

Perceptions and Challenges of ESL Teaching in Malaysian Primary Schools During COVID-19: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by ESL teachers in Malaysian primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by the global transition from physical to virtual classrooms. Employing qualitative methods, interviews were conducted with six ESL teachers from primary schools in Johor Bahru. The findings highlight significant obstacles, including technical barriers, limited student engagement, and teachers' inadequate training for online teaching. Nevertheless, the shift to online education also presented opportunities for flexibility in teaching and learning processes. This research underscores the necessity for targeted professional development, enhanced technological support, and effective strategies to optimize online ESL instruction. The insights derived contribute to future educational practices and policies, advocating a more effective and inclusive approach to online teaching and learning.

Keywords: online teaching, ICT, primary schools, challenges, ESL, teacher perceptions, flexible learning, professional development, technology integration.

INTRODUCTION

Online instruction and learning refer to an educational approach that harnesses the capabilities of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The integration of ICT into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR) context has ushered in an era of unprecedented possibilities and far-reaching impacts on various dimensions of human existence, particularly in education, with a notable focus on English education (Umrana et al., 2020). Consequently, Education 4.0 has emerged as an enhanced iteration of Education 3.0, emphasizing education that fosters innovation (Wen & Tan, 2020). Hussin (2018) underscores that contemporary education should empower students to discern the origins of knowledge rather than merely spoon-feeding them information to pass exams. Collaborative learning is pivotal, with teachers transitioning into facilitators who guide students throughout their learning journeys. This denotes that students are expected to proactively pursue knowledge aligned with their learning styles within this technologically advanced era (Wibisono, 2019).

Moreover, as Fisk (2017) notes, Education 4.0 introduces a significant facet: the flexibility of learning, liberating students from temporal and spatial confines. To fulfill the aims of Education 4.0, a plethora of online educational technologies have been designed to streamline teaching and learning, including platforms like Google Classroom, Schoology, Moodle, and Frog VLE. These virtual classrooms serve as repositories for file organization and resource sharing between educators and students. Within this framework, educators upload learning materials, granting students unfettered access to these resources and enabling them to submit assignments. Advancements in mobile applications further enhance accessibility, enabling both teachers and students to engage with these platforms at their convenience (Wen & Tan, 2020).

Amidst the educational revolution, the COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a potent catalyst propelling educators' adoption of online teaching and learning strategies (Atkeson, 2020). This infectious virus, COVID-19, originated in Wuhan, China, towards the close of 2019, rapidly disseminating and affecting individuals globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially designated it a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

The governments of all the countries issued policies that ensure the public's safety, such as maintaining social distancing, avoiding crowded places, and reducing travelling to break the virus chain. Therefore, people must continue their daily activities, such as working and studying from home (Umrana et al., 2020). The government's actions to keep the people safe from COVID-19 significantly impacted education, leading to a shift from physical education to online education. Educational institutions such as pre-schools, schools, colleges, and universities were strictly instructed to be closed to control the pandemic (Sun et al., 2020). However, this action should not affect the student's learning process. Thus, all educational institutions globally have implemented online teaching and learning, including Malaysia (Wen & Tan, 2020).

On March 18, 2020, the Malaysian government established the Movement Control Order (MCO) as a preventive measure against the spread of the Coronavirus infection inside the country (Bunyan, 2020). All through the MCO's length, all instructive foundations were shut. The Ministry of Education (MOE) contrived rules for instructors to work with educating amid the episode to guarantee the progression of instructing and picking up during this period. The MOE trained instructors to use online instructive advances, like Google Classroom, for far-off guidance (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020a). Notwithstanding, sure understudies experienced obstructions going to online classes because of restricted web access and an absence of fundamental gadgets. Accordingly, the MOE started an Instructive Television Program, conveying learning content through transmissions (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Since not all instructors and understudies had vital assets for web-based education and learning, the MOE conceded school organizations the circumspection to decide on proper showing techniques during the MCO (Wen and Tan, 2020).

By the by, the shortfall of appropriate earlier guidance on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) prompted difficulties as instructors wandered into online instructive innovations for illustration conveyance. They confronted obstacles originating from insufficient offices and online assets for directing illustrations. Also, they wrestled with restricted innovative capability expected to utilize online instructive devices. This features the steadiness of issues like deficient school assets, shortage of materials, insufficient abilities, and an absence of ICT commonality among ESL instructors, despite ICT reconciliation into Malaysia's school system a long time back (Wen and Tan, 2020). As verified by Kandasamy and Shah (2013), ESL educators reliably need inspiration, backing, and preparation to incorporate ICT into their instruction capably. Missing such help, a few educators returned to conventional strategies, ignoring ICT. This absence of ICT experience fundamentally added to their moves in adjusting to web-based education during the Coronavirus flare-up, hampering their readiness and thus influencing the adequacy of understudies' English language educational experience (Wen and Tan, 2020).

In Malaysia, English language training ranges from kindergarten to secondary school, encompassing around 12 years of tutoring (Kumaran and Krish, 2021). However, certain students experience challenges in gaining English language proficiency after finishing elementary or secondary school (Azman et al., 2017), regardless of the kind of school they attend (Kumaran and Krish, 2021).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the Malaysian government made sudden announcements about closing educational institutions. As a result, innovation in the teaching and learning process needed to be done worldwide. Teachers and students were required to use ICT to communicate with each other so that teaching and learning could continue at home without any interruption. Some ESL teachers have been using technology and electronic devices for a long time before the existence of the Coronavirus. These teachers face fewer obstacles after they are instructed to continue teaching and learning from home. In contrast, ESL teachers who have never used technology and electronic devices due to lack of facilities in schools faced many challenges after the emergence of the Coronavirus (Wen & Tan, 2020). According to Arifa (2020), these teachers had to prepare physically and emotionally to teach from home. In addition, teachers who are not technology literate disagreed with the newly implemented online classes because they feel that it is less effective than face-to-face classes (Muhdi & Nurkolis, 2021). Aside from inexperience in using the technology, lack of professional training made the ESL teachers to face more challenges because they were never taught about the knowledge and skills before the implementation of online teaching and learning (Rahayu & Wirza, 2020). If training is not provided, teachers have no choice but to acquire the skills to

conduct online teaching. Studies claimed that teachers had to learn from their mistakes and that self-discovery was considered time-consuming. Besides that, teachers are facing trouble staying up-to-date because online teaching and learning tools evolve constantly, which shows that they need regular professional training (Paepe, Zhu & Depryck, 2018).

