

Navigating the Digital Classroom: Instructors' Insights into Online ESL Reading Learning

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ABSTRACT

Presently, higher education institutions use an online learning platform as a teaching and learning portal for online programmes. Ever since the start of fully online learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been numerous studies on learners' online engagement. In Second Language teaching and learning, it is crucial for instructors to understand and utilize online learning platforms to increase learner engagement. Nonetheless, most online teaching has not fully incorporated effective pedagogic principles, which could lead to ineffective teaching performance and thus unsuccessful learning. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate instructors' perceptions of using online learning platforms in teaching adult students, particularly online reading of ESL proficiency courses for a diploma programme of a local university in West Malaysia. Six instructors were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of their perception of using online teaching platforms. The interviews revealed that the instructors were mainly positive and willing to integrate the system in teaching online reading, specifically encouraging online participation and monitoring students' performance. However, the instructors also claimed that challenges like time limitations, lack of ICT skills training and students' expectations hinder them from teaching ESL online reading more effectively.

Keywords: Online language teaching; ESL; adult students; instructors, online-learning platform, online reading

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the landscape of higher education, enabling learning to take place beyond the physical boundaries of traditional classrooms. Contemporary students can access educational resources, participate in collaborative activities, and engage with instructors and peers through a variety of digital platforms regardless of geographical location. Online learning environments have become an integral component of higher education, offering flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for self-directed learning. These affordances are particularly valuable for adult students who often balance academic pursuits with professional, family, and personal commitments. Previous studies have highlighted the potential of online learning to promote learner autonomy, interaction, and personalised learning experiences when supported by appropriate pedagogical design (Al-Seghayer, 2016; Chapelle, 2001; Levy, 1997; Herdina & Ningrum, 2023).

In the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035, the emphasis on lifelong learning has further increased participation in flexible and distance education programmes. As economies become increasingly knowledge-driven, continuous upskilling and reskilling are essential for individuals seeking to remain competitive in rapidly evolving workplaces. Recognising this need, national higher education policies have consistently promoted equitable access to education and lifelong learning opportunities for diverse groups of students, including working adults and non-traditional students. The integration of digital technologies within

higher education has been instrumental in supporting these initiatives by expanding access to learning beyond conventional campus-based delivery (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2025). Consequently, institutions and instructors play a critical role in creating learning experiences that leverage the affordances of technology while addressing the diverse needs of students.

Despite the widespread adoption of online-learning platforms and other educational technologies, concerns regarding the quality of online learning remain prevalent. Studies have reported challenges related to instructional design, learner engagement, assessment practices, instructor workload, and the effective integration of pedagogical principles into online teaching (Yang & Cornelius, 2005; Herdina & Ningrum, 2023). In many cases, online instruction continues to replicate traditional teacher-centred practices rather than exploiting the interactive and collaborative potential of digital learning environments. Such approaches may limit opportunities for meaningful engagement and autonomous learning, particularly in language education where interaction and active participation are essential components of language development.

Within the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, these challenges are particularly significant. Effective online language instruction requires instructors to balance pedagogical, technological, and learner-related demands while fostering engagement beyond the classroom (Annamalai et al., 2022). Understanding how instructors navigate these competing demands is therefore critical for improving the quality of online language learning. This study explores ESL instructors' experiences and perceptions of online reading instruction within a distance learning environment, with particular attention to the pedagogical challenges and opportunities associated with promoting learner engagement in digital learning spaces.

Problem Statement

Instructors play an important role to initiate and motivate the students to continue using the learning portal. Several studies that investigate students' perceptions of online learning revealed that their participation is dependent on the instructors' involvement in engaging them in online learning. A study on the use of online platforms whereby students reported that they expected everything to be taught by instructors just like the full-time mode of instruction (Chen et al., 2022). Due to this expectation, they often received complaints about instructors who seemed to be underutilising the system. Another study on an evaluation of online learning programmes reveals that students have differing opinions when asked about their instructors. The findings highlight the fact that most students have positive experiences in integrating technology in their learning experience but not when interacting with instructors, especially with the more senior instructors (Riconalla, 2022). According to Cavanaugh et al. (2022), students' expectations towards instructors in using online-learning platforms are based on their experience in learning face-to-face. Instructors may lack the experience or training in online teaching. In defence of the instructors, nonetheless, Kurniasih et al. (2023) suggest that students should have a better grasp of the concept of online learning, mainly to be autonomous, so that the pressure is lessened. From these studies, there are discrepancies in terms of the expectations from students and instructors in using online platforms. One of the major points emphasized in these studies is the expectation for the instructors to provide a quality and consistent online learning experience to the students (Al-Seghayer, 2016; Cavanaugh, 2022; Alkaabi et al., 2023; Mokhtar et al., 2025).

