

# Impact of Online Learning on English-Speaking Skills among ESL University Students in Malaysia

Yuvavatania Dass<sup>1</sup>, Kishaeen Nambiar<sup>2</sup>, Shazreena Khan Kamaruzaman Khan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre of Language Studies, City University Malaysia, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Subject Specialist (English), MindSpace Woodleigh, Singapore

<sup>3</sup>Centre of Language Studies, City University Malaysia, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

The rapid transition to online learning in Malaysian universities has influenced how ESL students develop their speaking skills. This study investigates the impact of online learning on the English-speaking proficiency of Malaysian university students. A quantitative approach was employed, with a structured survey administered to 54 students from various faculties at a private university. The survey explored students' perceptions of how online learning supports communication, participation in discussions and confidence in speaking English. The data were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations to identify overall trends. The results suggest that online learning provides moderate support for improving speaking skills, especially through structured interactive activities and access to digital resources. However, many students reported neutral experiences regarding engagement and comfort during online interactions. Students reported key challenges such as grammatical inaccuracies, difficulty forming complex sentences and maintaining fluency and accuracy. Overall, the findings suggest that although online learning offers useful opportunities, careful instructional design and interactive strategies are essential to fully develop speaking proficiency. These insights contribute to research on digital language learning and offer recommendations for improving online English instruction in higher education.

**Keywords:** online learning, ESL learners, speaking skills, English proficiency, university students

## INTRODUCTION

English plays an important role in education, business and global communication, particularly in multilingual contexts like Malaysia. In Malaysia, proficiency in English is crucial for academic success and employability. Among the four language skills, speaking is often considered the most challenging for ESL learners due to anxiety, limited opportunities for practice and lack of confidence.

The integration of digital technologies has changed how language learning is delivered and experienced. Online learning, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, has become increasingly prevalent, providing flexible learning environments, digital collaboration, and access to a variety of instructional tools. However, its effectiveness in developing speaking skills remains uncertain.

Virtual classrooms provide opportunities for video conferencing, discussion forums and collaborative tasks; however, students may struggle to participate actively due to limited interaction, technological barriers and reduced face-to-face communication. This study focuses on Malaysian ESL university students, examining their perceptions, engagement, and challenges in developing speaking skills through online learning.

## Research Objectives

This present study, entitled “*Impact of Online Learning on English-Speaking Skills among ESL University Students in Malaysia*,” aims to address this gap by pursuing the following objectives:

1. Explore ESL university students' perceptions of online learning in improving speaking proficiency, particularly in fluency, accuracy, and communicative competence.
2. Examine students' engagement and confidence in speaking English during online classes.
3. To identify the common challenges faced by ESL university students in developing speaking skills in an online learning environment.

## Research Questions (RQ)

In line with the above objectives, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do ESL university students perceive the effectiveness of online learning in enhancing their English-speaking proficiency?
2. In what ways does online learning affect student engagement and confidence in virtual English-speaking activities?
3. What challenges do ESL university students encounter in developing speaking skills online?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of research on online language learning and provide insights into how virtual learning environments influence the development of speaking proficiency among ESL learners in higher education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Online Learning in Language Education

Online learning has become increasingly prominent in contemporary education, particularly following the shift to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alharbi, 2020). Digital platforms enable learners to access materials, participate in discussions and collaborate beyond physical classroom boundaries. The flexibility allows students to learn at their own pace and make use of additional digital resources to support language development.

Previous studies have shown that carefully structured online environments can enhance language learning through multimedia tools, task-based exercises, and synchronous or asynchronous communication (Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Musa & Abdul Rahim, 2024). While these activities can promote interaction and engagement, they may not fully replicate the immersion of traditional classrooms. Reduced social cues and limited spontaneous interaction can hinder speaking skill development (Ariff Albakri et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2018).

Effective online language instruction often depends on the use of purposeful communicative tasks, peer collaborations and scaffolded interaction, which encourage active participation (Khamis et al., 2024; Rasulovala, 2023).

### English Speaking Skills among ESL Learners

Speaking is a key component of language proficiency and is often identified as a major challenge for ESL learners due to limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation difficulties, and anxiety (Richards, 2015). Participation in communicative activities, including group discussions, role-playing, and presentations, can help improve fluency, accuracy, and confidence (Fauzi et al., 2022; Yahaya et al., 2024).

Technology-enhanced tools, such as multimedia and virtual reality, offer additional opportunities for immersive oral practice (Yan et al., 2024). Yet, the effectiveness of these tools depends on their integration into pedagogical strategies. Learner engagement, motivation, and autonomy continue to play an important role for the development of speaking skills (Khamis et al., 2024).

