

The Effectiveness of Learning English Online among Second-Year Engineering Undergraduates

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Abstract: English language proficiency is a crucial skill for students worldwide, as it opens doors to global opportunities and facilitates effective communication in various fields. In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language and is widely used for academic and professional purposes. However, concerns have arisen about the deterioration of English language proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates, particularly among those pursuing degrees in engineering. This study was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by university students to study English online. The data were collected from a group of second-year students from an engineering course in a public university in Malaysia. Data was analyzed descriptively. It was found that the majority of the students enjoyed learning English online even though they preferred face-to-face learning. This study provides some suggestions for the challenges faced by students including the use of preferred online platforms such as 'Author', having support from family and friends, and sustaining strong mental health for an effective online learning environment.

Keywords: Online Learning, Engineering Undergraduates, English Language, Proficiency

1. Introduction

English language proficiency is a crucial skill for students worldwide, as it opens doors to global opportunities and facilitates effective communication in various fields. In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language and is widely used for academic and professional purposes. However, concerns have arisen about the deterioration of English language proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates,

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particularly among those pursuing degrees in engineering. Extensive English proficiency among students has declined in recent years. This poor performance is especially concerning given that English is Malaysia's second language (Aziz & Kashinathan 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Noah et al., 2020) and a crucial language in the era of globalization and open market trade. One of the primary concerns regarding the deterioration of English language proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates is its impact on academic performance. According to a study by Abdullah and Lim (2020), engineering students who struggle with English often face challenges in understanding complex technical texts and communicating their ideas effectively. This can result in lower grades and hinder their academic progress. This circumstance is extremely tough to accept due to the fact that all students are required to study English from primary school through higher education.

In today's interconnected world, strong English language skills are essential for employability, especially in technical fields like engineering. A study conducted by Tan and Chew (2019) found that Malaysian engineering graduates with poor English proficiency faced limited job opportunities, as multinational companies often prioritize candidates with strong communication skills. The teaching and learning process in Malaysia that is based on information and communication technology (ICT) has not been implemented fully and comprehensively, including online teaching and learning (Yaakob et al., 2020), because the approach has not been fully implemented in all schools, study centers, and institutions of higher education. Since the spread of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional method of teaching and learning in the classroom, often known as face-to-face education, has been largely replaced by online, internet-based, or electronic learning (Trung, 2022). Since these students are unable to participate in the typical face-to-face teaching process, it is reasonable to assume that they will have a better chance of learning English if they take advantage of the online e-learning education that is available to them through the use of the Internet.

Students in their early stages in universities (including first-year and second-year students) face a variety of difficulties as a result of the effectiveness of learning English through online platforms. These challenges include a lack of technical skills to write the report or thesis, students taking online classes frequently experience issues with their internet connections (Simamora, 2020), students frequently lose focus as a result of an undesirable home learning environment (Di Pietro et al., 2020) and have trouble communicating effectively because of their limited command of the English language.

Writing difficulties arise from a lack of command of English tenses and grammar, a lack of inventive ideas, ineffective teaching methods by lecturers, insufficient vocabulary, weak sentence structure, inexperienced lecturers, inappropriate use of vocabulary, and rhetorical conventions. When students lack these skills, their writing may be unsatisfying in a variety of ways, ranging from poor grammar and syntax to illogical organization to weak reasoning and arguments (Johnson & Rulo, 2019). In addition, many students have poor reading skills. Furthermore, students frequently lack the thinking skills needed to identify areas where their prior knowledge and skills are insufficient, and thus which skills they need to work on improving (Coman et al., 2020). Besides, speaking problems are caused by a lack of general knowledge, lack of speaking practice, fear of making a mistake, lack of words usage and grammar practice (Karademir & Gorgos, 2019), low motivation, low participation, reading laziness, shyness, less dictionary usage, nervousness, fear of criticism, and pronunciation of unfamiliar words.

The deterioration of English language proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates, including engineering students, is a complex issue with multifaceted causes. However, it is a concern that must be addressed to ensure students are well-prepared for the demands of the global job market and academia. By implementing effective language instruction, promoting English usage within the engineering curriculum, and creating opportunities for language immersion, Malaysian universities can play a crucial role in reversing this trend and equipping their students with the language skills they need to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world. Thus, this study focused on the English proficiency of Faculty of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (FKEE) students at a public university in the

southern region of Malaysia. They were found to avoid communicating with others because they were afraid of embarrassing themselves due to their lack of language command. The objective of this study was mainly to get a better understanding of the university students' experience in learning English through online classes.

