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CHALLENGES FACED BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN MANDARIN LANGUAGE ODL DURING MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Due to the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the transformation from traditional face-to-face classes to the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode has affected basic Mandarin learners in higher learning institutions. After studying Mandarin level 1 through face-to-face classes for only three weeks, students were forced to adjust and adapt to ODL within a short period of time. This situation had posed challenges on both lecturers and students that had also affected their teaching and learning quality during the MCO period. While lecturers are required to put in intensive effort and time to design teaching materials, students also need to equip themselves with sufficient technical proficiency to decode and comprehend the course materials. Hence, a study on the challenges faced by students during the ODL mode under this circumstance is crucial to establish a better understanding on the possibility of ODL's sustainability as a necessary component in learning Mandarin henceforward. A questionnaire was designed for this study to survey different criteria of challenges, namely adaptability struggles, technical issues, computer literacy, time management, and self-motivation. By identifying the challenges faced by students in ODL and providing solutions through proper initiatives, it will help to apprehend and further satisfy students' needs in studying Mandarin through the ODL mode.

Keyword: Challenges, Undergraduate Students, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Mandarin language, Movement Control Order (MCO)

INTRODUCTION

Since the rise of COVID-19 cases in March 2020, the Malaysian government has imposed Movement Control Order (MCO) thus prompting Open Distance Learning (ODL) as the new teaching and learning method. It is aimed to overcome the difficulty of suspending classes without suspending learning in the local education system. Both teachers and students are still adapting to such a new shift, where local education institutions are switching majority of their courses to the ODL mode. Technological devices have replaced the traditional face-to-face sessions and become the teaching and learning medium between teachers and students. Even though ODL is the most welcomed alternative for our education system under such circumstances, which had proven to considerably reduce the pandemic's direct impact towards teaching and learning, the challenges that have been brought upon by this brand-new educational method should also be highlighted. Lederman (2020) for example stated that due to the COVID-19 crisis, teachers and students both find themselves in the situation where they feel compelled to embrace the digital academic experience in the online teaching and learning process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted traditional face-to-face teaching and learning sessions, but it has also instigated the prominence of ODL. This paradigm shift has been deemed as hasty and has not been well-planned beforehand, thus causing a variety of issues and challenges to teachers and students who practice the ODL method. Kebritchi et al. (2017) for example stated that the challenges of ODL can be divided into three major themes, which are: educators' issues, learners' issues, and content issues. In terms of educators' issues, the challenges faced are due to inadequate ODL knowledge to cope and keep up with such comprehensive shift from an offline mode to an online mode. It means that educators need more preparation time to change and adjust their teaching method and time management accordingly. They also encounter challenges in managing online learning platform while developing subject contents with insufficient technical support, which may cause disruption to the daily teaching load and learning patterns of both teachers and students. In terms of learners' issues, they also faced challenges in their learning process, such as anxiety towards ODL, difficulties in overcoming obstacles towards becoming an independent learner, a lack of suitable learning materials and resources, as well as poor internet connection, inadequate learning facilities, and a lack of communication between teachers and students (Pragholapati, 2020). There are many studies regarding online learning to date, especially about the challenges faced by teachers and students based on their teaching and learning backgrounds. However, such studies rarely based on the ground of language teaching and learning, specifically concerning Mandarin as a foreign language, along with the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, in a more effective and successful teaching and learning process of Mandarin language, which involved listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, teachers' ability to provide immediate supervision and guidance in a face-to-face class session is highly required. Hence, shifting to ODL will certainly be more challenging for Mandarin language beginner-level learners.

This study aims to understand the variety of challenges faced by students in their Mandarin learning process through ODL based on feedbacks collected from a questionnaire. Such understanding will provide an insight to evaluate the effectiveness of ODL in Mandarin learning. Due to the uncertainty of the current pandemic situation, it is highly possible that the comprehensive implementation of ODL

will be extended in the future. Students' feedback can be used as a reference for lecturers and educational institutions to improve their method and strategy on teaching and learning hereafter. Thus, several suggestions on improving ODL's effectiveness in Mandarin teaching and learning as well as upholding students' benefits will be discussed, after a detailed analysis of the data collected from the participants through the questionnaire.

Purpose of Study

This study has two purposes: (a) to explore challenges faced by Mandarin language students in completing their teaching and learning through the ODL method, and (b) to identify the possible criteria to overcome these challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The teaching and learning process in local higher education institutions has experienced significant changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, since interactions between teachers and students are affected. As the pandemic situation remains fluid, most higher education institutions in Malaysia have been forced to immediately stop any traditional face-to-face classes from 18 March 2020 until now; they are being restricted only to teaching through the ODL sessions. This measure is to ensure uninterrupted educational process while avoiding further spread of the virus.

ODL is beneficial due to its flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and life-based education opportunities. Its focus is to remove barriers in learning and allow students to conduct self-learning with flexible and achievable learning opportunities. Prior to the pandemic, some universities have started to adopt E-learning as an additional teaching method, but most teachers or students were not yet fully ready for a comprehensive online teaching and learning experience.

Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, and Zebon (2015) identified that ODL learners were challenged with a range of obstacles in their course of studies. The most reported challenges were lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and the use of ICT, ineffective feedback, and lack of study materials. Thus, the unplanned, unexpected, and massive shift from the traditional to the fully online learning environment in the context of the epidemic certainly has a serious impact on the entire education system and has changed the teaching and learning modes of teachers and students, which in turn has created learning challenges for students. This is further supported by Bao (2020) which stated that since this online teaching "migration" is implemented quickly during the outbreak of COVID-19, students' anxiety needs to be relieved in various ways to ensure that they can actively and effectively engage in ODL.

In just over a year since the pandemic, there has been several studies examining the challenges that students face during ODL. In an investigation by Amir et al. (2020), only less than half of the dentistry students in Indonesia preferred distance learning, while the challenges faced by students during their ODL sessions can be categorised as: unstable internet connection, extra financial burden to buy internet quotas, and internal factors such as time management and difficulty to focus while learning online for a longer period. This is in line with Ag-Ahmad (2020) which indicated that the students

faced problems with their internet connectivity that happened a few times a week. In addition, the students also experienced personal issues like feeling unmotivated, having a lot of distractions at home, and a lack of self-study skills.