Previous research delved into the various obstacles confronted by educators in the realm of online teaching and learning. Lukas and Yunus (2021) conducted a study titled 'ESL Teachers' Challenges in Implementing E-learning during COVID-19,' revealing that Malaysian ESL teachers faced challenges like connectivity issues, scarceness of technological tools, inadequate teacher proficiency, diminished student engagement, and complexities in student assessment amid online instruction. In another study by Mahyoob (2020) titled 'Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners,' a notable concern revolved around technical glitches in the online teaching and learning process. Additionally, Nambiar (2020) underscored the issue of poor student attendance as a prevailing challenge, which can be attributed to multiple factors, predominantly network problems and a lack of necessary technological devices.

The same study also highlighted the absence of direct classroom dynamics as a hindrance to teacher-student interaction during online teaching and learning. Furthermore, teachers expressed discontent with online classes due to disruptions in the home environment. Orhan and Beyhan (2020) found that teachers emphasized the inadequacy of student engagement in online classes, leading to dissatisfaction with the efficacy of online education. Certain educators perceived online teaching and learning as time-intensive, involving prolonged hours of multitasking, especially during lesson preparations (Vadivel et al., 2021). Moreover, Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) noted that acquiring the English language through online modalities had mainly proven ineffective and yielded minimal gains in language proficiency. In light of the preceding discussions, very few studies have addressed the perspectives of ESL teachers regarding online teaching and learning, particularly within the context of primary schools in Malaysia.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and learning implementation across educational institutions has gained prominence. As a result, many teachers are now engaging in online teaching for the first time. Consequently, it becomes essential to discern teachers' perspectives and assess this novel teaching approach to initiate necessary improvements for system enhancement. Furthermore, recognizing teachers as pivotal actors in the successful execution of online classes emphasizes the significance of understanding their viewpoints for a productive online teaching and learning environment.

Hence, the study aims to explore the perceptions of ESL teachers engaged in online teaching during COVID-19. The focus of the study centres on aspects related to online teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on the challenges perceived by teachers in this domain. By shedding light on the experiences and concerns of ESL teachers in Malaysian primary schools in Malaysia when adopting technology for online classes, the study's findings are anticipated to offer a more comprehensive understanding and deeper insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology is a vital element used in this 21st-century teaching and learning process. The increase in the use of technology in the teaching and learning process has changed educators' attitudes from the traditional ones when they were distributors of knowledge to a new and more flexible attitude now that they are more supporters and motivators who urge and encourage students to engage and learn. Moreover, as Shadieff & Sintawati suggested, technology constantly supports intercultural learning on many levels. Technology facilitates personalised learning, allowing students to achieve better learning outcomes. E-Learning is a revolutionary mode of education that adapts to the different requirements and expectations of different users; in this way, it allows varied methods of educational technology to operate, redesign instructional methods, and refine performance and effectiveness to adapt to the priorities of E-Learning. Online teaching and learning can be described as a capable tool in strengthening the educational process, focusing on a more student-centred teaching environment with an innovative, and adaptable approach (Dhawan, 2020). It encompasses educational experiences occurring within synchronous or asynchronous environments, facilitated through various devices such as laptops and smartphones with internet connectivity. Within these contexts, educators and students can teach, learn, and interact from any location (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Synchronous environments are characterized by structured real-time interactions between teachers and students via live classes, offering the potential for immediate feedback. Conversely, asynchronous environments lack the same level of organization, omitting live classes and thereby foregoing the possibility of instant feedback and immediate responses. Nevertheless, these two environment types have advantages and disadvantages (Littlefield, 2018). Amidst this deadly virus spread, teachers conduct both synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching by adopting the latest or popular online teaching and learning tools (Basilaia, Dgebuadze et al., 2020). Professional skills are needed to conduct efficient online teaching and use these tools appropriately (Dhawan, 2020). Unfortunately, challenges arose along the way due to a lack of skills, ICT experience, and training (Wen & Tan, 2020). Despite the challenges, online teaching and learning have been positively perceived by teachers as it provides an opportunity to communicate with their students in this time of crisis (Nambiar, 2020). This chapter revolves around the previous studies conducted in this particular area. However, little is written in detail about ESL teachers' perceptions of online teaching and learning, and no studies specifically focus on ESL teachers from primary schools in Malaysia. Thus, this chapter serves as a good representative of the literature to fill the research gap through the current study.

Online Learning During COVID-19

The emergence of the coronavirus or similar crises that demand a swift transition to remote learning prompts governments to suggest or enforce measures such as physical distancing and travel restrictions (CDC, 2020). In higher education, concerted efforts were undertaken to curb the virus's spread by safeguarding vulnerable students, faculty, and staff to establish a secure and health-conscious learning environment (Cao et al., 2020; CDC, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). To achieve this, numerous schools, colleges, and universities adopted remote learning, conducting classes in an online format (Ali, 2020; Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, & Glowatz, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). Certain institutions opted for asynchronous learning approaches where educators designed assignments or recorded lectures, allowing students to complete tasks at their own pace (Crawford et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Concurrently, other establishments embraced "synchronous" learning, occurring at specific times through designated mediums.

