

Students' Perception And Challenges Of Learning The English Subjects Through Online Classes

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in schools and universities worldwide shifting from face-to-face learning (F2F) to Online Distance Learning (ODL), and Malaysia is no exception. However, ODL has resulted in many challenges that students and lecturers have had to go through, and teaching English is no exception. This study has three aims; to analyse the student's perception of learning the English language subjects through online classes, to identify the student's challenges in learning the English subjects, and to discuss what can be improved, as well as the directions of improvement to make learning the English language subjects through online classes easier and more accessible to all. The ninety-nine respondents in this study are students taking pre-diploma and diploma courses in UiTM Sarawak. The study implements the survey research method whereby questionnaires were distributed to pre-diploma and diploma students during week 13 and week 14 of the March-August 2021 semester via Google Form. The findings were extracted, and results were analysed. The study revealed key differences in students' perception, challenges, and improvement in making learning English language subjects through online classes easier, bearable, and accessible to all. Implications of the study are also presented and discussed.

Keywords: English language learning; Open-Distance Learning (ODL); English Language; Education

INTRODUCTION

The recent outbreak of the novel human coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has had a global impact on society. COVID-19 is the fifth pandemic to be documented since the 1918 influenza pandemic. The virus is believed to be from an animal coronavirus that later acquired the ability to transmit human to human, making it highly contagious and rapidly spreading in the human population (Liu, Kuo, & Shih, 2020). As of July 29, 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported 195,886,929 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with a staggering number of 4,189,148 deaths globally (WHO, 2021). The data shows dire implications of the virus's high contagiousness among the population of humans; therefore, drastic measurements, in particular of physical distancing, are needed to curb and mitigate the rapid infections of COVID-19 (Bavel et al., 2020). As a result, global quarantine was necessary, but it had disrupted and crippled major sectors worldwide, such as the economy, social, health, and education, to name a few. In a short time, all significant sectors needed drastic adjustments to accommodate the critical measurements in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, forcing all social and physical interactions to switch to digital social interaction.

The implementation of the Malaysian Government Movement Control Order, commonly known as the MCO, on March 18, 2020, was the starting point of a series of national quarantines and cordon sanitaire as measures to curb the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia after the first reported case in Malaysia on January 25, 2020 (Sufian, Nordin, Tauji, & Nasir, 2020). The global pandemic has created bubbled communities in Malaysia whereby these major sectors shifted into relying entirely upon modern technology and the internet to maintain business normalcy. It is undeniable that vital measures such as these are to prevent economic collapse, and at the same time, maintain the healthcare system to accommodate the proliferating demand of mitigating nation catastrophe. Unfortunately, the education prospect is one of the sectors that received a heavy penalty because of the pandemic disruption:

An estimated 90 percent of the world's school-aged children have had their education disrupted by the pandemic... At the peak of Covid-19 related school closures in April 2020, these measures disrupted the lives of 1.4 billion pre-primary, primary, and secondary students—or 90 percent of

all students in the world—when schools in more than 190 countries were closed... The closing of schools was stressful and uncertain for students, parents, teachers, and school staff. A common description was “chaos.” (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

With all educational institutions being forced to close their doors, teaching and learning had to be made with limited social face-to-face interaction and online and distance learning. However, despite the circumstances, a shifted paradigm which relies almost entirely on the internet has accelerated the Industrial Revolution 4.0 in the education sector. Therefore, this becomes an opportunity to incorporate digital learning (Dhawan, 2020).

Research to date provides a minimal reference on students' perspective towards online classes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially on remote Malaysian public universities campuses like UiTM Mukah itself. Therefore, this article aims to highlight and provide a holistic view of the predicament in online and distance learning (ODL), especially towards the English Language subjects faced by the students in UiTM Sarawak Branch, Mukah Campus. It evaluates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning process from the students' perspectives and underlines the challenges faced by the students in learning the English Language subjects. Subsequently, the challenges measured from the data collected could add value to the existing body of literature by providing comprehensive awareness and opportunity for improvement in the learning aspect of the English language subjects through online classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education in the digital era sees acceleration into Industrial Revolution 4.0 with demand for modernising the educational system. However, this transition came into disruption when the 2019 coronavirus impacted the education sector. Students, parents, and educators worldwide felt the unanticipated rippling impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since educational institutions have had to close their doors, as part of the catastrophe mitigation that the governments, frontline workers, and health authorities have had to grapple with, to slow the spread of the coronavirus. The massive disruption of the education system witnessed the intensity of needs from the authorities to ensure that all students receive a quality

