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CONTENTS

Covid-19 Pandemic: The Challenges that Malaysian Secondary School Students Faced with Online Learning

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Abstract

Most schools in Malaysia had been temporarily shut down as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has changed the norm of education in schools dramatically whereby most teaching and learning were done on digital platforms. With this unplanned and sudden transition from traditional classroom settings to online learning, some are wondering whether these students could adapt to this transition. Therefore, this study focuses on challenges faced by Malaysian secondary school students with online learning.

Keywords. Online learning, Covid -19 pandemic, secondary school students

Introduction

Covid-19 outbreak has spread all over the world including Malaysia. The Movement control order (MCO) and Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) were implemented by the Malaysian government to curb Covid-19 in this country. As a result of that, most schools in Malaysia were temporarily shut down for almost 4 months. Teachers, concerned about completing the syllabus, transitioned from face-to-face learning to online learning via digital platforms. Singh and Thurman (2019) defined online learning as education being delivered in an online environment through the use of the internet for learning and teaching. In other words, internet connectivity is used to enhance the learning environment in online learning. However, online learning had been challenging. Fully online learning during MCO and CMCO was Malaysia's first experience involving a nationwide learning on such platform. Therefore, it is more likely that many challenges were encountered.by Malaysian secondary school students. This study was conducted to identify the challenges that Malaysian secondary school students faced with online learning.

Methodology

An online survey was conducted to identify the challenges faced by secondary school learners in online learning. The survey comprised questionnaires which were distributed to secondary schools' students in Malaysia from March 15 to May 25, 2020 that was almost two months after schools were forced to close due to Covid-19 pandemic. The survey form was organized into several sections that include socio-demographic information of respondents, information related to internet connectivity for online learning, identification of problems faced by respondents in online learning and respondents' acceptance and readiness of online learning. The information obtained and data collected were processed and analysed using descriptive statistics such tables and percentages.

Results and Discussion

The survey was conducted among 3,584 secondary school students throughout the country. Respondents were from various locations where 66.52 per cent were from urban sites, 27.34 per cent from rural sites and 6.14 per cent, from remote areas. This composition was reflective of a fair

representation of the population. The respondents who participated in the survey represented 54.21 per cent of the low-income earners (B40), 31.03 per cent medium income earners (M40) and 14.76 per cent high income earners (T20). In term of racial breakdown, the sample consisted of 78.13 per cent Malays, 9.04 per cent Indians, 7.81 per cent Chinese while the remaining 5.02 percent included other races.

A total of 92.80 per cent of the respondents stated that their schools conducted online learning while 7.20 per cent said that their schools did not conduct online classes. In terms of accessing the online learning platform, one needs stable internet connection. However, the survey showed that 12.05 per cent of the respondents did not have access to the internet while the majority (85.30 per cent) came from B40 families followed by 13.10 per cent from M40 families and 1.60 per cent from T40 families. The findings suggest that not all students were able to participate in online learning conducted by their schools especially those who came from low income families because they had no internet access. Among respondents who had internet access, 9.2 percent of the respondents said their access was slow while 63.6 percent reported that they had moderate internet speed. Only 27.2 percent said that they had a strong internet connection.

Student feedback on Online Learning Enjoyment

Students were also asked to respond whether they enjoyed their online classes. A slim majority of respondents (50.60 percent) stated they did so. The factors stated are displayed in Table 1. From the students' responses, the main contributing factor (21.12 per cent) is they experienced a new learning environment. For most students, this is their first-hand experience as online students and the findings show that many of them had positive experiences with online learning.

Another reason that led to this enjoyment was the flexible learning time and space (17.47 per cent). This was mostly due to the fact that with online learning, they were not bounded by time and space. Also, online learning allowed for students to learn at their own learning pace, set their own schedule and participated in classes from anywhere. This finding is consistent with the argument made by Poole (2000) that online learning provides flexible ways to learn without time and place constraints. Moreover, Petrides (2002) asserted that flexible learning environment is the strength of online learning.

Another factor that made students enjoyed learning online was that they could repeat the lesson if necessary, to get a better understanding (16.46 percent). With online learning, the students were able to review and repeat the notes or exercises as many times as needed. Other factors included easy access to information (16.29 percent), conducive learning environment (12.49 percent), no school-presence requirement (8.59 percent), and finally eased in asking the teacher questions without embarrassment or fear (7.58 percent).

