

# **Sri Lankan English language learner attitudes of virtual learning during the COVID-19: implications for future online learning**

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## **Abstract**

Online teaching has grown exponentially during the COVID-19 period around the globe. As a result, many research studies have been conducted to evaluate online teaching. The current small-scale qualitative case study was conducted to explore the attitudes of English as a second language learners toward online platforms during the novel coronavirus pandemic in Sri Lanka and to draw implications for future online English education. The findings are summarized under six themes: organization and clarity; flexibility; workload and academic support; interaction; skills and knowledge; and motivation. The current study brings important insights for a number of stakeholders considering the development of online language education in a Sri Lankan context and beyond. A key finding was that educators would do well to continue to initiate and promote virtual English language learning as a majority of the respondents are willing to continue learning English online. The findings also indicate that educational authorities should be encouraged to arrange training sessions for teachers involved in the online delivery of course content, focusing more on pedagogical matters. Moreover, it is suggested that language teachers should focus more on learners' online engagement and communication.

**Keywords** online education, language learning, English as a second language learners, COVID-19

## **1. Introduction**

The COVID -19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented shift to online education. This shift has had a tremendous impact on the lives of both teachers and students, including in language education (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). This mandatory but mostly unplanned and temporary virtual learning was meant to provide smooth and uninterrupted functioning in the education sector around the globe (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Yet, this unprecedented change in the teaching and learning process could affect the attitude of students towards English Language learning, as learner attitudes constitute one of the major factors that determine the level of adaptation and success in online learning. That is to say, the effectiveness of online learning may be significantly affected by the positive or negative attitudes of the learners. Thus, it is very important to pay attention to learner attitudes (Daniels, Tyler, & Christie, 2000), as in recent years, integrating

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technology into language learning classrooms has changed the way in which instruction is delivered to students.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of attitudes in language learning (Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), only a limited number of studies have been conducted to directly address the impact of this temporary but mandatory transition from traditional face-to-face learning to virtual platforms on the attitudes of English as a second language learners (ESL). To the best of the author's knowledge, relevant literature is scarce in the Sri Lankan context, where this study takes place.

### 1.1. *Literature Review*

Electronic literacy, computer literacy, and information literacy are emerging with the advent of new technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With these new advancements in technology, developing these literacies in the education sector has become an essential factor (Son, 2004) as they immensely support the development of learner creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, cooperation and teamwork, autonomy and flexibility, and lifelong learning (Dudeney, Hockly & Pegrum, 2013).

In the late 1960s, the idea of computer literacy emerged among students. Computer literacy is understood "as the ability to use computers at an adequate level for creation, communication, and collaboration in a literate society" (Son, Robb & Charismiadji, 2011, p.27). In recent years, with the technological innovations and student demand, the number of online sessions has increased significantly in schools and higher education institutes (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Britt, 2006), but it is especially important to hear student voices regarding the effectiveness of these courses.

Language learners can be considered one of the potential contributors to developing the tools for language learning (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2003). Hence, it is essential to consider learner perceptions when evaluating technologies in order to better support educators in perceiving possible problems, and considering possible solutions, in technology integration into virtual language classrooms. Significantly, the number of studies being conducted on language learning in technologically enhanced learning environments, particularly in non-Western contexts, has surged sharply.

A study that Ushida conducted (2005) investigated the changes in learner attitudes in online language learning courses. The results indicate that the participants were optimistic about their virtual language learning experience; thus, they were motivated throughout the programme. The findings of Webb, Doman, and Pusey (2014) highlight the participants' dislike for their online sessions, which changed over the period and resulted in their accepting computers as a new language learning tool. Similarly, Webb and Doman's study found that the participants' confidence in learning grammar improved due to having flipped learning, more than the learning gained during traditional language classrooms. In Stepp-Greany's (2002) study, the language learners were delighted after the technology integration into their language learning lessons as it benefitted in increasing motivation and self-concept, mastering basic skills and resulting in higher-order thinking skills and better recall.

Meyen et al. (2002) indicated that online learning would increase due to the high demand from the educational and corporate organizational sectors, a statement that has proved correct over the decades and exploded during the recent pandemic. Observing the changes in online classes worldwide in recent decades, Larremendy-Joems and Leinhardt (2006) state that the concept of colleges has changed from having online classes as an option to having online classes as mandatory in some contexts.

### 1.2. *English Language Learning during COVID-19*

The impact of crisis and trauma on the field of language education due to the global spread of COVID-19 constitutes an important area of inquiry. However, due to the unprecedented nature of the ongoing pandemic crisis situation, very little is known about the impact it has on L2 learning. However, the body of the literature discloses that there was a great attempt made to carry out studies on language learning in virtual platforms during COVID-19.

Transitions to virtual language learning have rapidly emerged during the wake of COVID-19. Yet, the impacts of this transition on language learners' attitudes are largely unknown. The longitudinal survey of Pusey and Nanni (2022) investigated the attitudes of 263 Thai undergraduates towards remote English for Academic Purposes instructions, which were conducted online. The results highlight a more positive outlook towards online learning. Thus, the outcome of this study will be of interest to educators who are exploring language learner attitudes toward virtual language learning during times of crisis.