All in all, the literature documents a largely positive but cautious stance among ESL/EFL instructors toward online reading and online language learning. Yet, much of the existing work is focused either on students' perceptions of online platforms or on broad comparisons between face-to-face and online instruction, with fewer fine-grained studies mapping instructors' changing beliefs, classroom practices, and professional development needs across different institutional and cultural settings (Herdina & Ningrum, 2023). Hence, students' needs and expectations in online platforms are a constant struggle for instructors to fulfil due to institutional demands and resources. This gap suggests a need for more qualitative, context-sensitive research that tracks how teachers' perceptions evolve over time and how they negotiate between institutional expectations, technological affordances, and their own pedagogical values in online reading and language-learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Digital Tools and Language Learning

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has evolved from behaviouristic CALL, communicative CALL, to integrative CALL. Since Behaviouristic CALL was heavily criticized, thus the communicative approach advocates that lessons should use the computer to teach language implicitly rather than explicitly and to create an artificial environment for students to use the language in a non-threatening environment. Later, a more integrative approach was adopted since educators felt that the computer had the potential to teach language. With the advancement of the Internet and Artificial Intelligence (AI), more possibilities for language teaching were seen.

As a result, language educators now increasingly utilised digital tools such as learning management systems, video conferencing platforms, discussion forums, collaborative applications, and AI-supported technologies to facilitate language learning and interaction (Levy, 1997, Kurniasih et al., 2023; Mokhtar et al., 2025, Ounnisi, 2025). The growth of digital learning ecosystems has transformed language learning into a more flexible, connected, and learner-centred experience. The development of the Internet and digital communication technologies has also created extensive opportunities for students to engage with language in meaningful and authentic contexts. Nevertheless, researchers in CALL consistently argue that the effectiveness of technology-enhanced language learning depends not on the technology itself, but on how digital tools are pedagogically integrated into instructional practices (Annamalai et al., 2022; Kurniasih et al., 2023). Consequently, effective online language learning requires thoughtful instructional design, meaningful interaction, and pedagogically sound learning activities. In contemporary language education, digital literacy and technological competence have become increasingly important components of teaching and learning.

From the socioconstructivist point of view, a person's learning is shaped through his interactions with the people and environment that surrounds him (Wertsch 1991; Vygotsky 1997). The main attraction of online learning platforms is the interactivity factor, and it is seen as an indispensable tool in a language classroom. This technology not only develops English language acquisition but should also be seen to encourage social, cultural and personal benefits (Warschauer 1999; Kurniasih et al., 2023). Especially for ESL students, the online learning environment gives them abundant opportunities to practise using the language in a non-threatening environment (Chapelle 2003). A considerable amount of research has been published on the benefits of integrating technology in language learning. Previous research (Kurniasih et al., 2023; Nurisma et al., 2025; Herdina, 2023; Alam, 2023) reveals that both instructors and students have a positive outlook when it comes to integrating technology in the language classroom. This is especially evident in their responses towards feedback and the authenticity of resources. As for the students, they find learning a language via online help to boost their motivation, as there is a correlation between their computer literacy and confidence in using the language. Instructors recognise the potential of digital technologies to enhance language learning experiences, although successful implementation often depends on pedagogical readiness, institutional support, and instructors' willingness to adapt their teaching practices to evolving digital learning environments.

Instructor Engagement

Generally, literature suggests that online instruction can provide meaningful and effective learning experiences when supported by appropriate pedagogical design and instructional practices. Studies have highlighted the potential of online learning platforms to foster learner autonomy, flexibility, collaboration, and active engagement through technology-enhanced learning experiences. However, these benefits are often dependent on several interrelated conditions, including well-structured learning activities, sustained instructor presence, meaningful learner interaction, timely feedback, and adequate institutional and technological support.

Online learning instructors also have multiple roles and responsibilities that they must carry out in making online learning a success. Previous research reported that instructors have overlapping roles as instructors, designers and managers (Dennen & Jones, 2022; Güneş & Adnan, 2023). There is a blurring line that distinguishes these roles. This means that instructors of online learning must carry out these responsibilities. With this realisation, instructors may feel overwhelmed or frustrated since they are confronted with multiple

tasks which demand more time and work. Nasir, Talib, and Faridah (2007) already highlighted that students frequently complain about instructors' lack of online interaction, pointing to weak instructor presence as a key factor in dissatisfaction with online English-language courses. More recent work on student satisfaction in online learning in Malaysian higher education further confirms that instructor responsiveness, clear communication, and interactive teaching strongly shape students' satisfaction, and that when instructors are perceived as minimally interactive, students express frustration and lower their motivation (Mokhtar et al., 2025). Teachers' online teaching performance is significantly and positively affected by their satisfaction, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use. Perceived ease of use exerts a more significant impact on performance than perceived usefulness (Du et al, 2023). Herdina and Ningrum (2023) mentioned that instructors generally have a positive attitude towards implementing technology in their classrooms; however, they also face challenges like lack of ICT skills and training, infrastructure and facilities and material preparation. Mokhtar et al. (2025) highlighted that instructors usually expect online students to be autonomous, but many who were accustomed to teacher-directed learning struggle with this shift and opt for passive behaviours online. Online learning is neither automatically student-centred nor teacher-centred; it depends entirely on how the course is designed and taught. However, the potential of online learning leans strongly toward student-centred approaches due to its flexibility and interactive technologies (Eksangkul, 2023). As such, the success of online instruction is shaped less by the technology itself than by the pedagogical approaches employed to facilitate learning and engagement in digital environments.

