and quality. Accordingly, the post-pandemic era is the most suitable stage to shape our practice towards a sustainable next normal while adopting and adapting to feasible digital tools.

Importantly, it is not necessary to compare traditional in-person education with online education and select the best out of them. As the participants did not completely reject the online component, collaboration between the two modes will be a practical solution and "all we need is a right mix" (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020, p. 7). It is further argued that "the idea and intention are to make education as flexible as possible by giving more control, autonomy and independence to the learners and by making use of educational technology in a more effective way" (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020, p. 7). The crisis can be regarded as an opportunity for a renaissance in education. Accordingly, the present study emphasizes the necessity of a blended learning approach, a combination of "face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction" (Graham, 2006, p. 5) in a way undergraduates and teachers are able to traverse the physical and virtual environments by successfully bridging their gap.

It is recommended by the study to encourage a synergetic work environment among teachers, IT experts and institutional leaders and to introduce rigorous quality assurance methods, technology policies, proper teacher training in online ESL education for a blended teaching and learning approach in the future.

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