education during these challenging times. Nationwide lockdowns and the implementation of social distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 outbreak have resulted in the closure of educational premises, both learning and training. As a result, teaching pedagogy and methodology of a high-quality education is undergoing a fundamental shift through various online platforms. Not surprisingly, educators, parents, and students face significant setbacks in providing and altering the normalcy of a traditional approach to education pedagogy into a fully digitalised platform.

As a developing country, Malaysia struggles to cope with the digital transformation and modernisation in the educational sector. Integrating traditional with modern teaching pedagogy is slow progress. The latter is more challenging as digital application lacks even the most basic infrastructure and skills needed for adaptation. The usage of digital technology in the educational sector during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic time was merely as a teaching aid to make the learning process impactful, interactive, and versatile. Most of the time, teaching methodology integrates technology infrastructure provided by the learning institution and is accessible to anyone at any given time. Instructors are also available to guide the students in facilitating meaningful synchronous and student-centred learning. However, with the abrupt shift into a fully digitalised, online and distance learning through virtual platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Kumospace, students and educators have difficulties coping with the content delivery without proper guidelines and hands-on facilitators. In this situation, as explained by Subedi et al. (2020), E-learning tools have come into a crucial role during this pandemic, aiding educational institutions to facilitate students' learning during the closure of the institutions. Within a short time, educators and students are now coping with the demand of costly ICT requirements. Once, smartphones and tablets are deemed as luxury. Now, those luxuries have turned into necessities when it becomes compulsory for everyone to own a device- even the most basic, in order to access education content:

After schools closed, hundreds of millions of students experienced a dramatic shift to distance learning, with physical classrooms being replaced by radios, televisions, cell-phones, tablets, and computers. This resulted in an overwhelming dependence and need for affordable, reliable connectivity, adequate devices that met learning needs, and the capability to use these technologies safely and confidently. (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

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The sudden transitions exposed insufficient basic modernisation infrastructure and access that Malaysian students and educators need to face. The everyday setbacks that students need to endure during online and distance learning range from limited access to a stable internet connection to owning the most economical yet questionable sustainable gadgets. Worse, these are a far cry from the actual problems faced by higher education students in Malaysia. Even with access to the said tools, most students lack digital literacies in using e-learning tools such as Microsoft Office, Google Classroom, or manoeuvre video platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Team: Digital transformation of Higher Education institutions is a topical issue that several stakeholders of education must feel concerned about-abilities to apply ICT in every spheres of life are on incremental level, thus universities must be up to the task of preparing potential professional to be able to face challenges and provide solutions. (Bond et al., in Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020)

Research duo Hiltz and Turoff (2005) argued that online learning is a novel social activity gaining traction as a substitute for the traditional face-to-face classroom but from the standpoint of disruptive processes (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Technologies are indeed a great aid in the teaching and learning process. The internet is the prerequisite for education, yet not everyone has equal access to it. However, it cannot replace human social interaction, and it comes with an economic burden, especially to both students and parents. Indeed, the closure of educational institutions is a must to curb the widespread coronavirus, and this decision comes with a grave price. It resulted in inequality in education as it is now more difficult for students to access primary education, including those in the higher learning institutions: But many children were not given the opportunity, tools, or access needed to keep on learning during the pandemic. As a result, school closures did not affect all children equally. Throughout this pandemic, students, parents, and teachers have been frustrated by the direct impact of governments' long-term lack of commitment to remedying discrimination and inequalities in their education systems, and their failure to ensure basic government services...Lack of access to affordable, reliable internet connection was another key problem...In many countries, the heavy reliance on online learning and connectivity technologies to deliver education exacerbated learning inequalities because many governments did not have the policies, resources, or infrastructure to roll out online learning in a fully inclusive manner. (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