Finally, instructors are responsible for grading tests and exams and providing feedback. These responsibilities may have affected the instructors' commitment to teaching online. According to Al-Busaidi and Al-Shihi (2010) and Chen et al. (2022), the success of the use of online learning platforms in any institution begins with instructors' acceptance by using the features effectively, which is then followed by participation from students. Du et al (2023) highlighted that the success of online learning depends on the satisfaction of communication and feedback from instructors. According to AbdAlgane (2023), 135 Middle Eastern English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers were surveyed for the research. Responses to a questionnaire based on the teacher professional identity scale and semi-structured interviews with 13 participants provided the data for this analysis. Content analysis was used to categorise the codes representing the qualitative information gleaned from the semi-structured interviews. It seems that many EFL teachers were unprepared for the pedagogical and technical problems they faced while teaching English to foreign students online, and this has had a profoundly destructive impact on the instructors' professional identities as they migrate away from teaching in-person. The findings revealed that the participants' long-term engagement with technology during and after their formal education significantly influenced their perception of themselves as professionals. They were unprepared to give constant feedback and to deal with the technical challenges. In a later study by Mokhtar et al. (2025), they described that feedback in online learning can become one-way delivery, not spontaneous and passive information from the students. Nurisma et al. (2025) mentioned that, especially in reading online instruction, instructors feel the limited face-to-face interaction hinders them from observing students' body language or non-verbal cues. These non-verbal cues to experienced instructors are indispensable to evaluate students' comprehension. Therefore, successful online learning requires involvement from not only the students but also, most importantly, instructors.

In making students engaged with online learning, instructors are the key players to use the online tools, for example, an online learning platform, to its full potential. Gunes and Adnan (2023) verify that instructors believed that an online learning platform assisted them in terms of managing and teaching students. They utilise various software like PowerPoint to develop materials. Nevertheless, this was true as the instructors did not have to spend too much time online, especially in uploading materials. Therefore, these instructors use the online learning platform as an adjunct to their teaching. However, how the instructors adapt the online learning platform to convey their teaching is dependent on the current systems. Timotheau et al. (2023) argue that instructors use the tools in the online learning platform not because they are IT savvy, but because they think more about saving time, supporting a traditional teaching process and improving management efficiency. In their study, instructors do not use the tools in the online learning platform based on the pedagogical impact that they would have on students. Instructors are more concerned with using the technology to lessen the burden of managing classes. Du et al (2023) further discussed that the degree to which the digital tools improve their teaching is the higher their level of satisfaction in teaching online. As Yang and Cornelius (2005) mentioned,

there is a tendency for instructors to translate the pedagogic principles in face-to-face classrooms to online learning since they do not see the advantages of integrating online learning platforms into teaching. As a result, this leads to unsuccessful learning.

Sangeeta and Tandon (2020) highlight that creating engaging ESL materials in an online environment is time-consuming. Instructors must be aware though online learning may cost less but it involves hours or preparations and a certain level of ICT skills (Al-Seghayer, 2016). Specifically for ESL reading, technology often provides technological aids to enhance reading texts like an English glossary, target language synonym, picture/video, audio pronunciation of individual words, grammar explanations, cultural explanations and so on for instructors to develop these authentic ESL materials. Nonetheless, development and designing an appropriate online material must consider the level of proficiency and students' background knowledge. Though, evidently there is abundant of possibilities for online language learning, teachers lack the time, resources and skills to develop online language learning lessons particularly reading online (Al Aghar et al., 2023; Timotheou et al., 2023; Du et al., 2023, Milliner, 2021). Moreover, designing CALL requires interdisciplinary studies that if not properly defined may hinder the potential of CALL (Levy 1997).

Learner autonomy, self-directedness and L2 learning

The term 'autonomy' was popularized in the 90's and has been interchangeably used with other terms like 'learner-centeredness', 'learner independence', 'discover learning' and 'self-directedness'. The most frequently cited definition of learner autonomy in language learning, however, is by Holec (1981). Holec (1981: 3) defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". He highlighted that the learner has a pivotal role in ascertaining the process of learning. More specifically, he describes that a learner who is autonomous should be able to take control of his own learning in making decisions in the following situations (Holec 1981: 3),

1. Determining the objectives
2. Defining the contents and progressions
3. Selecting methods and techniques to be used
4. Monitoring the procedure of acquisition (rhythm, time, place, etc)
5. Evaluating what has been acquired

He also makes a distinction between self-directed and autonomous learners. He explains that being self-directed does not automatically make a learner autonomous. In learning situations where objectives, contents and evaluations have been predetermined by the instructor, teacher or institution, it restricts the learner from being self-directed. Students should be able to make decisions in such conditions, thus enabling them to be autonomous. According to Holec (1981), self-directed means the degree of learning on one's own, while autonomy is the conscious capability to control learning. The varying degrees of self-direction, in turn, affect the degree of the learner's autonomy. Therefore, the role or the presence of the instructor in the learning process is not the yardstick for the learner's self-directedness; it is the learner who determines his self-directedness (Holec, 1981).