According to Simamora (2020), there are many responses about the challenges experienced by the students while studying online, such as being bored with online learning after the first two weeks of learning from home, economic conditions or conditions because students cannot afford to buy internet data to access online learning sessions and complained about devices that do not support their online learning sessions. In addition, students' emotional disturbances manifest themselves because of changes in mood or being given too much homework that is deemed as ineffective. The availability of WI-FI and internet data packages are another determining factors for the continuity of online learning, as in practice, it is also found that there is limited internet access for certain students either due to their geographical location or financial issues.

Qamar et al. (2021) mentioned that the challenges faced by the students during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic can be classified to four types: non-learning environment at home, self-efficacy or self-determination, time management, and lack of motivation. Although Allo (2020) mentioned that the ESL learners' perception is positive on online learning and learners revealed that online learning is good and very helpful amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the study also highlighted issues such as the availability of internet access, financial, and online learning implementation issues.

Although it has been one-and-a-half-year year since the onset of the pandemic, research on the challenges faced by Mandarin learners in their ODL sessions is entirely relevant, even though the pandemic has attracted much scholarly attention. This study specifically examines the perceptions of students regarding the challenges that they have experienced in Mandarin language through the ODL method. Through the investigation of these challenges, it is hoped that this paper will provide recommendations to overcome them in improving future ODL teaching models thus ensuring a better quality of the students' learning outcomes. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges that students experienced from the ODL implementation in Mandarin language teaching and learning during the MCO period?
2. What are the criteria of the ODL method that can be improved in Mandarin language online teaching and learning?

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out to investigate and describe challenges of ODL as experienced by 77 tertiary students from a local university in Perak, Malaysia. An online questionnaire was designed to collect data on the students' self-reflection of their Mandarin language ODL experiences and the relevant issues that arise in their online learning experiences during the MCO period in Malaysia. All the students are from bachelor's degree programmes and were randomly chosen as the sample of this study. Their ages range from 18 to 24 years old, and they were taking a course called 'Introductory to Mandarin I' course. They were divided into four different lecture groups taught by different lecturers. However, the syllabus, teaching materials, and assessment methods involved are similar throughout the four lecture groups.

A questionnaire was developed, and the responses is kept confidential. Students were asked to login to Google forms to fill in the responses through a link sent by the lecturers via WhatsApp. A clear instruction was communicated that the results of the questionnaire will not affect their grades. The questionnaire consists of two sections, Section A is for “Personal Information” and Section B is on “Challenges Faced by Students in Mandarin’s Open Distance Learning (ODL) Sessions During COVID-19 MCO Period”. Section B consists of 17 items measured by using the five-point Likert scale (ranging from one to five), where five indicates the highest level of a certain indication, and one represents the lowest. The data collected from the questionnaire were descriptively and statistically analysed by using Microsoft Excel.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In line with the theory of outcome-based education, a teaching and learning module is suggested to be more student-centred, valuing students’ personality development, and focusing on the cultivation of their ability and capability attainment after the completion of their education. However, a paradigm shift towards ODL as the sole implementation method of the outcome-based education may severely impact its expected vision and result. Hence, a study on the challenges faced by students during ODL in a pandemic era is crucial to establish a better understanding on the possibility of ODL’s sustainability as a necessary component in learning Mandarin. For this study, a questionnaire consists of 17 questions was designed to survey different criteria of the challenges, including adaptability struggles, comfortability, confidence, technical issues, computer literacy, participation and communication, time management, self-discipline, persistency, self-motivation, and focus.

A) Adaptability Struggles, Comfortability and Confidence

A complete conversion from the traditional face-to-face interaction in classrooms to computer-based teaching and learning sessions in virtual classrooms has entirely altered the learning experiences for students. Students’ resistance to such sudden and out-and-out change did not allow them to sufficiently accommodate to the online learning environment thus causing adaptability struggles. When asked in Question Fifteen, 54.55% (42) of the students confirmed that they had no problem in adapting to the changes from traditional face-to-face classes to ODL sessions, while 24.68% (19) of the students showed only a fair level of adaptability. However, it should be an alarming fact that 20.78% (16) of the students faced problems in adapting to the changes. Such result represents that barely half of the student populations surveyed can adapt fluidly, while one out of five students has struggled with adaptability issues.

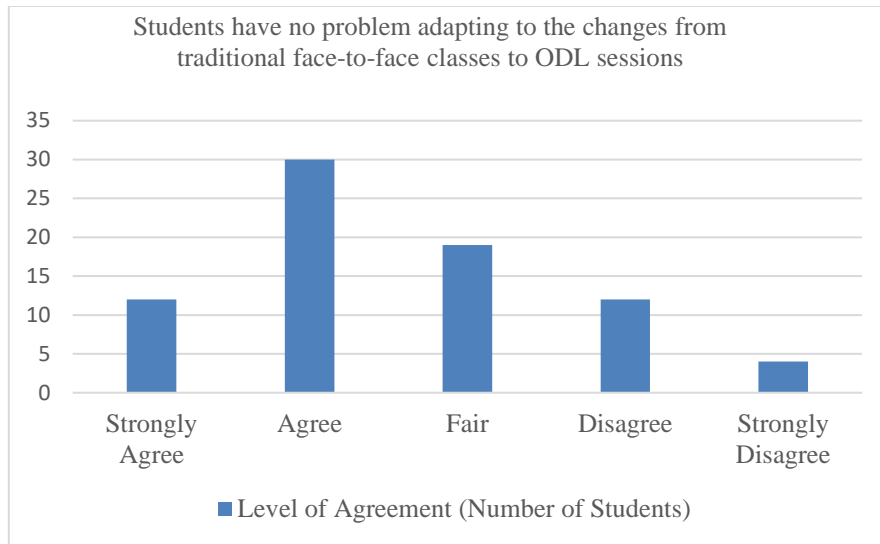


Diagram 1: Students do not have problem adapting to the changes from traditional face-to-face classes to ODL sessions.