One particular case of such circumstances in Malaysia was reported by the British Broadcasting Corporation News (BBC) on June 18, 2020. Eighteen-year-old Veveonah Mosibin, a Sabahan student at University Malaysia Sabah (USM), was forced to build a treetop hut in her family farm to sit for two university exams because of limited internet coverage, electricity and running water in her family's residence. Hence, this exemplified the inability by both the government and educational institutions to offer adequate internet or equipment was more likely to exclude students from low-income households and rural areas from accessing online and distance learning. Inequality and discrimination in education directly result from the governance of critical aspects in socio-economic and demographic factors. It is reflected in the students' capability to cope with online and distance learning. Students from sustainable family economic backgrounds may not be feeling the impact of shifting into digital learning. However, it is reversed for students who come from a disadvantaged economic stand front. Accessibility, cost, flexibility in teaching pedagogy and educational policy are among issues that have been recognised as problems with online and distance learning (Murgatrottd, 2020). Economically disadvantaged students in many developing nations cannot afford online learning gears, primarily when a progressive country such as Malaysia could not provide primary necessities for online learning. A significant dependence on online education and connection technologies to deliver education worsened learning disparities in many countries. Many governments lacked the regulations, resources, and infrastructure necessary to properly implement online learning (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Tertiary-level students from rural communities have difficulties getting a decent internet connection. Poor basic infrastructures such as electricity and a non-conductive environment halt the educational progress of these affected students, compared with students from urban and suburban communities.

In compliance with the Malaysian Government Movement Control Order (MCO), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) embarked on the transition into virtual learning, noting the journey to be perilous with limited skilful educators in engaging virtual learning within a limited time. With the progressive transition of traditional classrooms to an entirely virtual learning environment at local educational institutions, teachers and students have resorted to online or distance learning to comply with campus-enforced

social distancing. Apart from basic tools such as laptops or personal computers, the availability of resources such as complex Instructional Technology (IT) platforms and fast internet connections was deemed critical in this unprecedented situation. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) illustrated that educational transitions during the COVID-19 crisis came with logistic challenges affecting students' academic performance. Firstly, there is growing concern about pandemic-related anxiety. Then, socio-economic factor differences related to the students' ability to access tools and logistics required for online and distance learning are also a concern. Finally, most instructors were not prepared to give high-quality training remotely in an effective manner (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

The review of difficulties confronted by students in learning the English language subjects among UiTM Mukah students during ODL is computer literacies and learning styles and preferences. Indeed, distance language learning has progressed from traditional print-based correspondence classes to fully online courses that can provide ample chances for contact, feedback, and support between educators and students, as well as among students themselves (White in Teoh, Liau, & Belaja, 2013). However, Seetha Kuama's (2016) research indicates that students faced with computer anxiety display drawbacks on their academic performances because of limited access to instructors that can guide them in completing tasks using ICT (Aydin in Kuama, 2016). In addition, psychological impact ensued as the students felt left behind by their peers, resulting in a loss of interest in learning English language subjects. Kuama further argued that students require time to adapt to new learning environments and difficulties concerning learning style and preferences. These difficulties may develop for some students due to the requirement to use a different learning style. This deficiency may present a challenge for learners who are less proficient in technology (Kuama 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ascertain UiTM Mukah distance learners' perceptions of the difficulties they encountered while learning the English language. Collecting data and identifying the students' perspectives would be the best barometer in helping enhance their learning experiences and capabilities in ODL during COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the following research question was addressed: what are the students' perceptions and challenges students face in learning English language subjects via ODL during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

RESEARCH METHOD

The research is conducted using both quantitative and qualitative method. This research was conducted during the March- August 2021 semester. The research adopts a survey method whereby a questionnaire adapted from Zboun & Farrah (2011), was designed. The researchers prefer the use of a questionnaire because it is a quick and reliable way to collect information from respondents in an efficient and timely manner. The questionnaire was designed using Google Form and distributed to students via group Whatsapp.

A total of 132 respondents participated in this study. All of the participants were pre-diploma and diploma students who were taking English language subjects. As for the diploma students, the students were from semester one until semester three. The questionnaire was distributed for two weeks, which were weeks 13 and 14 of the semester.