Learner autonomy is desirable to ensure that language students continue to learn outside the four walls of the classroom and without the intervention of an instructor. This is especially true in adult education, where acknowledging the responsibility to learn lies in oneself and not in other people, which is the essence of life-long learning. With Holec's definition of learner autonomy, it can be implied that the learner can apply knowledge outside the context of the learning setting. Little (1995) defines the meaning of autonomy for successful language students in two dimensions: pedagogical and communication. He proposes that learner autonomy in language learning is the negotiation between teacher and learner in determining the learning process. The teacher and learner should not be bound by the rigidity of assessment and course content. The instructor should themselves be autonomous and therefore impart learner autonomy in the use of the language.

Shi et al. (2023) elaborated that instructors prioritise class monitoring, chat participation and post quality during synchronous online learning. During asynchronous sessions, focus is more on assessments and discussion board contribution. Learner-centred instruction aims to foster the development of these autonomous skills while allowing students to self-regulate. Similarly, research on students' online interaction, self-regulation, and engagement indicates that low instructor interaction correlates with weaker social presence and reduced engagement, even when technical access is adequate (Masmali & Alghamdi, 2021).

Learner autonomy focuses on the learner making decisions in his learning process. However, in discussing learner autonomy in online learning, the issue of to what extent an instructor should intervene has been widely debated in previous research (Syafryadin et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2023; Masmali & Alghamdi, 2021). Knowles (1990) emphasizes that instructors ought to create a self-directed learning environment that is informal, mutually respectful, consensual, collaborative and supportive of these adult students. Alkaabi (2023) said that there is decreased student autonomy in terms of participation like camera-off and low interactions during online learning, thus affecting teaching effectiveness. Instructors often experience mixed feelings like frustration and lowered expectations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is a purely qualitative study. A series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with instructors were conducted to obtain qualitative data on their use of the online platform. A qualitative design allows an in-depth investigation to gain rich data on a certain phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2023). To provide contextual understanding of the institutional implementation of online learning, an interview was also conducted with the programme's online learning coordinator.

Research Participant

The research participants were the instructors of an online language programme of a local university. Six instructors were purposely selected for this study. According to Creswell and Poth (2023), for a phenomenological qualitative study, 5-10 participants are adequate to allow an in-depth investigation. The instructors are required to log into the online learning platform at least 10 times monthly for each class that they are teaching. The programme is a mixed-mode programme where students are required to log in online synchronously or asynchronously. Also, the students must attend a face-to-face class once a month. The instructors' teaching experience in teaching Diploma English as a Second Language proficiency courses using an online learning platform ranged from 4 to 5 years. The experience of the interviewed instructors is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Instructors interviewed for the research

Instructor	Experience (no of semesters taught)
1 (I1)	4
2 (I2)	8
3 (I3)	3
4 (I4)	10
5 (I5)	10
6 (I6)	6

The coordinator was not included as a primary participant in the analysis. Instead, the interview served as supplementary contextual data to provide insights into institutional expectations, support mechanisms, and challenges associated with online learning platform implementation. Information obtained from the coordinator was used to support the interpretation of the instructors' perspectives rather than as a separate source of findings. Supplementary interviews with key informants were used to provide contextual understanding and support data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interview questions were used during the interviews with the instructors. These types of questions were used because they allow flexibility for the researcher to adapt and adjust questions as the interview progressed. As suggested by Bryman (2004), based on the participants' answers to the semi-structured questions, the "...researcher asked further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies" (Bryman 2004:543).

Research procedure

The researcher began collecting data by contacting the instructors and making appointments through telephone calls and text messages. The time and venue of interviews were discussed for the convenience of the instructors. The interviews were done in soundproof rooms like the discussion rooms at the library and computer labs. All the interviews were audio recorded. The interviews lasted between 30 – 45 minutes. The researcher also obtained a written consent letter from the instructors for the interviews. The researcher also emailed the transcriptions to the participants for verification of accuracy.

Analysis of data

All the recorded interviews were recorded using an MP3 recorder and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Office Word. Then, the transcriptions were uploaded and analysed using a qualitative analysis software, NVivo. Using this software, the researcher was able to select quotations from the transcriptions and place them directly into tree nodes. These tree nodes represent themes that emerged as the researcher analysed each of the transcriptions. The thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was used in the analytic process to identify, examine and refine different themes and patterns of meaning with participants' data. The researcher read and re-read the interview transcripts, noting down data related to the research questions and the initial coding scheme. The initial coding scheme was refined throughout the data analysis process until the analysis was completed.

Findings and Discussion

The following section is the findings and discussion of the two research questions.

Research Question 1: ESL instructors' perception of their roles in facilitating ESL online reading engagement

For Research Question 1 an in-depth analysis of the interviews of the 6 instructors of the use of online platforms revealed the following themes and subthemes of their roles in facilitating ESL online reading engagement. The first main theme is the instructors believe that the role is to negotiate assessment-online instruction by which they constantly teach exam-oriented approach, teacher-centred and balance the demands of the syllabus and engagement.