Online distance learning (ODL) has become a primary mode of teaching and learning when face-to-face interaction is no longer feasible. Under normal circumstances, ODL is often chosen by learners who find attending physical classes impractical. In such cases, the online learners are usually equipped with an appropriate online learning platform, devices, and reliable Internet connection. In contrast, during the recent pandemic, students and learning institutions around the world were abruptly thrust into online distance learning without prior preparation. Given the situation, all involved parties had to make do with the available resources and skills despite lacking adequate training for new instructional strategies.

Given the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, many stakeholders have put a strong emphasis on prioritizing students' health and safety first before resuming physical classes. In line with this issue, Malaysian universities adopted online teaching and learning platforms to deliver lectures, tutorials, and assessments to students through online distance learning, a mode of emergency remote teaching (ERT). Most students are sent home from their dormitory residences and colleges, so they are now undertaking the ERT from home. With the rapid response from Malaysian universities in conducting online teaching and learning positively perceived, indicating the level of the country's readiness in their digital infrastructure to undergo digital transformation, the hidden challenges have not been directly addressed. Evidence suggests that internet-based learning was pivotal in responding to the pandemic. Gonzalez et al. (2020) conducted a study on student performance during the COVID-19 period and observed that students surpassed the achievements of the previous year's cohort. In their investigation of specific assessments tailored for both online and face-to-face contexts, Gonzalez et al. (2020) noted significant enhancements in both modalities when the impacts of COVID-19 constrained students. Despite observable and quantifiable performance improvements, there remains a lack of insight into how COVID-19 measures, particularly stay-at-home orders and online learning, have influenced the student learning experience.

Teaching ESL Online During COVID-19

While COVID-19 infection rates differ across countries, the impact of the pandemic has led to school closures

affecting more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries (Li & Lalani, 2020). Online education has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional in-person classroom instruction (Capra, 2014). The demand for online courses has witnessed substantial growth in recent years, driven by students' desire for flexibility and autonomy in their educational pursuits (Capra, 2014 as cited in Edmundson, 2007). Students enrolled in distance education programs through online platforms, especially from universities and colleges, gain access to instruction from esteemed educators globally (Simonson, 2014).

In the current pandemic context, students transitioning to online learning must embrace a new culture of education, shifting away from teacher-centered approaches towards more learner-centered methodologies (Edmundson, 2007, p. 118). Additionally, English as a second language (ESL) learners bring their unique cultural influences to the online learning environment (Chou & Chen, 2009, as cited in Ku & Lohr, 2003). ESL students often encounter challenges in effectively integrating into online platforms and participating in collaborative learning with peers and instructors from diverse backgrounds. Cultural and linguistic barriers can impede students' engagement in online courses, leading to diminished participation and involvement.

According to Cheok et al. (2017), e-learning has greatly supported teachers' teaching process. This new teaching mode has been a great help and has made the teacher's job easier in conducting lessons. The online platform is known to be a convenient platform for uploading and storing extensive teaching materials. Not only does this help save time, but it also saves some costs in the long run (Bailey & Lee, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has posed countless challenges to English educators, online teaching and learning have offered numerous advantages to them (Koet & Abdul Aziz, 2021). Escobar and Morrison (2020) claimed that online teaching enhances educators' pre-class preparations. Furthermore, many educators were encouraged to plan a more creative lesson to be brought into their classroom (Kapar & Bhandari, 2020, as cited in Ginaya, Somawati & Mataram, 2021). This led to educators having more engaging lessons delivered with a tremendous amount of learners' participation which held them to be more responsive during lessons. Additionally, the flexibility and convenience allowed educators to conduct English lessons anytime, anywhere, regardless of time and location (Thaheem et al., 2021). E-learning served as meeting points for all educators and learners as they were based at different places across the nation.

Online Learning in Primary Schools

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, many schools have taken a twist to switch their classes to online. Even in primary schools, students cope with online education. There are some benefits of online learning. For instance, online learning allows students to develop a new range of skills (e.g., research skills). Online learning also allows students to engage in authentic experiences (e.g., contacting experts). Online learning can also help prepare students to be successful in the 21st century. The 21st-century learning skills movement highlights skills young people need once they move into the workforce as adults (Silva, 2008), an increasingly globalized and competitive environment (Kaufman, 2013). Trilling and Fadel (2009) categorize these as (a) learning and innovation skills, digital literacy skills, and career and life skills. Learning online, whether in formal or informal environments, can help children develop some 21st-century skills, specifically communication and collaboration skills and media literacy skills while learning in authentic settings.

Advantage of Teaching ESL Online

According to Mohamad et al. (2018), online learning offers ESL learners exposure to an effective language-rich environment that facilitates both communication and learning. Feldman and Zucker (2015) delineate two processes inherent to the online environment: synchronous interactions, which involve tools like shared whiteboards and live conversations, and asynchronous interactions, encompassing tools such as file attachments and emails (Khoshsima et al., 2018). The swift technological progress, as highlighted by McBrien et al. (2009), has facilitated online learning and created opportunities for more advanced discussions and learning experiences for ESL learners compared to traditional classrooms (McBrien et al., 2009). Previous research findings corroborate that internet resources shared within online classrooms play a vital role in enhancing children's reading skills. These resources provide access to a diverse array of engaging, relevant, and interdisciplinary textual materials, fostering meaningful and real-world language processing

(Shea, 1996). Given that a substantial portion of online content is presented in English, ESL students can encounter an assorted collection of authentic English-language literature spanning a wide range of informational subjects (Higgins, 1991). As ESL students navigate through the wealth of online materials, their reading skills naturally improve, significantly enhancing their overall reading proficiency.