The questionnaire is divided into four parts; general information, which consists of student ID, level, programme, part, and gender, students' perception in learning the English language subjects through online classes, students' challenges in learning the English language subjects through online classes, and ways to improve and make learning English subjects through online classes easier and more accessible to all. On the first three parts of the questionnaire, students were asked to choose one of the 5 items included; strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. This is the quantitative part of the study, where the questionnaire is constructed in 5-Point Likert scale. The last part was a question, whereby respondents need to give suggestions on ways to improve and make learning English subjects through online classes easier and more accessible to all. The results of the study are then collected and analysed.

RESULTS

4.1 Background Information

Figure 1: Level

Level

132 responses

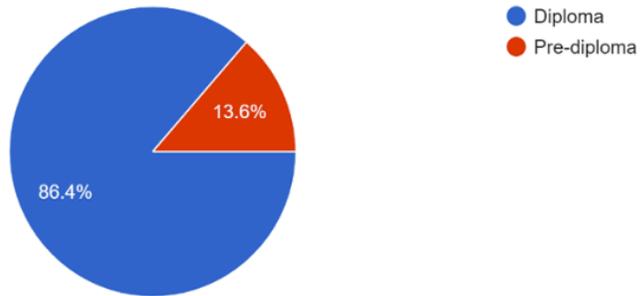


Figure 1 shows respondents' level. 84.5% of the respondents are diploma students, while 13.8% are from pre-diploma students.

Figure 2: Programme

Programme	Percentage
AT117	13.63%
AT112	11.36%
AT110	25.75%
BA111	15.9%
BA118	9.09%
BA119	5.30%
HS110	3.78%
BA002	11.36%
BA003	3.03%

From this figure, 25.75% of 132 of the respondents are from AT110, which is Diploma in Planting Industry Management. Moreover, students from AT112 (Diploma in Herbal Production) and BA002 (Pre-commerce; PPPT intake) share the same percentage of respondents, which is 11.36% each. The least respondents who partook in this study was from BA003 (Pre-commerce), which was 3.03%

Figure 3: Parts

PARTS	PERCENTAGE
1	6.2%
2	64.62%
3	15%
4	0.9%
5	0%

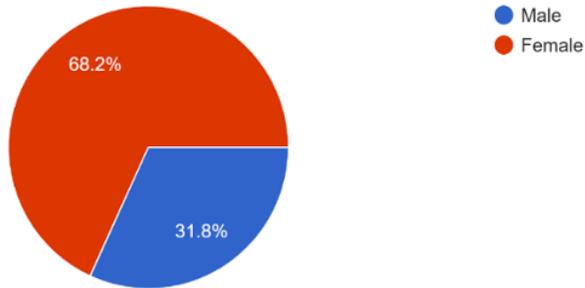
From this figure, only students from part 1, 2, 3, and 4 took part in the survey, and none from part 5. A majority of the respondents are from Part 2 (64.62%), followed by part 3 (15%), part 1 (6.2%) and part 4 (0.9%).

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Figure 4: Gender and age of the respondents

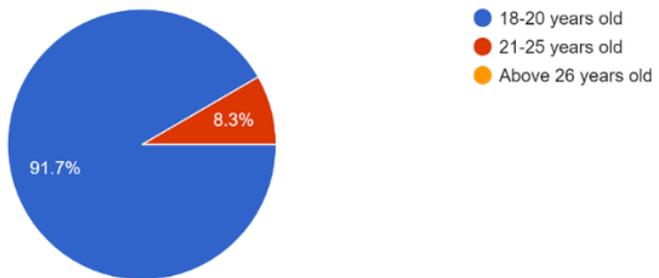
Gender

132 responses



Age

132 responses



From figure 4, most of the respondents are female (68.2%), followed by male (31.8%). A majority of the respondents' age are 18-20 years old (91.7%) and only 8.3% of the respondents are from the age of 21-25 years old.