1. Negotiating Assessment-Oriented Online Instruction

- a. Exam-oriented teaching
- b. Teacher-centred instructional practices
- c. Balancing syllabus demands and online engagement

The discussion of each of the subthemes are as follows,

a. Exam-oriented teaching

These instructors of this study held the view that the students expected the instructors to help them achieve their desired examination grades. Thus, fulfilling this expectation is the priority to the instructors. As one of the instructors described, “I am honestly being very exam oriented whenever I teach them because that’s what they aim for...” (I1). The students of this study, at the end of each semester, are expected to sit for a written examination, which reading is one of the components in the English Language Proficiency Courses examinations. The instructors dominantly used previous examination papers as exercises and references during face-to-face and online. Thus, face-to-face and online activities were coordinated around the demands of the examination. This supports the idea that instructors adapt their teaching practices and use of technology based on the pressure from the students (Harrington, Staffo, and Wright 2006). Shi et al. (2023) vary their instructional strategies based on whether it is synchronous or asynchronous. Asynchronous activities mostly in reading assignments and collaborative tasks.

To further illustrate this, the instructors were asked about their approach when teaching ESL reading. In achieving the goals of the examination, the instructors pointed out that they selected the skills that were predetermined as important for the students to acquire like recognizing topic sentences, main ideas, supporting details and contextual clues. Furthermore, the instructors indicated that they explained examination answering techniques in preparing students for the examination. These instructors select skills to be taught and teach examination answering techniques. This is mentioned by I3 and I4 as indicated in the following excerpts,

What I do with my... students are that I concentrate with the component that is examination I select items. I don’t teach everything, for instance reference words. Reference words are something important that comes up in exam. My focus will be on that other like contextual clues; those are important items for the exam.(I3)

I will give them past year questions and then you try and do the reading comprehension from past year question. But err but I also do ask them in terms of certain areas that are being tested for the reading component like in topic sentence they don’t know.(I4)

This approach seems to satisfy the students’ expectations since they are most concerned with whether they are able to improve their overall grades. Cavanaugh et al. (2022) discussed that instructors often select and simplify the course content to accommodate the limitations of time and the challenges faced in online learning. As socioconstructivist views on learning are shaped by surroundings and, in this case, online learning demands and expectations, the instructors have created and developed a learning environment that fits the students’ needs and expectations.

b. Teacher-centred instructional practices

From the interviews with the instructors, they consistently maintained that the main concern was to meet the requirements of the examination, and this is what was expected from them. Ideally, in online learning there is a dynamic interaction between teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches (Eksangkul & Liu, 2023; Shi et al., 2023). However, in the case of this study, the approach tends to lean towards teacher-centredness. One of the instructors in this study suggests that the instructors have the intention to do a lot of online learning activities that would involve learner commitment and participation. Nevertheless, according to these instructors, students demanded to be trained in examination skills. This is succinctly expressed in this interview excerpt,

I think online students you have to be... realistic. a lot of things you want to do with them but the core thing that is you have to make sure they can answer the exam. because if not it will pop up the frustration. (I1)

In addition, she described that face-to-face classes were focused on examination preparation, while the activities on the online-learning platform were support activities. This interview excerpt reveals how the online-learning platform is utilized,

I would say... err it's good to have online practices or reading but... you can't compete with face to face... in teaching reading... if you're teaching online students, because even though they call themselves online student... some of them don't go online at all... and very rarely... unless there's a reward for them... to give reward for each and everything, I don't think it can be done because we have tests and so on... (I1)

As Knowles (1975, 1990) has mentioned, especially to adult students, they have strong prior internal motivation to reach their goals. Consequently, they believe that they need to emphasize on assessment through close assistance from the instructors. The instructors in this study appeared to be aware of these expectations and therefore emphasised close guidance, continuous support, and assessment-oriented instruction to ensure that students remained engaged and academically successful.

c. Balancing syllabus demands and online engagement

As far as this study is concerned, this approach is justified since it is fulfilling what is expected by their students. It can be said that, apparently, these instructors strive to fulfil students' expectations, and this is evident in their comments on dividing the learning tasks based on the examination requirements. To what extent the instructors use the system depends on the demands of online learning, like students' expectations or the type of skill taught.

To give context to the study, the coordinator stated that the instructors of the online learning platform have experience in teaching similar courses face-to-face. They are selected to teach similar courses online. It is important to note that the online learning programmes are assessed by their written assignments and examinations. Because of these written tests or examinations, instructors as well as students prefer face-to-face instruction because they use examination papers as references and teaching materials. Discussing the techniques of answering the written paper is more practical if done face-to-face. This is consistent with Nurisma et al. (2025), instructors believe that assessment should be carried out face-to-face since online assessment close monitoring may be integral to ensure integrity. Hence, the coordinator stated that it "depends on instructors, some really teach reading online... Every week they will have lessons for the students" (C). She also described that some instructors listed websites for students to go to and do online activities, as in this interview excerpt below,

Because some instructors they only provide website... For reading comprehension purposes... they talk about... materials are not from instructors, but materials are taken from website... they refer to URL addresses whatever (C)

Thus, when it comes to online reading, the coordinator perceived that it depended on the instructors themselves to what extent the online learning platform is used.