Another criteria that is related to students’ adaptability struggles is their comfortability level with ODL. Question Sixteen shows that only 38.96% (30) of the students agreed that they were comfortable with the shift towards ODL sessions, while 36.36% (28) of the students implied a fair level of comfortability, and 24.68% (19) of the students did not feel comfortable with this change. The result indicates that more than half of the student population surveyed still feels comfortable with the traditional face-to-face classes in learning Mandarin.

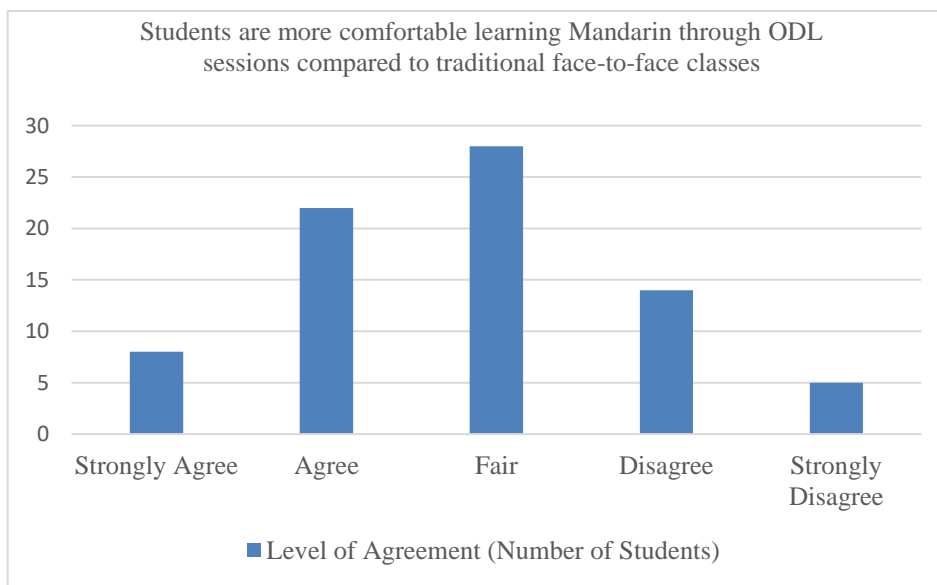


Diagram 2: Students are more comfortable learning Mandarin through ODL sessions compared to traditional face-to-face classes.

Students’ confidence level is also a reflection of their adaptability struggles and comfortability in learning Mandarin through ODL sessions. The result for Question Seventeen shows that 49.35% (38) of the students felt confident in completing a basic level Mandarin course by fully utilizing ODL sessions only. 32.47% (25) of the students indicated a fair level of confidence, and 18.18% (14) of the students were lacking such confidence. The result matches with the figure collected for both criteria analysed above, in which only around half of the student populations surveyed shows a high

confidence level in completing a basic level Mandarin course by fully utilizing ODL sessions only.

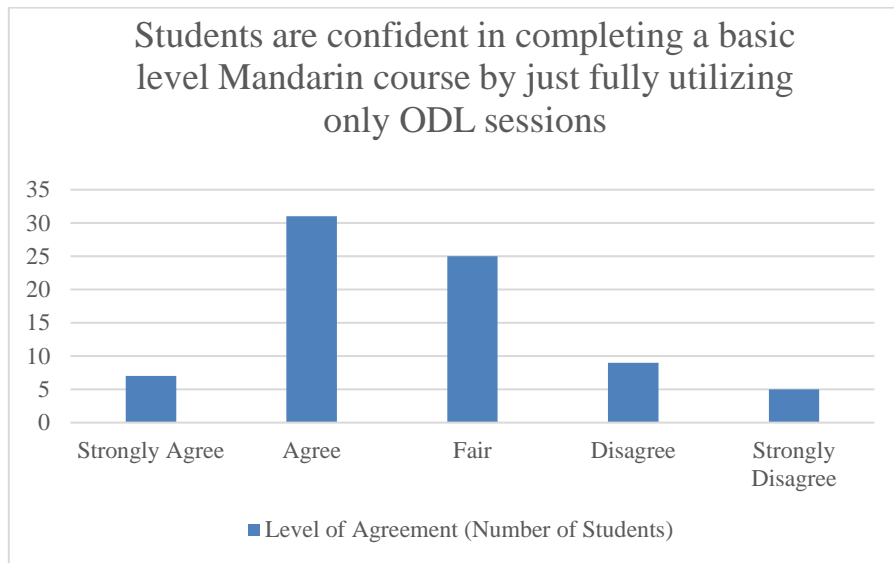


Diagram 3: Students are confident in completing a basic level Mandarin course by just fully utilizing only ODL sessions.

In short, by comparing the three different criteria above, there is a direct correlation between students' adaptability struggles and their comfortability in utilizing ODL in learning Mandarin. Both results indicate that less than half of the students' population surveyed can both truly adapt to and feel comfortable towards shifting from the traditional face-to-face classes to ODL sessions. In addition, the students' confidence in ODL's effectiveness as the sole teaching and learning method for learning Mandarin is reflected in the moderate level as well. Factors contributing to such lacklustre responses may include hasty, sudden, and the all-inclusive nature of the implementation policy, where students were not given enough time to be mentally prepared. Similar to the experience of a culture shock, which generally moves through several different phases such as frustration, adjustment, and acceptance, students need more time to sort out their emotions and perception towards the sudden announcement of the MCO and paradigm changes in the teaching and learning methods. As the traditional face-to-face learning method is the mainstream method and has been deeply rooted and firmly established in our education system since pre-school and primary school levels, students generally had limited exposure to a complete ODL session before this period. While only be given less than a month to adjust to this paradigm shift, students were hardly able to adapt to or even feel comfortable and confidence towards ODL sessions in Mandarin learning, thus posing higher challenges for the other criteria of this study.

B) Technical Issues and Computer Literacy

To ensure smooth continuation in teaching and learning during the pandemic period, the implementation of ODL is necessary and imperative, even though it also unexpectedly accelerates the digital transformation of our education system. However, a significant number of local students are yet to be equipped with a high-speed internet connection or technological devices that are required for ODL sessions. Selvanathan et al. (2020) highlighted limited accessibility to the internet as one of the issues that requires consideration for online learning sessions. Hence, students are facing challenges in going live for virtual learning sessions and in navigating other online platforms, such as the Course Management System (CMS) that requires a stable internet connection. A difference in internet

connection can significantly affect the quality of the online class sessions attended and their learning process.