4.2 Students' Perception

Figure 5: Student's perception in learning the English language subjects through online classes

Items/ percentage	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I prefer online classes	5.3%	7.6%	59.8%	19.7%	7.6%
I prefer face-to-face classes	0.8%	0.8%	30.3%	40.2%	28%
I participate more in online class	0.8%	6.8%	47%	31.1%	14.4%
I participate more in face-to-face class	0%	1.5%	32.6%	44.7%	21.2%
I prefer submitting my assignments online	0%	0.8%	27.3%	50.8%	21.2%
I spend less time and efforts in online class	8.3%	22%	48.5%	15.9%	5.3%
I am able to work independently in online class	3%	8.3%	44.7%	30.3%	13.6%
I do not find it difficult to use Google Classroom, Zoom, or any other video chat platforms	0.8%	6.1%	36.4%	40.2%	16.7%

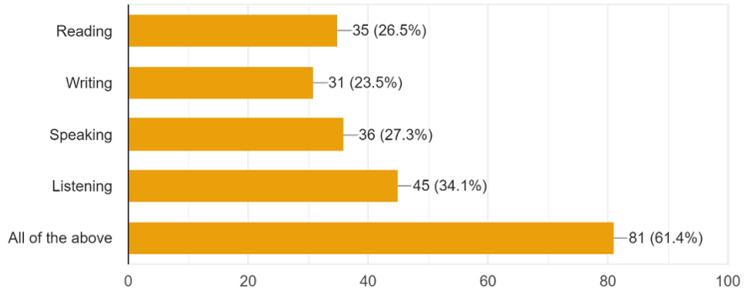
From figure 5, a majority of the students are neutral in 4 items; 'I prefer online classes' (59.8%), 'I participate more in online classes' (47%), 'I spend less time and effort in online classes'(48.5%), and 'I am able to work independently in online classes'(44.7%). Conversely, a majority of the students agree in 4 items; 'I prefer face-to-face classes'(40.2%), 'I participate more in face-to-face classes' (44.7%), 'I prefer submitting my assignments online' (50.8%), and 'I do not find it difficult to use Google Classroom, Zoom, or any other video chat platforms' (40.2%)

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Figure 6: Language learning goals

Online classes meet my language learning goals in one or more on these areas (choose one or more options)

132 responses



One of the questions asked regarding students' perception is their language learning goals. 61.4% of the respondents viewed that learning English language online fulfils all four skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

4.3 Student’s Challenges

Figure 7: Students’ challenges in learning the English language subjects through online classes

Items/ percentage	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I do not have good internet connection	5.3%	15.9%	51.5%	18.2%	9.1%
I find it difficult to use Google Classroom, Zoom, or any other applications in online class	13.6%	39.4%	34.8%	12.1%	0%
I am anxious of making mistakes in online classes than face-to-face classes	0.8%	18.9%	47.7%	24.2%	8.3%
Lecturers are not trained enough to teach online classes	29.5%	47.7%	20.5%	1.5%	0.8%
It is very difficult to study through online classes	2.3%	15.9%	43.9%	25%	12.9%
It is frustrating to do online tasks	5.3%	17.4%	52.3%	18.9%	6.1%
I feel less motivated attending online classes than face-to-face classes	5.3%	16.7%	35.6%	31.1%	11.4%
I do not have adequate gadgets to participate in online classes	18.9%	43.2%	30.3%	7.6%	0%
There’s too much noise at home/hostel whenever I have to do online presentations or speaking tests	6.1%	15.2%	30.3%	31.3%	17.4%
My teammates are not reachable most of the time.	12.1%	34.8%	37.9%	11.4%	3.8%

In figure 7, a majority of the respondents are being neutral in 6 items; ‘I do not have good internet connection’(51.5%), ‘I am anxious of making mistakes in online classes than face-to-face classes’ (47.7%),

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'It is very difficult to study through online classes' (43.9%), 'It is frustrating to do online tasks' (52.3%), 'I feel less motivated attending online classes than face-to-face classes' (35.6%), 'My teammates are not reachable most of the time' (37.9%).