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## Challenges in Online Language Learning

Although online learning offers flexibility, it also presents several challenges that may affect oral proficiency. Technical issues, such as unstable internet connections and platform glitches, can disrupt learning (Ariff Albakri et al., 2023). Reduced face-to-face interaction and delayed feedback may inhibit spontaneous speech and conversational confidence (Fauzi et al., 2022; Musa & Abdul Rahim, 2024).

Interactive instructional design, incorporating real-world tasks and scaffolded speaking activities, plays a vital role in addressing these challenges (Rasulova, 2023; Teng & AlSaqqaf, 2025). Asynchronous tasks like video responses or discussion posts allow students to practice speaking at their own pace while receiving instructor feedback (Hampel & Stickler, 2015; Yahaya et al., 2024).

Overall, previous studies indicate that online learning can support speaking skill development when activities are designed to be interactive, communicative and appropriately scaffolded. Challenges persist, making learner-centred design essential for meaningful language acquisition.

## Summary of Literature Review

Existing studies indicate that online learning environments can support the development of English-speaking skills when they are intentionally designed to promote interaction, collaboration, and communicative practice. However, technology alone does not guarantee language improvement, pedagogical strategies incorporating authentic speaking tasks, multimedia tools, and ongoing feedback help bridge gaps in skill acquisition. Challenges including technological limitations, reduced social interaction, and learner anxiety continue to affect the need for adaptive instructional approaches and learner-centred design in online language education.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate the impact of online learning on English-speaking skills among ESL university students in Malaysia. The quantitative method was selected as it allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data to examine students' perceptions and experiences in online learning environments. Data were gathered through a structured survey questionnaire administered to university students from various academic disciplines. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify patterns, trends, and overall perceptions of the effectiveness of online learning in supporting the development of English-speaking skills. This methodological approach enables the study to provide insights into how online learning environments influence students' communication abilities and the challenges they encounter in virtual learning contexts.

The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies on online language learning and speaking proficiency.

### Research Design

This study used a quantitative approach with a structured online survey to examine students' perceptions of online learning and its impact on speaking skills. Quantitative methods were appropriate to collect and analyse numerical data, identify trends, and evaluate relationships between engagement, confidence, and perceived speaking improvement.

### Participants

The study included 54 students from a private Malaysian university across multiple faculties: Education, Business, Engineering, Allied Health Sciences, Hospitality, Architecture, Information Technology, and Creative Industries. Most participants were undergraduates with prior online learning experience.

## Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was used, with participants selected based on their availability and willingness. While this method allowed efficient data collection, the generalisation to all Malaysian ESL learners is limited.

## Instrument

A structured online questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographics, perceptions of online learning and speaking skills, and challenges in online communication. Responses were recorded using a Likert scale.

## Validity of Instrument

To ensure the validity, the questionnaire items were reviewed and adapted from established literature on online learning and ESL speaking skills. Content validity was further established through expert review, where experienced educators in English language teaching evaluated the questionnaire for clarity, relevance and appropriateness.

In addition, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of students to identify any ambiguities or issues in the questionnaire design. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the instrument before the actual data collection, which helped improve its validity and reliability.

## Reliability of Instrument

The reliability of the questionnaire was supported through internal consistency measures. The items in the questionnaire were designed based on constructs related to online learning and speaking skills. Consistency in item structure and scale design contributed to the reliability of the instrument. Previous studies using Likert-scale questionnaires in similar contexts have reported acceptable reliability levels (Pallant, 2020).

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics: frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These methods helped describe students' engagement, confidence, and perceived speaking proficiency.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings based on the data collected from 54 university students through a structured questionnaire. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: the demographic profile of the respondents, students' perceptions of the impact of online learning on English-speaking skills, and the challenges faced when communicating in English during virtual classes. Descriptive statistical analysis, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, was used to interpret the data and identify patterns in students' responses. The results show how online learning environments influence students' communication abilities, engagement, and overall speaking development among ESL university students in Malaysia.