From the data collected in Question One, the result indicates that 51.95% (40) of the students could easily access the internet as needed for their Mandarin’s ODL sessions anywhere and anytime. 31.17% (24) of the students showed a fair level of internet accessibility while 16.88% (13) of the students did not have such convenience. The result from Question Three shares the similar outcome as Question One, with 45.45% (35) of the students claimed that they had strong and stable internet network to access ODL sessions, while 27.27% (21) of the students showed both fair levels of agreement and disagreement to the claim, respectively. In other words, it is estimated that one in every five students is not well equipped with a fast and stable internet connection that enables them to participate in ODL sessions satisfactorily. This raises concerns as such a projection, if it remains unresolved, could be devastating to the fairness and equality of education, as not every student has a sustained access to similar online resources.

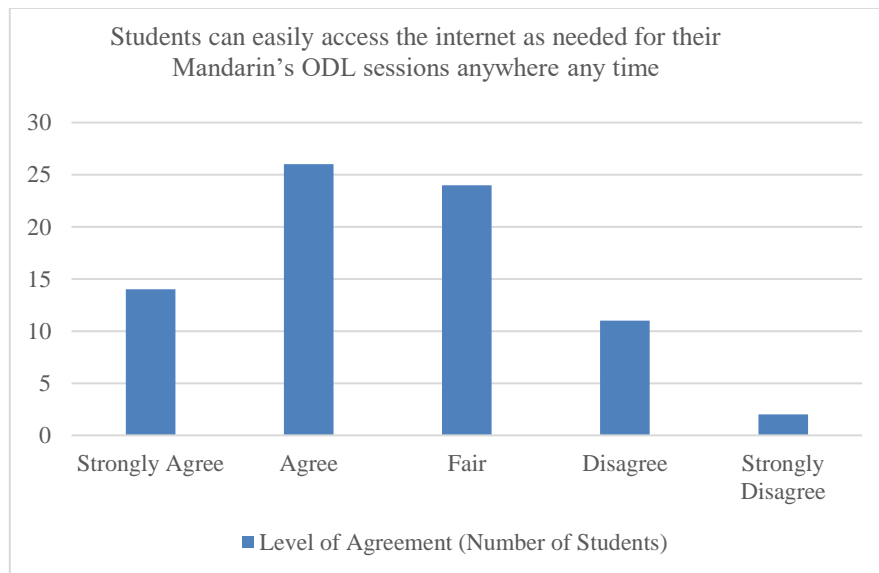


Diagram 4: Students can easily access the internet as needed for their Mandarin’s ODL sessions anywhere any time.

Low computer literacy among local university students is still one of the major lingering concerns in our education system. There are many students who are unable to operate basic computing skills with Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. They may even find it difficult or challenging to solve emerging technical issues with live classes, to use certain specific functions, to utilize communication-related apps and websites, and to browse for study materials. Some students may also lack technological proficiencies to create content, submit assignments or reports, and communicate with their teachers and friends.

Question Four and Five indicate similar results, where 68.83% (53) and 67.53% (52) of the students did not have problems in using a laptop/notebook or desktop computer, as well as using a smartphone or tablet to access and participate in ODL sessions, respectively. While 22.08% (17) and 23.38% (18) of the students showed a fair level of computer and technology literacy respectively, 9.09% (7) of the students were contrariwise on both criteria. When asked in Question Six whether students were able to utilize both types of electronic devices (laptop/notebook/desktop computer and smartphone/tablet), the result is similar to the aforementioned questions, with 66.23% (51) of the students firmly agreed,

23.38% (18) of the students fairly agreed, and 10.39% (8) of the students disagreed.

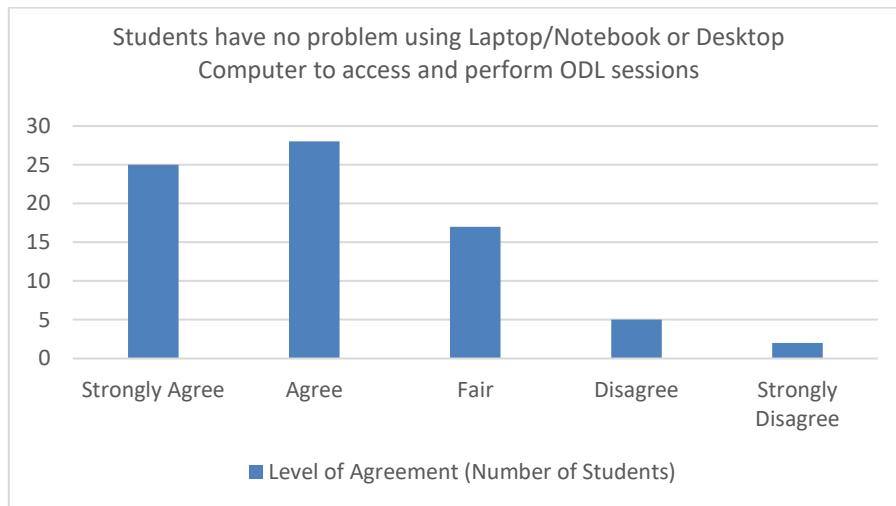


Diagram 5: Students have no problem using Laptop/Notebook or Desktop Computer to access and perform ODL sessions.