A majority of the respondents disagree with three items; 'I find it difficult to use Google Classroom, Zoom, or any other applications in online class' (39.4%), 'Lecturers are not trained enough to teach online classes' (47.7%), 'I do not have adequate gadgets to participate in online classes' (43.2%). Lastly, a majority of the students agree on one item; 'There's too much noise at home/hostel whenever I have to do online presentations or speaking tests' (31.3%)

4.3 Making English learning more accessible

The researchers also asked respondents via open-ended questions; 'What can be improved to make learning English subjects through online classes easier and more accessible to all?' This is done to gather feedback on what can be improved to make English language learning easier and more accessible to all. There were 132 respondents who answered the questions. Out of this 132, 14 students wanted lecturers to infuse more online quizzes and games to make learning more interesting and fun. For example, one respondent said "I think I prefer doing quizzes rather than exercises. English should be fun!". Another respondent also said "have more quizzes to know how we understand the topic- make it way fun like miss always does." Moreover, 10 of the students responded that they prefer lecturers to use platforms that are accessible to all, and pre-recorded lectures are more preferable. For example, 1 student said "the material used must be fun and interesting but not using the data so much, and arrange these materials in one platform that can be accessed easily". Another student also said "use pre-recorded videos more than live meetings because (pre-recorded videos) use less internet data. Provide some interesting activities so that students feel excited to learn the English subject.'. Lastly, 10 respondents wanted lecturers to give more exercises to them. For example, one of the students said "I guess doing more exercises and watching sample videos (learning from YouTube) are easier. However, this is not an effective way because students may escape during lecture

hours.”. Another student also said, “do more exercises, especially past year questions”.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In terms of background information, it can be said that a majority of the respondents are diploma students than pre-diploma students. This is because there is only one class of pre-diploma students, while the rest are diploma students of two campuses; Samarahan and Mukah. In this study, students from five programmes from UiTM Mukah ; BA111, BA119, AT110, AT112, and AT117; and students of two programmes from UiTM Samarahan -BA118 and HS110 were respondents. To add more, the majority of the respondents are females.

In terms of students’ perception of learning English language via online classes, from 8 of the questions asked, the respondents are neutral in the four items mentioned in the result section. This is because they take into account the situation and environment, they are in. For example, in ‘I prefer online classes’, there are times where the online class is convenient for them, and there are times the online class is not, and it is the same situation with respondents who were neutral with ‘It is very difficult to study through online classes’. However, a majority of the respondents agree that they prefer face-to-face classes, as with face-to-face classes, they understand more, and it is easier for them to communicate with lecturers in a straightforward manner. However, most students prefer to submit the assignments online because there are limited facilities for them to go to printing shops and print their assignments, and printing out handouts and assignments is expensive for them. They also agree that they have no problems using platforms like Google Meet, Zoom, Google Classroom, or any other platforms because they have been familiar with these platforms since the 1st MCO up till now.

In terms of students’ challenges of learning English language via online classes, out of 10 items asked, 6 of the respondents took the neutral stance. This depends on the situation and the environment that occur at that time. For instance, there is one item where the respondents answered ‘I do not have good internet connection’, there are times the internet connection is stable, and there are times the internet connection is not stable. Another example, in ‘I am anxious of making mistakes in online classes than face-to-face classes’,

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shows that there are times the students will feel anxious with making the mistakes during assessments, but have no problems making mistakes during non-assessment classes. Meanwhile, the respondents disagree in three of the items asked. This is because there is financial assistance given for them to buy gadgets. Moreover, the lecturers are well-trained in using online platforms because they have attended courses on how to use and handle these online platforms.

In terms of what can be improved in making learning English subjects through online classes easier and more accessible to all, it can be said that students nowadays prefer online quizzes because of their interactive features. Moreover, they also require lecturers to use pre-recorded videos rather than live classes so that it is easier for them to refer to the videos over and over again to make the lessons more interesting.

However, this research has its own limitations. Firstly, the research only focuses on perceptions and challenges students face in one subject only, which is English. This research can be broadened to other subjects, so that other researchers can compare and contrast whether the results produced are the same or different. Next, this study only takes onto account respondents from UiTM Sarawak. It is hoped that this study can be expanded to include students from other campuses.

In conclusion, it is hoped that this research can give an insight of the perceptions and challenges faced by students during ODL, and measures can be taken to make learning the English subject more inclusive, accessible, and engaging.

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