Table 1
Student feedback on Online Learning Enjoyment

Reasons for students' enjoyment over online learning	Per cent
Experience new learning environment	21.12
Flexible learning time and space	17.47
Possibility repetition if necessary	16.46
Easy access to information	16.29
Conducive learning environment	12.49
No school presence requirement	8.59
Ease in asking the teacher questions without embarrassment or fear	7.58

Student Feedback on the Lack of Enjoyment in Online Learning

While a slim majority of the respondents enjoyed online classes, 49.40 per cent said that they did not. As shown in Table 2, the main reason was they were not being able to have direct interaction with their teachers (27.96 per cent). These findings suggested that most students were more comfortable learning in a physical classroom setting where face-to-face interaction with their teachers was possible. The lack of direct interaction with friends (18.48 per cent) was another factor that contributed to not enjoying studying online learning. These findings suggested that most students viewed that interaction among friends in the classroom as vital to the learning process. Stodel et al. (2006) reported that students felt that the bond with other students in online classes was not as strong as that of face-to-face classes. The results obtained concur with the previous work carried out by Pozgaj & Kneevic

(2007) where the lack of direct interaction was seen by students as the biggest disadvantage with online learning. Moreover, Howland & Moore (2002) stressed that the communication between instructor and students and between students was an important issue. The students felt unconfident with supervision and guidance when the feedback from instructions was delayed. Next, 16.86 per cent said that another reason was they took longer time to complete assignments.This was probably due to the fact that they took extra time to study and understand online lessons on their own. Other reasons included having poor internet connectivity (15.33 per cent), working long hours on the computer (13.88 per cent) and sharing digital devices with other family members (7.49 per cent).

Table 2
Student Feedback on the Lack of Enjoyment in Online Learning

Reasons causing students not to enjoy over online learning	Per cent
No direct interaction with teachers	27.96
No direct interaction with friends	18.48
Taking longer time to complete assignments	16.86
Poor internet connectivity	15.33
Working long hours on the computers	13.88
Need to share digital devices with other family members.	7.49

Student feedback on Online Learning-Stress

Another critical finding of the survey was that almost half of the respondents (44.50 per cent) reported being stressed when studying online. The reasons causing them stressed in studying online are presented in Table 3. The survey showed that the main factor attributed to this was difficulties in understanding lessons (26.37 per cent). Other factors included being overburdened with work (22.14 per cent), poor internet connectivity (16.62 per cent), unconducive learning environment (14.54 per cent), working long hours on the computer (13.39 per cent) and the need to share digital devices with other family members (6.94 per cent). These responses were similar to the reasons given for not enjoying online classes, thus contributing to their stress levels.

Table 3
Student feedback on Online Learning-Stress

Reasons causing students stress over online learning	Per cent
Difficulties in understanding lessons	26.37
Overburdened with work	22.14
Poor internet connectivity	16..62
Unconducive learning environment	14.54
Working long hours on the computers	13.39
Need to share digital devices with other family members.	6.94

In assessing the students' readiness to accept online learning as another form of learning, the survey found that majority of the students (71.60 per cent) were ready to learn online as a new norm in the current times. However, 28.40 per cent said they were not ready for online learning. This is a significant finding because Dangol and Shrestha (2019) emphasized that there is a positive relationship between students' readiness and educational achievement among school students. They stressed that the absence of learning readiness spoils the teaching learning process.

Future Research

This research focused on the challenges that Malaysian students faced with online learning during the pandemic. Future research should look at the challenges that Malaysian school teachers faced with online learning during the pandemic. The findings of the teacher feedback would be useful for improving online teaching for the teachers, and invariably, online learning for the students. Such a research is very much needed at this point in time.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that many Malaysian secondary school students struggle with online learning. They face some difficulties in adapting to this new normal of learning. Teachers also play an important role in online learning. Teachers must be creative enough to put online lessons in an effective way to get students engaged with their learning progress. Yengin et al. (2010) emphasized that active learning, continuous motivation and feedback are some learning and teaching strategies that can be implemented to make sure active involvement and participation of students during and after online classes.

Despite the challenges that Malaysian secondary school students face with online classes, a substantial number of them are ready to accept online learning as another form of learning. This is a key factor in ensuring the effectiveness of online learning. As highlighted by Dangol and Shrestha (2019), students' learning readiness contributes highly to students' learning achievement.

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