The second main theme, the instructors perceived their roles as facilitating online participation and interaction by implementing structured online discussions and providing follow-up and feedback.

2. Facilitating online participation and Interaction

a. Structured online discussions

b. Importance of follow-up and feedback

In the interviews it was found that the instructors put emphasis on online participation when they were asked to describe students' online activities. These instructors developed online activities on their own to get students engaged.

a. Structured online discussions

Online participation, to these instructors, is as important as face-to-face learning. To urge the students to participate further, an instructor (I1) explained explicitly to students at the beginning of the semester what is considered online participation.

And for reading as well, each of the student for participation mark, from the first seminar itself, I inform them that their participation mark. (I1)

Another consideration that these instructors revealed is to increase online participation by giving specific instructions or training students with specific skills on how to participate in online discussions. As this excerpt of the interview reveals,

I do tell them that if you do not participate from time to time and I actually specified that answers like.”Yes”, “No,” “Okay” ...does not count as participation. Some of them just “Uhhh.” [noted].. “I see”. I tell them that does not count, if you want to discuss you really want to be online you give something constructive (I3)

This interview excerpt with I1, also stated the significance of specific instructions.

I highlight this is the kind of question you can ask... what, when, who... but I do tell them... do not ask to many who and make sure it's not a Yes and No question. Not only requiring a Yes or No... but you have to have at least one sentence to answer the question. (I1)

Instructions were given by the instructor so that the students are aware of the extent or the value of their online participation. It can be said that these instructors explicitly outlined and demonstrated the importance of online participation to the students.

Furthermore, the coordinator also observed that students' online participation may suffer if steps were not taken to increase online participation. She aptly summarized this reservation or perception of students' online participation in this excerpt,

If you were to ask me, I think adult students they want everything to be there. They don't want to go elsewhere. 'If I don't know this. I want the answer to be there. I don't want to look for elsewhere. I don't want to look into the dictionary. I don't want to go elsewhere' (C)

According to the coordinator, this dependency on the marks allocation and instructors to guide these students tended to continue into the following semesters. As a result, it was found that there was a need of constant encouragement and motivation from the instructors.

b. Importance of Follow-up and feedback

Realizing that students were not going to participate online unless proper and guided instructions were given, another active instructor contended that an instructor cannot simply leave the students to discuss on their own in discussion boards or online forums. She insisted that online activities needed to have immediate feedback and follow-up activities. When asked the significance of following up and constant feedback, she claimed that,

Err..yeah. better than just open discussion you know when you just open up 'Ok... today we discuss about reference' that method doesn't work. (I1)

There are similarities between the views of I3 and I1 on the need for students to be taught the skills to participate. Both instructors also agreed that students should not be left on their own to do activities. This finding corroborates with Sangeeta and Tandon's (2020) view that only structured feedback and improved interactions ensure students make full use of the features and tools that technology provides.

The instructors interviewed not only showed initiatives to make students engaged by developing online activities, but they also sought other means to increase participation. When there is a loophole in the online learning platform, they seek other alternatives, for instance, other messaging platforms. An active instructor used another chat platform that may be more accessible to encourage students to interact and participate online. To this instructor, when the chat feature of an online learning platform was not working, it was not an excuse to use the telephone. Students were still encouraged to go online by using another messaging platform. Her views on this are expressed in this interview excerpt,

Yes. And I don't encourage them to call me, especially when I'm teaching, I don't entertain phone calls so I just tell them you either e-mail me and if I'm online... you just give message there or either you can just simply text me, "Puan, I have an enquiry here... I really need to know when you are free to talk." then we'll get back... (I3)

Interestingly, she also pointed out that she would go back to the online learning platform and share what had been discussed outside the learning platform.

Not really because at the end of our message our chat. I usually tell them that I'm going to put up the answers or I'm going to give you the link to the website that can help you. So, it always goes back to the portal. I think it's not fair that only you know the answer. I want everybody else to know the answers too, right? [sharing] so I usually put up something else on the portal something like err "One of your classmates ask me this particular question and the answer to this is..." you know if one person asks that means there would be others who wondering the same yes, same thing... (I3)

This finding indicates that the instructor still views the learning platform as the main platform to learn and teach in spite of the problems faced with the system. In addition, the structured feedback increases online participation.

From another perspective, the coordinator also observed that the most common problem that she faced was "some instructors they wait... When students ask questions only, they post something" (C). The coordinator checked on the online instructors' participation weekly by viewing the statistics or frequency of login in the online learning platform. Quality feedback is essential to enhance students' engagement.