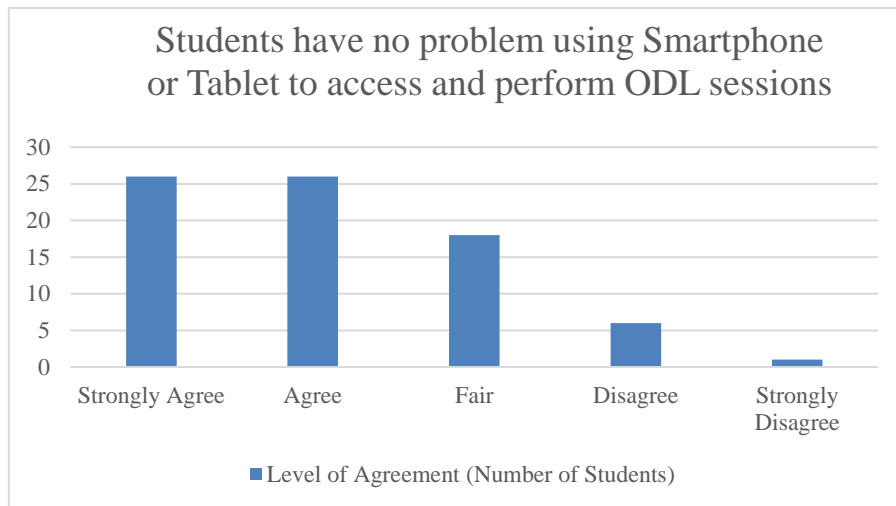


Diagram 6: Students have no problem using Smartphone or Tablet to access and perform ODL sessions.

Even though these results signify that most students are capable in and confident with their computer literacy, the reality of the situation is more concerning. Allam et al. (2020) for instance stated that students from the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, UiTM possessed a low computer literacy. In Mandarin learning, for example, not every student is knowledgeable in operating Microsoft Office-related apps such as Words and PowerPoint, PDF-related files, or video content creation, which is important for dialogue speaking and conversation recordings. Some are struggling in terms of completing assignments that require them to type, show, identify, and differentiate Pinyin or Chinese characters. They also need guidance regarding installing and applying a Pinyin software in their computer or mobile operating system. Moreover, during the MCO period, most of them live off campus and they find it challenging to keep in tune with the technical requirements, or smoothly manoeuvre through the Course Management System (CMS) of the chosen course.

Some students do not even own a laptop or a computer owing mostly to financial issues and they need to seek help from friends, relatives or third parties for technical assistance. According to New Straits

Times and The Sun Daily, after two months of the MCO in 2020, the Malaysian government seemed to not have a solid plan in place to remodel local schools or to transform teaching and learning to meet the challenges brought upon the students by the pandemic. There were claims that with the closure of schools, many have switched to online learning, but such an effort is hardly the new norm. Replacing conventional classroom teaching with online learning methods may be the only solution if the pandemic prolongs. But this is not feasible nationwide because a survey by the MOE in May 2020 of 900,000 students indicated that the levels of computers and tablets ownership among students stood at only 6% and 9% respectively, although smartphones ownership was much better at 46%. In addition, such devices are often shared among family members and school-going siblings, thus putting further limits and strain on accessibility. Increasing access to devices and broadband is a must to narrow the “digital divide”, which explains the gap between those who have access to computers and the Internet and those with limited or without such access, in online learning. However, this may be unachievable within a short time as it involves immense financial resources and prudent planning. (Chan, Karim, Yusof, 2020; Gan, 2020)

Lecturers are also required to display a higher level of computer literacy, provide guidance and assistance if inquired by students, and constantly monitor students’ digital footprint to ensure their participation in learning activities. These matters post great obstacles to both lecturers and students in terms of their teaching and learning progress, which will severely impact the quality of the outcome-based education if they remain unsolved. Hence, such are the reasons why albeit most students showed a notable level of computer literacy in this study, only 42.86% (33) of the students agreed that they did not encounter any technical difficulties during Mandarin’s ODL sessions, while 31.17% (24) of the students were contrariwise, which displays a prominent increase from the previous result.

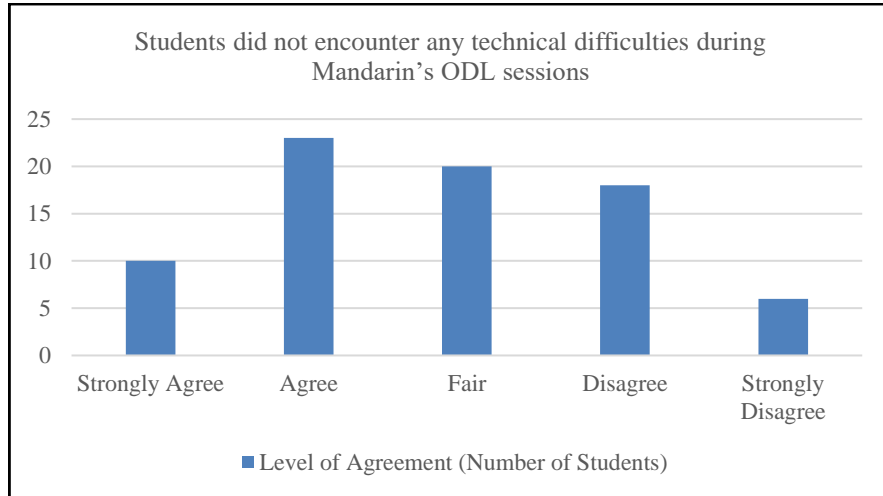


Diagram 7: Students did not encounter any technical difficulties during Mandarin’s ODL sessions.

C) Participation and Communication

Local students commonly lack effective communication skills especially in the ODL sessions compared to the traditional face-to-face classrooms. Local students tend to feel embarrassed or even lack in confidence and motivation to communicate with their teachers and friends, as well as to participate in this new model of

learning. The results collected from Question Nine indicate that 53.25% (41) of the students were willing to actively communicate, participate, and learn together with their classmates more actively during the Mandarin’s ODL sessions. While 24.68% (19) of the students and 22.08% (17) of the students showed moderate and low levels of such willingness, respectively.