2. Methods

This quantitative research used a questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. This study involved second-year students from the Faculty of Electrical and Electronics Engineering (FKEE) of a public university in the southern part of Malaysia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was appropriate for the questionnaire to be administered via an online platform such as Google Forms, which the students could access easily. A total of 67 students responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised demographic questions designed to identify students' backgrounds. In addition, the questionnaire also had closed-ended questions to provide students with a prepared set of options. The questionnaire was suitable for the students as the topic of the research was related to their situation.

3. Results and Discussion

This study included students from a public university in Malaysia from the southern region. A total of 67 second-year students from an engineering faculty participated with 27 students (59.7%) female respondents and 40 students (40.0%) male respondents. The findings indicated that 73.1% of students strongly preferred face-to-face English classes because they were more effective and simpler to comprehend. In addition, based on the results, forty-seven students (70.1%) strongly agreed that the university's resource was very useful for their English class at the beginning of class. Then, it was evident that the student strongly agreed with the statement that the instructor gave each student the same amount of attention as in traditional English classes. This resulted in the identification of 16 students (23.9%) who voted "Agree" three times. While 48 students (71.6%) chose the option "Strongly Agree" Based on the findings, many students (53.7%) strongly agreed with the statement that they felt very comfortable taking an online English class. Thus, it could be assumed that the instructor was a helpful guide during class and had the ability to make students feel relaxed and at ease while studying.

Based on the findings, the majority (about 90%) of the second-year students felt that their mental and physical health had been adversely affected, but they were comfortable learning English online. In this case, they required some enhancements to maximize the effectiveness of their online learning. For example, they suggested having a suitable device to participate in class, and a good platform for receiving or submitting assignments, and they must avoid distractions in order to give their full attention during the online season.

Based on the analysis and findings, the students were found to be able to cope with online lessons in learning English. However, there were numerous challenges faced by students in learning English such as communication issues including not being able to speak confidently and write competently. This was due to various challenges that they had to deal with while studying. Some of them were found to work part-time. Thus, they faced challenges studying and working simultaneously. The students have also suggested some effective ways to learn English.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Students pursuing higher studies at the university were frequently observed struggling to maintain a balance between university life (including studying English online) and personal matters such as financial status, peer pressure, and hobbies. Students were identified with numerous instances in which they could not manage their workload and were unable to overcome those obstacles. The students have suggested some ways to address the issues they encountered in online English classes. Students were advised to take detailed notes, prepare before class begins, and use a better device during class in order

to avoid technical issues. Next, they preferred the lecturers to use online platforms such as ‘Author’ as the primary platform for sharing all the class notes and other materials.

The study also revealed that students liked face-to-face learning as they found it more effective and easier to comprehend. However, they were found to realize that the learning condition had been drastically altered due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Because of this condition, teachers have shifted from face-to-face to online learning. Apparently, this has become a challenge for students who are unable to adapt to new ways of learning, and it could also cause mental health issues for students, reducing their learning effectiveness. As a result, the study recommends some ways to improve the effectiveness of online English learning, such as seeking virtual interactions with peers. Studying with a group of friends can help gain motivation by making them compete with one another. This can also aid in gaining additional knowledge in the circle by sharing knowledge gained outside of the online classes. This will also benefit mental health as socializing helps to lift spirits and make them feel happier. This situation allows one to confide in others and get the necessary help.

Next, students are advised to create a productive learning environment for online English classes by concentrating in class and not allowing themselves to be distracted by other activities. Smartphones should also be set to silent mode so that students are not distracted by phone notifications as creating a positive learning environment in online classes is not an easy task. Students and teachers should collaborate to keep the class on a positive track with lots of interaction. In a productive learning environment, students can be more attentive and focused, which also promotes meaningful learning experiences, higher levels of student performance, and the development of higher-level critical thinking abilities while avoiding mental health issues. Even if a student is at home, they can learn how to create a conducive environment for their online classes by reading a book and researching information online.

Finally, the student must be mentally strong while learning English online with the assistance of family and friends. There are numerous challenges that will cause stress for students, and when it becomes too much of a burden, students must be able to find solutions and get help from reliable sources to overcome them for effective online learning situation.

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