Research Question 2: Challenges in learner autonomy, assessment demands, and online teaching expectations

For Research Question 2, the 6 instructors shared the challenges faced in the online learning environment. The challenges are:

1. Passive learner behaviour
2. Preference for face-to-face teaching
3. Time limitations
4. Difficulty monitoring comprehension online

Passive learner behaviour

A recurring theme that emerged in the interviews with the instructors is the students' lack of motivation to participate not only in online reading, but also in overall online participation. These adult students needed to be given constant motivation to keep them engaged in learning, especially since these students are working adults. The instructors see the need for these students to be autonomous to make online learning beneficial for the students. Instructors in Al Kaabi et al. (2023) and Mokhtar's (2025) study also implicitly expected the students to be self-regulated and reach out for help independently, but the students chose to remain silent due to time pressure or technical issues. In the case of this study, the instructors expressed their frustrations that students seem to refuse to be autonomous and prefer the instructors to design and develop a structured learning approach. For instance, an active instructor maintained that it is the attitude of students that determines the extent of use of the online-learning platform, as this excerpt illustrates,

I don't face many problems the problems are not online learning platform the problems are more of the students they want to participate or not.. you know... (I4)

Another active instructor added that,

...in teaching reading... if you're teaching online students, because even though they call themselves online student... some of them don't go online at all and very rarely... (I1)

Furthermore, instructor I3 felt that the students should continue to learn language beyond the classroom by getting engaged online, as in this quote,

That's the problem for me. That's why I always tell them, 'You need this book' or 'You need to go onto this website then try to understand on your own' 'I cannot really be there for you' I do tell them this is. More of independent learning thing. If you think you can do this, okay, you are good. But if you can't be independent, I really can't help you there... hmm (I3)

To mitigate passive learner behaviour from the learners, the coordinator would list the problems encountered by senior instructors while conducting their face-to-face and online classes and share the best practices to new instructors. As she described in the interview, "I would suggest to them if you're teaching this code, because you know the problems already... this is how you go about tackling the students" (CI). Thus, according to the coordinator, the instructors could anticipate problems they might encounter and solve them immediately and effectively. This is a proactive approach to make instructors aware of the challenges. Even though Holec (1981) mentioned that learner autonomy entails self-directedness and determining one's own goals, this study revealed that students find it a challenge to be autonomous.

Preference face-to-face teaching

Another significant subtheme that emerged among the instructors is the preference for face-to-face instruction in teaching reading. All instructors have printed modules and textbooks to assist them in teaching the course. The instructors used these texts to teach reading face-to-face. Therefore, most reading activities were done during the face-to-face seminars, as this instructor expressed that,

Uhhh I would say depends actually sometimes if they don't understand in the seminar, they will ask again in the online learning platform but most explanation in reading I would prefer in the seminar... yeah (I2)

The instructors claimed that certain reading concepts or skills were better explained face-to-face. For example, teaching reference words was taught face-to-face by using modules or textbooks to assist the students grasp the concept easier.

In the seminar... but also if they made mistake I will have to stress again in the online learning platform because they need to understand singular and plural... right... if the question is singular, they have to give singular answer like 'it' doesn't mean 'them', isn't it? (I2)

The module... because there are past years questions over there... and then it's easy for me to say, the word 'they' over here refers to the Malaysian citizens... for example this line. I would easily okay now you put arrow to your anaphoric or cataphoric references... it's easier for me to show them... face to face... with the help of markers and whiteboards... easier... rather than to do it online. I don't know how to put the arrows and [show it to them?] Yes. and to type things again it will be ermm.. time consuming. (I5)

To these instructors, the online learning platform was used only to reemphasize what is taught in face-to-face seminars. According to Instructor 2 (I2), during the face-to-face seminars, she would have explained thoroughly and clearly, while the online learning platform was used to reiterate her teaching points to students. This perception is similar to instructors who use non-verbal cues as indications of understanding, which online learning platforms may not provide (Nurisma et al., 2025).

Time limitations

In addition, Instructor 5 (I5) remarked that explaining reference words to students using the online-learning platform would be time-consuming and therefore ineffective. Relying on texts and whiteboards in face-to-face classrooms was regarded as more efficient and practical to teach reading skills. Mokhtar et al. (2025) observed that providing a clear structure face-to-face, like checking comprehension through prompt questions, improves

comprehension. These immediate feedback loops allow negotiation of meaning and collective problem solving. They also observed that non-verbal cues instructors can use to gauge understanding via visual signs such as nodding and eye contact. This way, students receive immediate validation that boosts their confidence.

The focus of teaching reading is face-to-face; as a result, there is a lack of online reading activities. Nonetheless, the instructors were asked for their views on integrating online activities with teaching reading. Their response suggested that they do not perceive the potential or benefits of integrating technology, particularly in reading. Allocating and spending time online was impractical for the instructors. They were uncertain that the online-learning platform could be an enhancement to their teaching.

Instructor 2 (I2) disagreed that online discussion could be an approach to help students in reading or acquiring the targeted language. She contended that unless a substantial amount of time is spent then it would be an effective means. She illustrated an example of her class of 20 students, 2 hours spent online per week was insufficient. In addition, she had another 2 classes that required her attention as well. Another instructor (I5) expressed that using the online-learning platform could hamper teaching and learning. She stated that,

It will be very time consuming... the solution would lie on the e-learning materials like the computer assisted language learning software. where if we can provide that for the student upload for each reading comprehension, that is possible [but it's very time consuming, you mentioned.] Time consuming for us to describe why is this answer is such the best that I have done is to ask the student, the reading comprehension, to refer to the module and then ask them to answer online. But the setback is that errmm.. one student answer and then the other student saves the job of answering... so, it does not reach the target. (I5)

I5 suggested online learning materials for ESL reading; however, she maintained that explaining the reading texts online requires a large amount of time and would not benefit the students in the end. Moreover, she remarked that online activities tend to be monopolized by certain groups of students. Other students who were less active or participative online might be left out.