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 54)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	22	40.7
	Female	32	59.3
Education Level	Diploma	11	20.4

	Bachelor’s Degree	43	79.6
<b>Online Participation</b>	Yes	48	88.9
	No	6	11.1

**Gender Distribution of Respondents (n=54)**

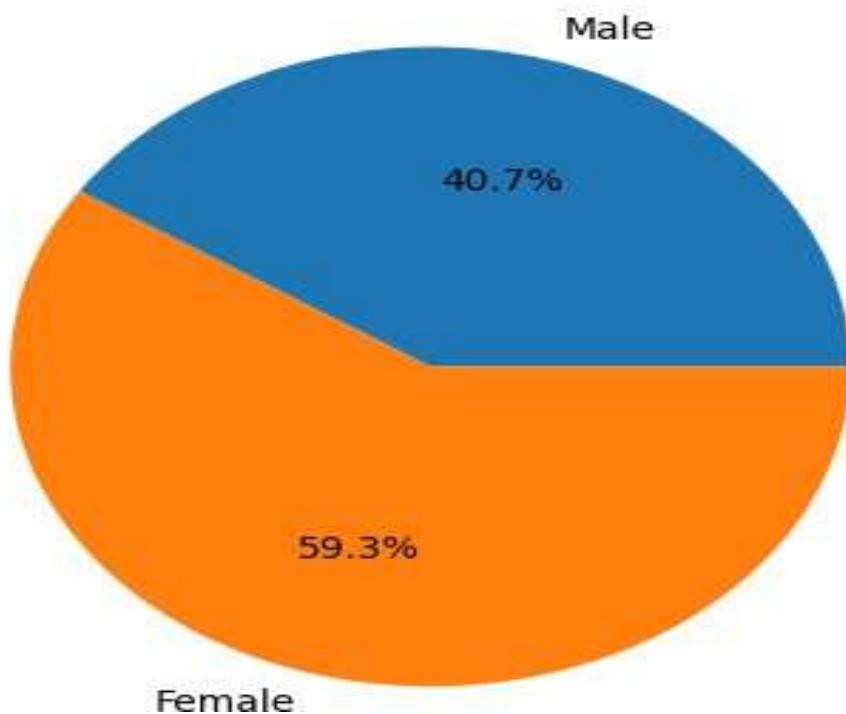


Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

The demographic analysis (Table 1) shows that the most of participants were female (59.3%) and pursuing bachelor’s degrees (79.6%), reflecting a predominance of undergraduates in the sample. Most respondents (88.9%) reported regular participation in online classes, suggesting that the findings largely reflect students with consistent exposure to virtual learning environments. This demographic composition helps in interpreting the perceptions of online learning and its impact on speaking skills.

**Impact of Learning on Speaking Skills**

Table 2 Students’ Perceptions of Online Learning and Speaking Skills. Students generally perceived online learning as moderately beneficial, with interactive activities reported as the most helpful for enhancing communication.

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean
Virtual classes enhance comfort in dialogue	24.1	64.8	11.1	1.87
Virtual classes enhance communication skills	27.8	55.6	16.7	1.89
Speaking skills improve through classroom activities	51.9	35.2	13.0	1.61
I can speak English fluently through online classes	38.9	40.7	20.4	1.81
I use internet resources to support communication	51.9	29.6	18.5	1.67