The Challenges of Teaching ESL Online

The concept of a challenge pertains to a novel and demanding situation that assesses an individual's ability to successfully overcome it. In the realm of education, online teaching and learning serve as a contemporary teaching method that presents several challenges for educators. These challenges have prompted teachers to adapt to this new mode of instruction (Arifa, 2020). In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, teachers had to prepare themselves both physically and emotionally to implement online teaching and learning from their homes (Arifa, 2020). They began exploring technologies to seek out the latest tools for online teaching and learning to replace traditional classroom methods (Umrana et al., 2020). However, this transition has not been without difficulties, particularly for those with limited prior experience in integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into their teaching practices (Wen & Tan, 2020).

Additionally, a lack of proficiency stemming from inadequate professional training has posed further challenges for ESL teachers engaged in online education (Rahayu & Wirza, 2020). Hence, this section aims to delve into previous research regarding challenges encountered by teachers during online teaching and learning and to glean insights into their perceptions based on their experiences in online instruction. Foremost among the challenges experienced by teachers during online teaching and learning is the issue of network connectivity. A study indicated that teachers are dissatisfied with online classes primarily due to unstable network connections affecting both teachers and students. Although tools like Google Meet, Zoom, and YouTube streaming are available, a robust internet connection is essential to ensure uninterrupted online instruction. In cases where students encounter connectivity problems, teachers often resort to allowing them to turn off their cameras to enhance stability. However, this approach might lead to a perception of teaching to an unresponsive audience, exacerbating the challenge of insufficient teacher-student interaction (Mishra et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Lukas and Yunus (2021) conducted a study titled 'ESL Teachers' Challenges in Implementing E-learning during COVID-19', revealing that educators encountered difficulties in delivering planned lessons due to unexpected occurrences like poor internet connections. Additionally, certain online teaching tools consume substantial data, creating financial barriers for some students and contributing to poor attendance rates.

Technical issues emerge as another major obstacle, mirroring the effects of network problems and leading to reduced teacher-student interaction, as highlighted in research by Mishra, Gupta, and Shree (2020), as well as Mounjid, Hilali, Amrani, and Moubtassime (2021). Hamad, Dafaallah, and Alhaj (2021) also supported this perspective, underscoring students' complaints about teacher interaction quality during technical disruptions. A study conducted by Orhan and Beyhan (2020) indicated that video conferencing in distance education negatively influenced students' attitudes due to technical malfunctions, undermining the effectiveness of teaching and learning interactions. Similarly, Mahyoob's (2020) research on 'Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners' indicated that technical issues during online instruction raised concerns. Some online teaching tools lacked compatibility with certain technological devices, particularly audio or video systems due to inherent feature limitations. This compelled teachers and students to seek alternatives, disrupting the learning process. Furthermore, these technical obstacles hampered learning material assessment and hindered students' ability to participate in online exams.

The dearth of technological devices among students presents a significant challenge in maintaining effective communication with them (Lukas and Yunus, 2021). While online learning necessitates at least a laptop or smartphone, many students, particularly those from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, lack access to such resources. Educators have had to resort to alternative platforms to deliver lessons, causing delays in students' learning progress (Kaden, 2020). Consequently, students' interest and motivation to engage in online classes have waned (Lukas & Yunus, 2021). Mohebi and Meda (2021) further emphasize that integrating technology is arduous due to limited access to computers and software. Mishra, Gupta, and Shree (2020) affirmed the necessity of having a computer or laptop at home for effective participation in

online classes, with smartphones deemed insufficient for this purpose. Contrarily, Mahyoob (2020) contended that most online teaching tools are accessible via smartphones, and their availability contributed to the success of online learning as students widely used these devices for their studies.

Teachers Perception of Teaching ESL Online During COVID-19

The introduction of technology-enabled teaching and learning, which offers the flexibility to engage from any location and at any time, has led educators to view online instruction as a convenient, accessible, and time-saving approach (Alolaywi, 2021). In essence, online teaching and learning transcend the confines of temporal and spatial limitations, aligning with the objectives of Education 4.0 (Fisk, 2017). Although the preceding section highlighted the time-intensive nature of online teaching and learning, this can be mitigated by the reduction of travel time (Nambiar, 2020). According to Todd's study (2020), teachers save valuable hours each day due to the elimination of commuting. Additionally, the ability to record online classes for future reference not only conserves educators' time but also obviates the need to reiterate lessons for absent students (Nambiar, 2020).

Moreover, online teaching and learning empower teachers to explore technological tools extensively. The profusion of online teaching resources available equips educators with tools to captivate student interest and enhance participation through interactive activities, which are crucial for language development (Basilaia, Dgebuadze et al., 2020; Umrana et al., 2020). This shift towards technology-enabled activities signifies an exciting departure from traditional classroom methods, aligning with the dynamic learning landscape prompted by the pandemic (Kulal & Nayak, 2020). In essence, this novel approach fosters independent and collaborative knowledge acquisition guided by teachers, a response aligned with the tenets of Education 4.0 (Wen & Tan, 2020).

Furthermore, sustained exposure to technology utilization facilitates teachers' skill enhancement and bolsters their confidence (Nambiar, 2020). In another study by Rahayu and Wirza (2020), educators reported an improvement in performance as current circumstances compelled them to embrace ICT. Weiner's findings (2003) indicate that online courses significantly enhance computer skills for both educators and students. Another positive outcome is the rejuvenated interest and motivation among teachers in their profession following the introduction of online teaching and learning post the COVID-19 outbreak. Educators are eager to embrace this innovative pedagogical approach, envisioning positive outcomes for themselves and their students (Dhawan, 2020). This trend resonates with Tull, Dabner, and Arthur's assertion (2017) that challenging circumstances, like natural disasters, can invigorate educators' motivation to adopt innovative communication technology. Moreover, active student engagement acts as a catalyst for teachers to elevate their performance in online teaching (Nambiar, 2020).

