
Is Online Learning a Curse in Disguise? A Thematic Analysis of Undergraduates' Perceptions on Learning English as a Second Language Online with Special Reference to Faculty of Science, University of Ruhuna

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Abstract

Online teaching that is considered an effective platform to disseminate instructional content won the attention of the educators with the outbreak of the COVID – 19 pandemic. The DELT (Department of English Language Teaching) of the University of Ruhuna was also compelled to conduct teaching English online owing to the decision of the government to close all the universities in Sri Lanka. With no prior experience in teaching online, the lectures were carried out using ZOOM, making it a novel experience for both the teachers and the students. Therefore, this study was carried out with the objective of ascertaining the perceptions of the undergraduates on their exposure to learning English online, which could bring about many insights. Following the course work of a semester, a questionnaire, comprised of open-ended questions was administered to 215 second-year students. In order to validate the implications, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 09 English lecturers of the DELT face-to-face. The data that emerged from the discussions were qualitatively analyzed, employing the thematic qualitative analysis method. It was revealed that the interaction not only between the lecturers and the students but also among students was low, making the students rather passive listeners. Another major finding was teacher-centeredness as in the case of a more traditional instructional approach to language teaching. Moreover, poor reception in remote areas and the preconceived notions regarding online teaching also had a negative impression on learning ESL online. Thus it was deduced that teaching ESL online can only be utilized as a strategic tool but not as a replacement to physical classrooms.

Keywords: *English language, Online teaching, Perceptions, Undergraduates, Strategies*

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