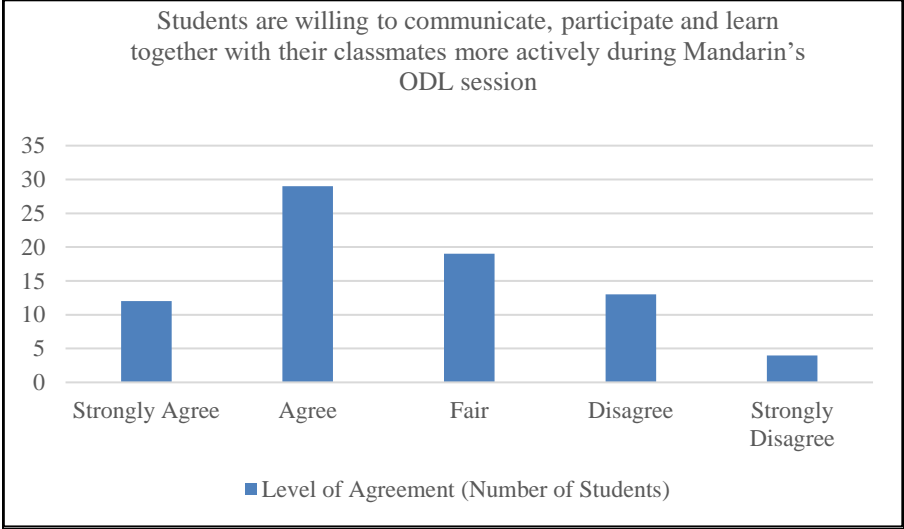


Diagram 8: Students are willing to communicate, participate and learn together with their classmates more actively during Mandarin’s ODL session.

Data gathered from Question Ten indicates that 62.34% (48) of the students were willing to consult their lecturer online if they struggled with Mandarin learning. While 25.97% (20) of the students and 11.69% (9) of the students showed moderate and low levels of such willingness, respectively.

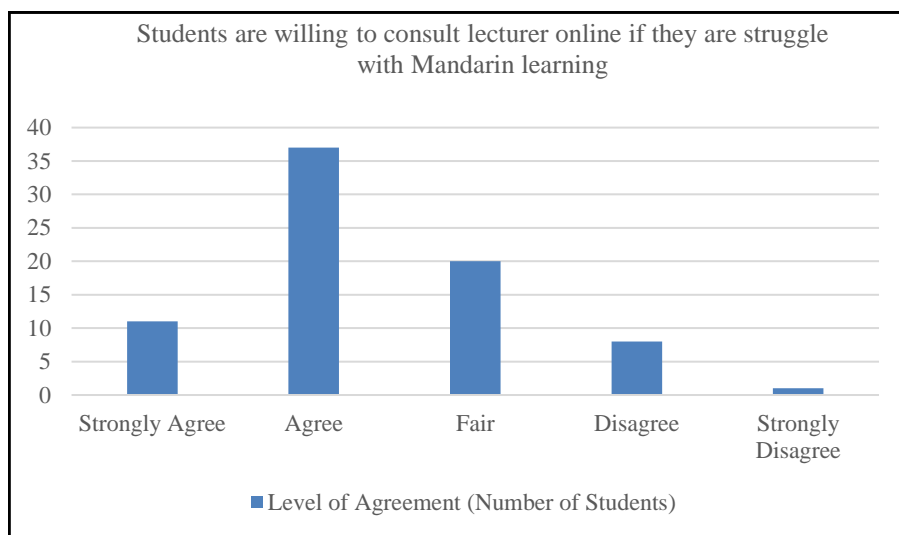


Diagram 9: Students are willing to consult lecturer online if they are struggle with Mandarin learning.

Comparing both data above, majority of the students understand the importance of class participation and interpersonal communication in Mandarin learning. They also show a higher tendency to consult lecturers than discussing with their classmates. This shows that they believe that their lecturers are more supportive and can provide more reliable guidance and clearer explanation if they encounter struggles in learning Mandarin. On the other hand, lecturers through online classes, can provide learning materials, tutorials, quizzes, tests, assignments, email communications, live chats, or messages in addition to delivering content by live sessions, presentations, recorded videos, or lectures to students. Despite all these activities, some students do not find ODL sessions to be engaging compared to face-to-face sessions in the traditional method. During ODL sessions, it remains challenging to keep students engaged and in high morale constantly without a lecturer's physical presence and face-to-face contacts. Students would rather keep their silence or insist on not asking questions when prompted during live sessions even though they have doubts. Occasionally, few students do not even approach their lecturers after classes for problem-solving. These happen mainly due to the students' lack of interest or technological competency with apps and video calls, as well as their low confidence in expressing themselves via live chats, emails, or text messages. Such challenges will also hinder students from getting immediate and necessary feedbacks from their lecturers regarding their performance during the learning process for further improvement.

D) Time Management, Self-Discipline, and Persistency

In many cases, students who engage in ODL sessions have difficulties in managing their learning time effectively, as they feel that it is a relatively new method and requires a lot of time and intensive work for preparation. As ODL sessions provide more flexibility compared to traditional classrooms, students with proper planning may be able to schedule and manage their time, as well as to stay persistent in an effective manner for various learning activities, such as one-on-one consultation sessions with lecturers, group discussions among classmates, brain-storming sessions for assignments, online study groups for quizzes and tests, or even self-study session by revising learning materials and lecture videos online.

Data collected from Question Twelve shows that 54.55% (42) of the students stated that they were self-disciplined in their learning process and found it easy to set their own learning time. In addition, 28.57% (22) of the students showed a fair level of self-discipline and 16.88% (13) of the students faced difficulties in adjusting their own learning time to establish an effective learning routine. At the same time, 57.14% (44) of the students claimed that they can manage study time effectively to complete the ODL Mandarin course and assignments on time in Question Eleven. 27.27% (21) of the students shared only a fair level of time management, while 15.58% (12) of the students showed disagreement with the statement. Furthermore, the data collected from Question Fourteen also indicates that 53.25% (41) of the students could learn Mandarin through the ODL sessions with persistency, while 29.87% (23) of the students and 16.88% (13) of the students expressed both fair and low levels of persistency, respectively. All these results indicate that most students can be persistent and practice self-discipline in Mandarin learning, while facing minimal challenges in their time management even with the implementation of ODL.