Considering the discussed research, it is evident that while the challenges in online teaching and learning are substantial, the positive facets must not be overlooked. These affirmative aspects contribute to a favorable perception of online instruction, propelling educators to address barriers hindering its adoption. In conclusion, there is always scope for improvement in the realm of online teaching and learning (Kulal & Nayak, 2020). Consequently, educators should recognize the potential of online instruction, endeavour to overcome challenges and drive success in students' learning journeys (Nambiar, 2020).

Overall, the research-based information shown above concisely summarises the study's most important aspects. After examining and analysing those papers, it can be stated that few studies have been undertaken to determine ESL teachers' perceptions about online teaching and learning. Most past research has focused on teachers in general, indicating the urgent need to investigate the perceptions of ESL teachers. In essence, there is a lack of studies undertaken by local researchers in this area of research.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is essentially the practical implementation of the "how" in conducting a specific research study. More precisely, it encompasses the systematic process through which a researcher designs and carries out a study, aiming to achieve accurate and valid results that align with the investigation's goals

and objectives (Jansen & Warren, 2020). This section outlines the research design adopted to fulfil the research objectives. Initially, the qualitative approach employed in this study will be elucidated. The discussion will then delve into the aspects of sampling, research instruments, and the methodology employed for data analysis. Lastly, a succinct summary of this chapter will be provided.

The design of the current study is a case study in which data will be collected through semi-structured interviews. A qualitative method captures the authentic nature of the data source. This approach is always preferred to depict a circumstance, attitude, social interaction, or individual's opinions and thoughts. A qualitative researcher's duties as a human instrument include selecting the research's focus, selecting samples, obtaining data, analysing the data, interpreting the data, and eventually drawing conclusions (Umrana et al., 2020).

To produce a greater knowledge of a study topic than either strategy alone, it is important to collect rich and in-depth information from the participants when using the qualitative method (Creswell, 2014). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the current study uses a qualitative technique to investigate the ESL teacher's perceptions of teaching English primary schools. It's crucial to choose a study design after choosing a research technique.

The first phase, which involves gathering qualitative data for the study's in-depth support, is carried out once the results have been analyzed. This is accomplished through semi-structured interview sessions. The information was then evaluated to illustrate how the qualitative findings contribute to the understanding.

This research is being done in a primary school in Johor Bahru. 6 randomly selected ESL teaching teachers were chosen to participate in the interview session. As it has no bearing on the study's objectives, the uneven gender distributions are not taken into consideration. The results do not accurately reflect the whole student population in the chosen school or throughout Malaysia, especially in the focus of this research study's aim and the sample used. Various sources and references have been gathered to obtain the information needed for this research. Most of the materials and references were journals that could be found on online educational websites. The literature review procedure has considered recommendations and data from earlier research and studies to successfully validate the necessary components and aspects to be included in the research instruments. Next, to make sure that the research tools used are accurate and trustworthy, references were gathered from a variety of sources. The testing instruments, such as interview questions, are then constructed using the information and references discovered.

The targeted research respondents involved in this study are ESL teaching teachers from the government educational sector in a state primary school. The selected respondents are aged between 30 to 50 years old and all of them are from the English Department most importantly, they are ESL teachers (a total of 6 respondents). In this study, two types of instruments will be used for data. Firstly, an interview will be conducted among English teachers by asking them a set of questions by Chang and Fisher (2009), to evaluate teachers' perceptions of teaching ESL online. The start of the interview will consist of demographic questions such as name, age, and little insights into the interviewee's education back and teaching experience. Followed by sets of questions that are prepared to walk through teachers' perceptions of online learning in ESL classrooms. Secondly, the interview will be transcribed into written text based on the interview questions to analyse the data.

FINDING AND ANALYSIS

The study aimed to discover the insights, advantages, challenges, and approaches English teachers employ in teaching ESL online, especially during and after the pandemic. This data was gathered through an interview with six ESL teachers from different schools in a state in Malaysia with diverse backgrounds and teaching experience based on the research question created. The purpose of this research is to identify effective ways of teaching ESL online in Malaysian Primary Schools, teacher's perceptions of teaching ESL online in Malaysian Primary Schools, challenges faced by primary school teachers in Malaysia during online learning, and explore the positive views on online teaching and learning of the ESL teachers in Malaysia primary school.

Perception of teaching ESL online

This question attempts to study the perception of Malaysian Primary School ESL teachers in Johor Bahru. This question is essential for the interviewee to explore in depth their attitudes and behaviour toward teaching ESL online in Malaysian Primary schools. Based on the interviews that have been conducted, three themes emerged: positive perceptions and limitations in implementing online teaching in Malaysian primary schools. Four teachers have had positive perceptions towards teaching ESL online.

Theme 1	Flexibility	“It is a flexible and useful platform for English learners, especially for the independent learners.” (Teacher 1)	Literature Review Alolaywi, (2021)
Theme 2	Technology Literacy	“I would say it is still an opportunity to introduce education in a virtual platform and students learn to discover their skills in terms of computing and technology.” (Teacher 3)	Nambiar, (2020)
Theme 3	Engagement	“Online teaching helps make lessons more engaging and understandable for students while teachers simplify their teaching process.” (Teacher 5)	Kapar & Bhandari, (2020)

Based on Kamal and Illiyan (2021), online classes are known to be flexible, and they can be conducted at any time and location, as well as be cost-effective. Moreover, teachers also feel that it is easier for them to share teaching material despite children being in different locations. It allows children who cannot attend classes at a specific time to review the lesson anytime at their convenience. In addition, children also get the opportunity to be more confident in having virtual conversations or discussions, which helps teachers to ease their teaching process. During the pandemic, teachers were allowed to explore online learning platforms and design their material using the platform to cater to student’s needs in providing activities and lessons (Rahayu & Wirza, 2020). On the other hand, teachers also portrayed their limitations towards online teaching. Teachers have labelled their online teaching experience as “*less effective*” and “*challenging*” for primary students. This difficulty is mostly pointed to the technical issues, technological barriers as well as lack of student-teacher interaction.