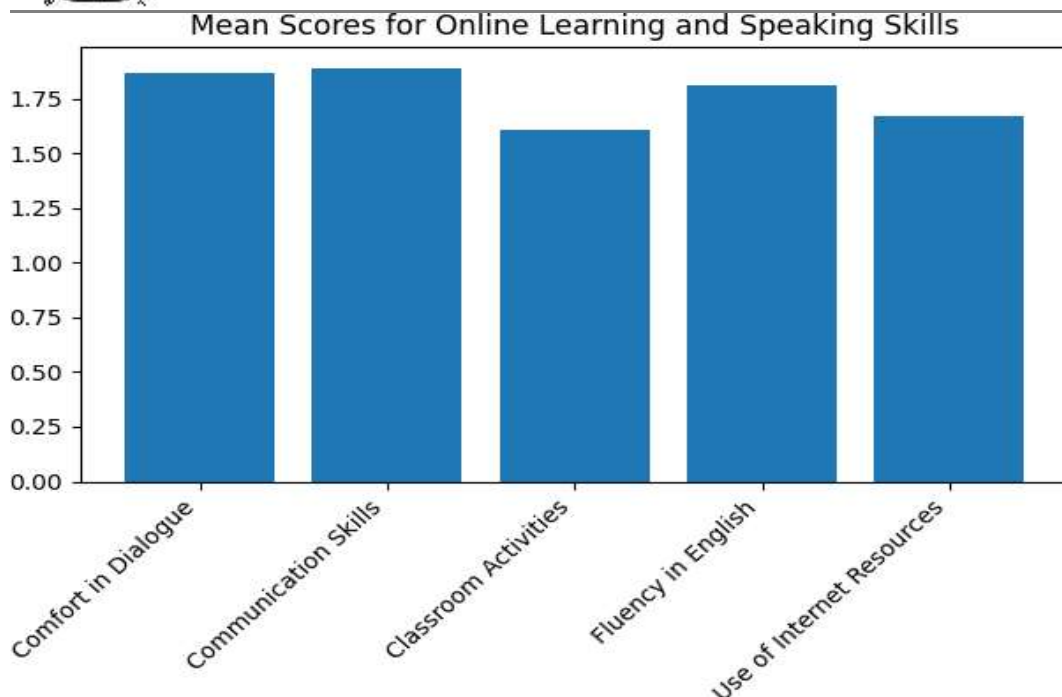


Figure 2: Mean Scores of Perceived Speaking Skill Development

As shown in Table 2, students generally perceived online learning as moderately beneficial for developing English-speaking skills. The highest agreement was observed for statements related to interactive classroom activities (mean = 1.61), highlighting the effectiveness of structured online tasks in promoting communication. Meanwhile, perceptions of comfort in dialogue and fluency in English were largely neutral (means = 1.87 and 1.81, respectively), indicating that while online platforms provide practice opportunities, some students may still experience hesitation or reduced confidence during virtual interactions. The moderate use of internet resources to support communication (mean = 1.67) further suggests that students are willing to supplement classroom activities with digital tools, although the degree of engagement varies. Overall, these results indicate that while online learning can facilitate the development of speaking skills, targeted strategies may be necessary to address confidence, fluency, and active participation.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that online learning environments provide opportunities to develop English speaking skills through interactive activities, digital resources, and collaborative tasks. Interactive exercises, such as group discussions and role-playing, support communicative practice in virtual classrooms (Fauzi et al., 2022; Yahaya et al., 2024).

However, many students expressed neutral perceptions regarding engagement and comfort during discussions, likely due to limited interaction, technological challenges, and fewer opportunities for spontaneous communication (Ariff Albakri et al., 2023; Musa & Abdul Rahim, 2024).

Challenges reported included grammatical errors, difficulty constructing complex sentences, and maintaining fluency, which aligns with prior research highlighting difficulties ESL learners face in speaking proficiency (Richards, 2015; Khamis et al., 2024). Effective online instruction should include scaffolded activities, peer collaboration, and continuous feedback to support learners' confidence and oral competence.

These findings seem to reflect the Malaysian ESL context, where students may not always have enough opportunities for real spoken interaction in online settings. This suggests that beyond using technology, the way learning activities are designed also plays a prominent role in supporting meaningful communication. This is consistent with previous studies, but it also shows that student engagement in online settings may vary depending on how interaction is facilitated.

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## Limitations of the Study

1. **Sample Size** – The study included only 54 respondents, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of ESL learners in Malaysia.
2. **Single Institution Context** – Data were collected from one private university, restricting diversity in terms of academic background and institutional environment.
3. **Self-Reported Data** – The study relied on participants' perceptions, which may be influenced by personal bias or social desirability rather than actual speaking performance.
4. **Descriptive Analysis Only** – The research used only descriptive statistics, without inferential analysis to examine relationships between variables such as engagement, confidence, and speaking proficiency.
5. **Lack of Qualitative Data** – No interviews or observations were conducted, which limits deeper insight into students' experiences and challenges in online learning.

These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted cautiously and highlight the need for future studies using larger, multi-institutional samples and mixed-method approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of online learning's impact on ESL speaking skills.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights that online learning provides moderate support for the development of English-speaking skills among ESL university students in Malaysia. While digital platforms offer opportunities for interaction and access to learning resources, challenges related to engagement, confidence, and fluency remain evident.

The findings emphasise that the effectiveness of online learning is highly dependent on instructional design and the integration of interactive and communicative activities. Enhancing student participation, providing continuous feedback, and incorporating meaningful speaking tasks are essential to improving oral proficiency in virtual learning environments.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on online language learning and offers practical insights for educators seeking to improve ESL instruction in higher education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, educators are encouraged to incorporate interactive and student-centred activities such as group discussions, role plays, and task-based learning to enhance speaking practice in online environments. The use of both synchronous and asynchronous tools, including video recordings and discussion forums, can further support student engagement and confidence. Institutions should also ensure that adequate technical support and training are provided to facilitate smooth implementation of online learning platforms. Future research should consider larger sample sizes, include multiple institutions, and adopt mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into ESL learners' speaking development in online settings.

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