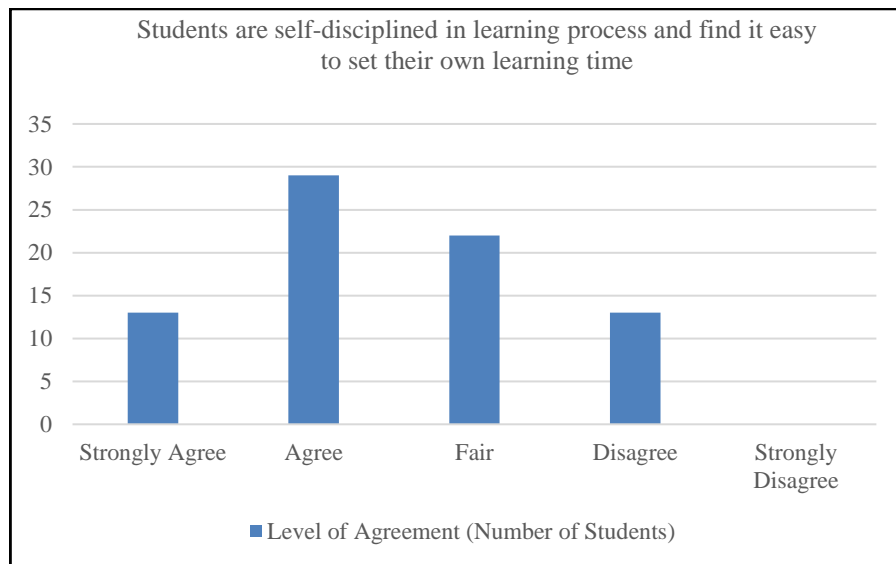


Diagram 10: Students are self-disciplined in learning process and find it easy to set their own learning time.

Since students are now required to study in a more relaxed and slacken home environment during the MCO period, difficulties in self-discipline and time management may be due to being unable to strictly adhere to their newly established routine, in addition to external or surrounding distractions that affect their focus on their learning process, unlike in the traditional classrooms where they are required to stay always engaged and be on a high alert with their own study progress.

E) Self-Motivation and Focus

Self-motivation is an essential requirement particularly in ODL sessions, where students are required to study in a more isolated environment compared to traditional classrooms. As a psychological factor, the feeling of isolation and the implementation of self-quarantine during the MCO period is affecting students' motivation and learning progress highly. In a traditional classroom for instance, students have developed familiarity to instant eye-to-eye communications with each other, which allow immediate reactions, experience sharing, and non-verbal contacts while strengthening their basic

social skills. Such a proximity however is now taken away from students, which may cause them to feel isolated and worried about the pandemic, their family’s job loss, and disconnection with friends and lecturers. Such insurmountable discouragements may lead to students falling behind their learning progress and nurture the idea of giving up and deferring from study.

Data collected from Question Eight shows only 33.77% (26) of the students felt more motivated during the Mandarin’s ODL sessions than learning in a traditional face-to-face class. While 35.06% (27) of the students showed a fair level of motivation, a staggering 31.17% (24) of the students exhibited low motivation towards the ODL sessions.

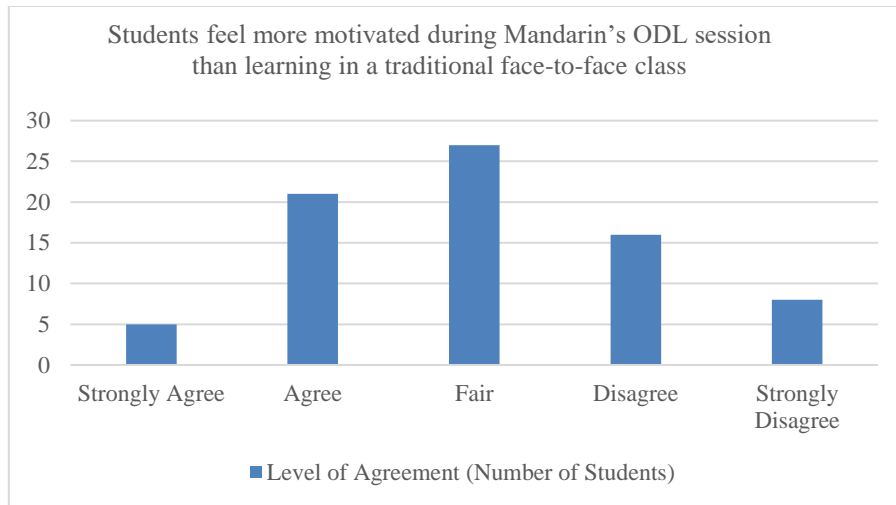


Diagram 11: Students feel more motivated during Mandarin’s ODL session than learning in a traditional face-to-face class.

The result should serve as an alarming signal across the education sector, as students need to find and nurture their own motivation to adhere and adjust to the new educational trends, as well as to properly equip themselves for future challenges in their education and careers. Even though it is vital for students to understand that embracing a positive attitude will help them to stay motivated in overcoming challenges in ODL sessions, it is undeniably hard to practice. There are some students who can quickly adapt to the changes in learning styles, but for students who need more time, they may feel demotivated rapidly thus leading to the eventual diminishing of concentration and lack of persistence in their Mandarin learning process.

The result from Question Thirteen confirms the above findings. When asked whether they can focus intently without being distracted during their Mandarin’s ODL sessions, 42.86% (33) of the students agreed on this notion, while 32.47% (25) of the students showed a fair level of agreement, and 24.68% (19) of the students disagreed. Incidentally, the percentage of students who disagreed that they could focus during their Mandarin’s ODL sessions is similar to the percentage of students who faced adaptability struggles earlier, where both results share the second highest rate of disagreement out of all questions asked in the questionnaire, only exceeded by the disagreement percentage on the ODL learning motivation (31.17%). The findings also indicate a direct correlation between adaptability, motivation, and students’ ability to focus in ODL sessions.