Theme 3	Training	“I would not like to go back to online teaching. As a veteran teacher, we do not have much knowledge in operating laptops and online platform. We were also not given enough training to solve technical issues that occurred at the point of time.” (Teacher 2)	Literature review Dhawan, (2020)
Theme 4	Lack of interaction	“Students do not have conversation with us via google meet or zoom, I was always felt that I was speaking to myself during classes.” (Teacher 5)	Mishra et al., (2020)

According to Kamal and Illiyan (2021), is evident that through online teaching, teachers face difficulties in understanding students’ basic needs such as their psychological and emotional needs. Adding more teachers’ negativity towards online teaching about retaining students’ attention and analysing their understanding of the syllabus. Teachers find it difficult to keep students focused during online lessons as they are not in control of what are children doing behind the screen. Besides, teachers were also not keen on online learning platforms due to technical difficulties as they were continuously getting fagged out between lessons which also contributed to students’ loss of interest in learning (Kamal & Illiyan, 2021). According to Rahayu and Wirza (2020), teachers were not keen on online teaching as they have not conducted one. This sudden change

of teaching mode has confused teachers. They faced numerous struggles in constructing engaging materials, explaining concepts and lessons effectively catering to students' proficiency level, assessing students, providing constructive feedback for student achievement, and retaining students' interest in a lesson. In addition, online teaching is also labelled as not a practical mode of teaching as teachers face difficulty in having communication with students. Based on Savenye (2005, as cited in Rahayu and Wirza, 2020), communication is a vital element to successful online learning, not only that but it is also a key element to increase students' motivation in learning a subject.

Online Teaching Platforms

Teachers are favorable towards the usage of online teaching platforms which they find effect ESL to primary school students.

Teacher 1 said *"It depends on the students' level. Of course, it is convenient and effective to conduct online, where it offers a variety of educational websites to keep track on students' progress."*

Teacher 5 mentioned that *"I prefer using platforms that offer flexibility, ease of use, and interactive features. Some popular options include Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and specialized ESL platforms like Cambly or iTalki"*

According to Ting and Aziz (2021), WhatsApp has been the main preferred tool for online teaching regarding communication between teachers and students. Teacher finds it easier to have clear students about lessons or inform absent students about the updated lesson they missed. Past studies have proven that teachers use WhatsApp applications to meet students' needs by communicating, encouraging, creating a nurturing social atmosphere, and using it as a platform to teach as it is free and accessible to all teachers and students (Ting & Aziz, 2021). In addition, Google Forms is also known as a preferred platform by teachers to conduct assessments (Kurniawati 2020, et al., as cited in Ting and Aziz, 2021). WhatsApp took over Google Forms and Quizziz as it is a preferable way to assess students' achievement and send out quizzes for assessment. As for providing learning material to students, past researchers have shown that teachers highly recommend YouTube as they can search for resources suitable for the student's level. In this case, for primary school students, teachers can search for animated videos that help teach grammar or sentence construction skills.

Despite this, some teachers have also expressed their disagreement on the usage of online teaching platforms. Whereas Teacher 2 has her own preference of *"I would prefer to conduct my class in an actual context, where I can notice students' attention and reassure their understanding."*

Teacher 6 responded *"I had my fair share of online teaching and I believe students tend to take advantage by turning off their cameras and microphones and disappearing in the middle of the lesson."*

Teacher 3 expressed *"but for younger students or those requiring more hands-on guidance, in-person teaching may be more effective."*

According to Ng and Yunus (2021, as cited in Mirzajani et al., 2016), teachers would not disagree with using technology for their lessons unless they are provided with good resources in the school. It was also found that teachers were having difficulties in managing students' attitudes towards the lesson as well as in-class discipline when online learning was conducted. Technical issues have also been pointed out as why teachers do not prefer using online learning platforms as they usually encounter technical issues with children, which results in almost half the class not completing tasks that are given to them (Thomas & Fong, 2020, as cited in Ng and Yunus, 2021).

Benefits of Online Teaching

From the responses, it is evident that teaching ESL online also benefits primary school teachers. By asking this question, the researchers have extracted two themes: flexibility and accessibility.

Theme 5	Flexibility	<p>“Students, in general would have more flexible time to study compared to attending face-to-face classes.” (Teacher 2)</p> <p>“Students can learn at their own pace and schedule, accommodating personal and professional commitments. Access to learning materials anytime, anywhere with an internet connection.” (Teacher 4)</p> <p>“I can conduct my lesson anywhere and anytime without worrying that I must be home. Same goes to my students, if their parents have sent them to their grandparent’s house or a childcare centre, they can still attend my class as long as they have the resources.” (Teacher 6)</p>	<p>Literature review</p> <p>Thaheem et al., (2021)</p>
Theme 6	Accessibility	<p>“Independent learners are able to self-access themselves through thorough online research so that it clears their doubts.” (Teacher 3)</p> <p>“Children gets to connect with native speakers or international peers through video chats, discussion forums, and collaborative activities.” (Teacher 4)</p> <p>“The good thing about online teaching is there are many game-based activities that can help attract students’ attention especially when they are in primary school. It helps the teacher to instantly make the class have a fun learning environment.” (Teacher 5)</p>	<p>Hodges et al., (2020)</p> <p>Simonson, (2014)</p>

As indicated by the interviewed teachers the first benefit of online teaching is the flexibility of conducting lessons online. The teacher has mentioned that they do not need to have the tension of being at home to perform the lesson. With all the resources provided, lessons can be conducted anywhere anytime. Not only that, but the teacher has also agreed that students can access all the teacher materials via online learning platforms if they are absent instead of copying from a whiteboard or friends’ book if they happen to be absent. Moreover, accessibility is also a factor that provides benefits to teachers and students. Independent learners have a great opportunity to research topics that they face difficulty.