The coordinator acknowledged that instructors played a vital role in providing materials online; however, there was no specific guideline on how to develop the materials, as the coordinator stated that, "I don't know where they get them" (C). In the interview, the coordinator also expressed that ideally there should be a team that was solely responsible for developing materials, as she stated, "so my point here is that if a team of developers to develop the content material" (C). The coordinator highlighted that the instructors were content experts but not trained in computer programming to develop online materials, as she stated that, "The content is not a problem to them. But how do you put it online? I think that would be a problem... So if you have a template where instructors can put in or slot in material" (C). However, these suggestions proved to be time-consuming for the instructors.

Difficulty monitoring comprehension online

These instructors were further asked on the reasons for the preference for face-to-face instruction. Instructor 5 (I5) added that she preferred reading activities that were carried out during the face-to-face seminars since she was able to gauge and evaluate students' level of comprehension more precisely and immediately compared to doing it online.

Reading is that errmm for me one is that reference word it's difficult for me to teach them errmmmm secondly reading comprehension. How am I to know that they understand or not if in the classroom, I can see their facial expression. The smileys that they put on the web is not that helpful I can't see their faces do they sometimes our students the culture of Malay students is that they don't say they don't understand or else they look stupid or recorded stupid in the online-learning platform, right? so they don't want to do that... how am I to know if they understand the reading passage. So, I would just give clarification and hope that they will understand. (I5)

This instructor felt that she could explain a certain concept clearly face-to-face, especially when it involves teaching items that are pertinent to their examination. In addition, the instructor suggested that understanding of the text can be measured immediately through students' facial expressions or verbal discussions. The

immediate response that the instructors received from students face-to-face ensured that the taught skills were acquired. In contrast, she claimed that using features like forum discussions in online learning platforms might not reflect students' level of comprehension. For example, students' responses in discussion threads like "I agree" or "I understand" might not reflect the level of comprehension. The instructor felt that the online learning platform might not provide a supportive or non-threatening environment for these adult students.

CONCLUSION

Interviews with instructors revealed that they perceive the online learning platform as a convenient tool for both learning and teaching support. The flexibility offered by the platform was particularly valued. All in all, instructors demonstrated a positive attitude toward integrating technology into their teaching practices. They invested time in developing materials and activities to engage students. Notably, the study found that instructors emphasized the importance of follow-up and feedback activities to foster student engagement, especially among adult ESL learners.

Assessment is an integral component of any learning program for measuring achievement and performance. In this study, instructors prioritized achieving examination objectives and fulfilling assessment requirements. While they recognized the potential of online learning platforms, instructors adapted their pedagogical beliefs and practices to better accommodate and motivate students, aligning with established student expectations.

In addition, the instructors indicated that spending time conducting online activities and preparing materials was a challenge due to a lack of training. This seems to be a major obstacle that hinders these instructors from integrating technology as an effective language teaching tool. The instructors have the perception that integrating technology burdens their teaching and increases their responsibility. The instructors should be exposed to proper ICT skills and digital training. They are moderators or facilitators who could extend the use of the language outside the classroom.

All in all, the motivating factor for students to participate online is widely determined by the extent of the weight of assessment and the assistance from the instructors. This is because these adult students have professional and personal commitments, which may be factors that influence their learning commitment, like time spent online. Also, the problem of online participation is not isolated to reading online. It is a challenge for online learning as a whole. Therefore, instructors play a significant role in ensuring learning also continues outside the walls of the classroom. Instructors who embrace the use of technology in online learning usually portray personal innovativeness to engage students to use the online-learning platform.

Implications of the Study

It is found that adequate technical support from the management is usually the uppermost concern expressed by online learning instructors. With the technical problems faced, nevertheless, the instructors indicated that they sought other online platforms to compensate for the flaws in the system. Such effort is commendable, but the management of the institution needs to seek practical solutions and viable alternatives to support these instructors.

It is recommended that future studies include the institutions and management of the online learning platforms to provide multiple perspectives on this phenomenon. The success of online learning involves each party playing its roles effectively to deliver content to the students.

In a nutshell, the online-learning platform is used to connect with students outside the four walls of the classroom. The extent to which the online-learning platform plays a significant role as a means to ensure continuous use of the targeted language largely depends on the instructors.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is carried out by interviewing six instructors from one institution, which restricts the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. As a qualitative investigation, the study aimed to provide rich insights into instructors' experiences rather than produce generalizable conclusions. In addition, the study focused exclusively on ESL reading instruction in an adult distance-learning setting, which may differ from

other language skills and learning environments. Finally, changes in educational technologies and online learning practices over time may affect the contemporary applicability of some findings. Future studies involving multiple institutions and mixed methods approaches are recommended.

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