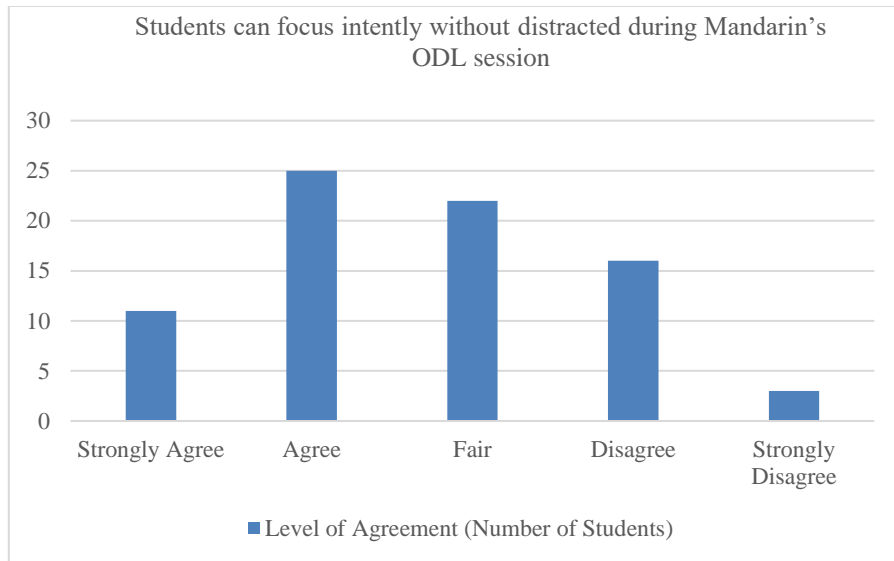


Diagram 12: Students can focus intently without distracted during Mandarin's ODL session.

All the above findings lead to the fact that there are many students who are facing challenges to stay motivated during their Mandarin's ODL sessions than learning in a traditional face-to-face class. Many of them also are unwilling to communicate, participate, and learn together with their classmates more actively during their Mandarin's ODL sessions. Not only they admitted that they were unable to focus intently without being distracted during their Mandarin's ODL sessions and were having problems in adapting to the changes from traditional face-to-face classes to the ODL sessions, but they also felt uncomfortable learning Mandarin through the ODL sessions compared to the traditional face-to-face classes. Such anxieties and negative notions will undoubtedly diminish their enthusiasm in engaging in bilateral interactions and communications through ODL sessions and may even affect their overall perceptions of ODL at its initial stage of implementation.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of ODL is supposed to encourage students to assimilate new knowledge and information through verbal or written interactions and collaborations with their peers besides their lecturers. Students should also be able to develop their ability on interpreting new knowledge, information, and experiences independently. On top of that, ODL can help redistribute lecturers' and students' attentions, which allows for the less abled or shy students to become more active participants in the class, due to the free, open, and student-centred environment of ODL's interaction, that is not overly limited or dominated by lecturers, raising students' self-esteem, and improving their knowledge in the process as a result. However, in the current initial state of the ODL implementation, it is obvious that this method is yet to enable a fully effective bilateral interactions and communications due to a wide variety of limitations, obstacles, and challenges faced by both lecturers and students.

From this study, the researchers have fully achieved the first purpose of the research by exploring challenges faced by the students in Mandarin language teaching and learning through the ODL method. It is concluded that lack of self-motivation, learning focus, and adaptability struggles are the three main challenges for students in the implementation of the ODL sessions. Therefore, these should be the top priority for immediate and constant attention by relevant parties. Even though a lack of self-

motivation is relatively common among students in the ODL sessions, the implications of other challenges such as computer literacy, technical issues, class participation, and bilateral communications should not be undermined as well. The hasty and sudden switching from the traditional face-to-face classroom to ODL in a virtual classroom has created an entirely different learning experience for students. It may be good news for the overall digital transformation of the local education sector, but at its initial stage, it definitely poses numerous challenges to students.

Despite the limitations of our education system and the government's policy, both lecturers and students still play an important role to effectively tackle their struggles and challenges in ODL. Even though many schools were not fully prepared to completely shift into online classes, and the burden is being put on both teachers and students to adapt to a new way of learning on their own, students need encouragement from their lecturers to stay positive, confident, and motivated always. This also means students should understand that communication with their lecturers is essential. Staying in touch with their lecturers to update and inform them about the students' learning situations such as their technical issues, internet connection, lateness or absence in the ODL sessions, and questions about the lessons themselves is the key for their lecturers to recognize and be flexible in handling various situations thus offering the best solution for the students. For example, if a student is facing technical issues with his or her computer or is having slow and unstable internet connection while an online class is ongoing, the lecturer should be informed immediately so that the lecturer can respond by providing verbal consolations or guiding the student after class with a recorded lecture video.

Organizing additional short courses on computer literacy for both lecturers and students is also vital for them to be more familiar with the Course Management System's functions and the handling of ODL-related software, applications, or tools. These additional short courses should be held at the beginning of a new semester and be made compulsory for all freshmen to attend. The university should also provide sufficient technical support services to its academic staff and students. In the end, students should also have a positive mindset that technological issues will always occur unexpectedly, and they should understand that they are not alone in such situations, which will allow the patience to solve the issues without losing confidence or motivation during their learning process.

Counsellors or advisors are valuable resources in ODL as well. They are one of the alternatives for students to seek help besides their lecturers. Online counselling sessions may also be provided for students in need of emotional and mental guidance, to help them regain or retain their learning motivation. Students should be encouraged to create a daily learning schedule or a weekly planner to find a productive learning environment at home and to simply focus on the goal of their study. If students with high self-discipline can follow their schedule and staying in touch with their classmates, in addition to reaching out to faculty or academic staff as needed, while ticking off all the items that they have completed in their study planner daily or weekly, it will help them to boost their motivation and persistency in Mandarin learning.

Hence, the second purpose of the study has been successfully achieved as well where several possible criteria have been identified in overcoming challenges in Mandarin language online teaching and learning sessions, in which the optimization of the online learning process is vital to ceaselessly provide an ideal quality of education. Although this optimization should also consider student-teacher interactions and the language used in the communication between students and teachers should be clear, it should also contain specific terms for their field of study (Coman, C. et al., 2020). Teachers then need to make suitable adjustments based on the changes in their teaching environment and

method. This is in line with Sun et al. (2020) who mentioned that in the absence of face-to-face communication, teachers need to put greater effort in preparing for online courses, innovating, and designing lessons that will improve the attention span of the students. It also requires teachers to patiently turn students from passive recipients to engaging learners through interactive question and answer sessions, tests, presentations, and open discussions. However, a change in attitude, awareness, and mindset towards positivity, as well as making improvements in technological literacy would help students to regain confidence and reignite their passion and interest to achieve a better outcome in a Mandarin ODL course.

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