From the perspective of Yan et al. (2024), online teaching provides benefits for both teachers and students based on their geographical limitations. This helps teachers to connect with their students from different locations. According to Franklin (2022, as cited in Yan et al., 2024), online teaching allows teachers to connect with students from different states, cities, or even different countries. This not only gives and expands the education scope but also supports the learning of diverse cultures and perspectives in a virtual teaching environment. Online teaching and learning are labelled as flexible as they give a choice for students to attend classes from their desired location and view teaching material anytime, they need clarification (Lim, 2005, as cited Yan et al., 2024). Yan et al. (2024) also mentioned that the freedom for students to use the teaching materials not only attends to students’ proficiency level but also attracts students’ attention to be more engaging in lessons and comprehensively explain lengthy lessons.

Halim and Hashim (2019, as cited in Lee and Bailey (2020), stated that online teaching provides flexibility and improves the teaching environment, communication skills, and self-confidence of both teachers and students. Online learning platform activities that are fun also help boost students’ motivation to attend classes and learn. Activities and the usage of authentic teaching materials on YouTube can be catered to pupils in one class based on their proficiency level (Gilakjani, 2014, as cited in Lee and Bailey, 2020). Furthermore, this online teaching and learning mode of study has given teachers and students a great way to deal with their

communication with each other as online platforms have been designed in ways that they can send messages privately or in groups for everyone to see and clear doubts (Ramli et al., 2022). Melor, Hadi and Chen (2012, as cited in Halim and Hashim, 2019) have pointed out that teaching ESL online to students is quite useful. It is due to teachers finding it easier to present their teaching material. In addition, teachers also find it easy to look for ideas and material to explain their lessons to students as they are able to get information from existing blocks. Teachers' materials that are uploaded online are also viewable by students when they are given a bring-back-home task to complete.

Challenges in Online Teaching

Theme 8	Class Management	<p>“You would not know if the students really pay attention to you or not if they are switching off the cameras during class. some students tend to be distractive by switching on their mic in the middle of a lesson.” (Teacher 1)</p> <p>“Some students might not respond and end up doing something else.” (Teacher 2)</p> <p>“Managing students’ attention during classes. It can be a distraction when younger children start to play online game while attending online class.” (Teacher 4)</p> <p>“Teacher don’t get much interaction with students. When students keep mum during online lesson, there will not be any kind of feedback given or questions asked. This is where they go wrong with all their homework and tasks.” (Teacher 5)</p>	Literature review Mishra et al., (2020)
Theme 9	Technical Barrier	<p>“Internet connection would be the crucial factor in conducting a class, if the line is cut, teacher might have to repeat her lesson.” (Teacher 1)</p> <p>“For me internet connection has always been an issue during online teaching, especially when it rains.” (Teacher 2)</p> <p>“Internet connectivity is the main challenge in online teaching and learning. If it’s not the teacher, the students would face the from which then discourage them to attend classes. Not only that, not having a proper device is also another challenge as your students is going to be missing out a lot” (Teacher 3)</p> <p>“Based on my experience, it’s just one simple answer. Poor internet connectivity or lack of proper devices.” (Teacher 6)</p>	Lukas and Yunus (2021) Mishra, Gupta, and Shree (2020) Orhan and Beyhan (2020)

Teachers were also interviewed on the challenges they have faced throughout their experience in conducting online teaching. The results are divided into 2 themes which are classroom management and technical barriers. As the results have shown, when it comes to classroom management, all teachers face a common issue, which is students' responses and replies during the lesson and their teachers' inability to see what

students are doing behind the screen. Furthermore, teachers expressed their inability to bring back students' attention through the screen. Teachers also feel that most of the time, online class is a distraction for students when they accidentally turn on their microphones in the middle of a lesson. It has also brought teachers' attention when children would enter the classroom and play games behind the screen. It has then been proven as an issue for teachers to achieve their objectives successfully. In addition, technical barriers are one of the biggest issues that are being faced by teachers who have been interviewed. Most of them agreed that they had faced technical difficulties during online lessons, whether it was for them or the students. Internet connectivity has been the major technical issue teachers and students face during online teaching and learning. Teachers said they will need to repeat their lessons as they get kicked out of their meeting, which can further lead to a loss of students' attention towards the lesson. Some teachers also face challenges conducting online lessons when the weather changes, as rain affects internet connectivity. Not only that, lacking proper devices is also a challenge faced by teachers and students. It is said that it works two ways: if the teacher and students do not have a proper device to conduct or attend online classes, it can be a burden for both of them.

According to Aslam et al. (2021), it is mentioned that challenges do occur between teachers and students when there is a lack of interaction between both. This occurs when the teacher gives a task, and students do not get enough feedback or explanation from the teacher. To support this statement, it is mentioned in Ramli et al. (2022) that the lack of conversation and engagement in the classroom makes forum discussion result in getting off-topic. In addition, teachers are said to be the factor contributing to the lack of interaction when they provide a task without proper instructions and it is to be completed at home, which may result in students and also their parents' facing difficulties in completing the task given. Allo (2020, as cited in Ramli et al., 2022) stated that some children would be hoping to get an explanation from the teacher when the task is given. Furthermore, the limited feedback that teacher gives also results to wrongly completing tasks, which results in demotivating teachers to provide feedback and marks, and hence demotivating students to complete future tasks (Ramli et al., 2022).

Moving on, technical barriers also seemed to be another major challenge faced by ESL teachers in teaching ESL online, especially in primary school. It has been proven that if students are able to get proper technical support for their learning, they will be more likely to contribute in positive learning, which will make their teachers more enthusiastic when conducting a lesson (Yan et al., 2024). When enough technical support is given to teachers and students, they will be able to resolve unexpected issue that occurs as their teaching and learning process is going on. In this condition, parents should play an important role in supporting and teaching their children to deal with devices so that students can be independent when technical issues occur (Yan et al., 2024). Next, children's likelihood of being engrossed in technology can also be a distraction when online learning is conducted. From the results collected in this research, we can see that teachers are also having challenges in monitoring their children not to do anything else behind the screen. As stated by Halim and Hashim (2019), children with Facebook accounts are most likely to be distracted as they offer chatrooms for children to speak with one another. Not only that, in-app games are also a cause of distraction, as students may find games more entertaining than the teacher conducting the lesson.

Besides, the major issue with online teaching and learning is unstable internet connectivity. Many teachers and students faced difficulty when the internet connection caused lessons to be cut off in the middle. Weather changes was also contributed towards the instability in connectivity. As mentioned in Sumalinog (2022), students and teachers were not ready for online lessons as they were aware of their unstable internet connection. There were reported cases where some students lost connection for a minute and managed to get back to the online teaching platform, whilst the rest were completely thrown out and were unable to join the online lesson again. Students' participation and interaction were disrupted as the internet connection is lagged, and the video froze during the conversation. The situations mentioned form countless difficulties for teachers and students to interact with each other and have themselves stuck in a conversation loop, not to mention that they will have to keep repeating a set of conversations again and again (Sumalinog, 2022).

Positive views on online teaching and learning.

The questions were divided into three sections: making lessons interactive and motivating, teacher motivation and recommendation. The first exploration was teachers' ways to make lessons interactive and motivating.

Based on the finding there are three different ways to make lessons interactive and motivating.

Gamification	<p>“Gamification would be one of the most effective ways to interact and motivate students. Being creative in lesson delivering is crucial, I have my colleague who uses Minecraft to conduct RBT lesson. I would also use emojis to have temperature check on my students / praise my students from time to time.” (Teacher 1)</p> <p>“Honestly speaking, for now, I noticed online quiz with the integration of gaming could hype the students. For example, the recent ‘kahoot platform’ included a personalised treasure map for the class to hit the target. The target as in scoring the quiz as high as possible.” (Teacher 3)</p> <p>“Introduce gamified learning with apps like Quizizz or Duolingo to make lessons more fun.” (Teacher 4)</p>
Multimedia Integration	<p>“To make lessons more interactive and motivating online, I recommend using multimedia materials, such as videos, animations, and games.” (Teacher 5)</p> <p>“Use reward systems (e.g., virtual badges or certificates) for achievements and also leverage multimedia such as videos, songs, or storytelling to keep lessons dynamic.” (Teacher 6)</p>

Based on the results above, teachers are getting used to online teaching by using many online resources. Starting off with gamification, teachers’ opinions have shifted from traditional teaching methods to integrating gamified learning into the lesson. The usage of games in teaching in ESL classrooms has made a great contribution to the teaching and learning process as it is effective in improving students’ social skills and language skills, as mentioned by Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (2006, as cited in Saha and Singh 2016). Not only that results from the teachers have also indicated that it motivates students to excel in all four language skills. Saha and Singh, 2016 mentioned that games can help students acquire all skills as they need to know all the rules and regulations. Moreover, students will also need to know what should be done during the game and how should the game be played. Games help students in enhancing their communication skills as they will need to reciprocate to give directions and instructions (Saha & Singh, 2016).

Teachers also seemed to be more engaging in utilizing multimedia integration in conducting online ESL lessons among primary school students. Material like “videos, animations and songs” have been used by teachers during their online lessons to boost student engagement. According to Hossain (2021), multimedia integration, such as applications that are known as hardware or software, is used in English lessons to have teachers teach with confidence. This gives teachers and students a chance to share their ideas and information that **must** be conveyed. Multimedia in teaching ESL is known to be a combination of text, graphics, animated materials, videos and sounds, which have given teachers a chance to teach English in this new era (Hossain, 2021). According to Yumnam (2021), podcasts and vodcasts are now important learning materials in online teaching and learning. Integrating the two multimedia into **lessons** helps students discover, observe, and interpret learning topics effectively. These tools are also helpful if the teacher uses the communicative task-based teaching approach to enhance students’ language learning. They are also flexible to be viewed at anywhere and anytime.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to uncover the insights, benefits, challenges, and positive effects teachers had discovered integrating online teaching in Malaysian ESL classrooms in primary school settings. Findings have revealed that online teaching has significantly shaped primary school teachers' experience, and perception in both difficulty and opportunity. Online teaching has emerged as a mixed paradigm among ESL teachers in primary

school. While it provides benefits in providing flexibility, accessibility and innovative teaching methods, it also has its challenges when it comes to technology usage, student engagement and classroom management. This research has uncovered the importance of improving technical infrastructure, training teachers, and integrating interactive tools to enhance online teaching and learning experiences among teachers and students. Ultimately, this research has highlighted ESL teachers' perceptions towards online teaching in Malaysian primary school settings and ensured effective post-pandemic teaching. However, there is still room for future research to develop interventions to address the identified challenges, aiming to optimize online teaching strategies in many different education levels.

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