Oraif and Elyas's study (2021) illustrates how this crisis situation affects L2 learning in Saudi Arabia. The findings on learner engagement in virtual platforms highlight that the students were satisfied with the online learning that they were exposed to during the COVID-19 period. Moreover, the positive correlation between learner engagement and student satisfaction indicated that L2 learners have positive attitudes towards getting instructions and experiencing language learning in online learning platforms.

Hosni and Dhahil (2021) analyzed online language learner attitudes in Oman amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative approach was employed for data collection from 155 undergraduates to find out the different aspects relevant to the online language learning experience. The thriving and overall positive attitudes of the participants towards online language learning indicate their willingness towards the new learning platform for language learning. However, the mention of the technical issues, difficulties conducting online assignments and virtual identity are some of the major issues to which should be given careful attention when designing and evaluating online language courses.

An experimental study conducted with 100 Pakistani ESL learners revealed that the participants welcomed the virtual teaching and that they were even highly motivated and gave their fullest commitment towards online language learning under COVID-19 circumstances. The majority of the ESL learners embraced online language teaching as it is new and it was a joyful experience for them. Furthermore, the convenience of participating in lectures online and the easy accessibility for the language lecturers and the ability to get answers for clarifications on the spot made them excited about learning English online (Shahzad , Hussain, Sadaf , Sarwat, Ghani, and Saleem, 2020). Similar to

Oraif and Elyas's (2021) study, these results also highlight that even in times of crisis, effective implementation of pedagogy in online learning platforms can assist both teachers and students to overcome barriers they encounter in learning English.

Khojasteh, Karimian, Farahmandi, Nasiri & Salehi's (2022) study explicitly evaluated the quality of e-contents of English language courses offered by Shiraz University of Medical Sciences faculties in Iran during the pandemic. The results showed that overall, the learners had a satisfactory perception of the quality of e-content, cognitive design, and flexibility.

The current study is vital in that while some of the findings of the above context-specific studies may be generalizable to other settings, no research has yet considered learners in a Sri Lankan context. A better understanding of Sri Lankan students' attitudes to study English online will undergird and support future research on pedagogy. Moreover, the current study will also provide resources to educators in the higher education sector during the pandemic and post-pandemic education and training sessions. In addition, by encouraging language learners to reflect on their learner attitudes based on their learning experience and challenges, curriculum developers and policymakers can better ensure the productive use of technological innovations in language learning on virtual platforms. Thus, the findings of this current study will be of significance to language teachers, language learners, material designers, researchers, and policymakers.

Thus, this research seeks answers to the following research question:

1. To what extent, and in what ways, does virtual learning impact learner attitudes during COVID-19?

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Research Design*

This study employed a longitudinal survey design. As Dörnyei (2007) explains, "Survey studies aim at describing the characteristics of a population by examining a sample of that group" (p. 101). Adopting a qualitative research approach, I assumed that it would allow me to take part in the research process energetically and better understand the language learner's attitudes toward web-based learning and determine how far these virtual platforms are effective in language learning.

### *2.2. Context*

The participants were selected from one of the state universities in Sri Lanka. Among the seven faculties, the Faculty of Allied Health Science was selected as almost all the students speak English as their second language or third language. English is compulsory but taught as a non-GPA course at the Faculty of Allied Health Science. The undergraduates have to follow the course for two years which consist of four semesters.

### *2.3. Participants*

Participants of this study were 60 online undergraduate learners who were enrolled in a nursing degree programme. This is a four-year degree programme with a one-year training period. These students were in a mixed-

ability level classroom. The majority of the participants were females (55%) and aged 21–to 24.

#### 2.4. *Data Collection Instruments*

A questionnaire and interview guide were the primary data collection methods used in the current study. The questionnaire and interview questions were designed with the purpose and scope of the study in mind. The open-ended questionnaire consisted of three sections: a demographic section to get participants' background information; a second section which evaluated the effectiveness of online education concerning students' perceptions when learning online to enhance their language learning competency. The third section was about the challenges of online education, specifically the challenges in virtual platforms and their recommendations for a better online learning experience, language classroom settings and language instructions. The questionnaire was distributed among the participants, and the questionnaires were returned with a 100% return rate. Finally, five randomly selected participants were interviewed online to find out the participants' attitudes towards virtual learning for language learning.

Finally, the collected data was analyzed qualitatively. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data analysis. The main purpose of using thematic analysis was to identify and to analyze the patterns in qualitative data in the current study. In the current context, the use of thematic analysis supported in analyzing the Sri Lankan language learner attitudes on virtual learning during the COVID-19.

Reliability and validity are important in order to ensure trustworthiness, credibility and accuracy in research, tests/ assessments and questionnaires (Chen, 2011). A lecturer in the same department from the data collected institute, was appointed as a rater for coding the collected data to increase the validity and reliability of the coding. As stated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) the inter-rater agreement of thematic analysis was calculated as a percentage in the following manner:

$$\frac{\text{Number of actual agreements}}{\text{Number of possible agreements}} \times 100$$

The identified themes were then compared for inter-coder reliability purposes as mentioned above and the reliability percentage was 79%. Before establishing the final coding, discrepancies which met in the coding stage were resolved through collaborative discussions.

The approach to thematic analysis was developed with a six-phase process; familiarization with the data, coding then searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this process, initially the researcher got familiarized with the qualitative data which was in the post-questionnaire and interviews by reading and rereading the data and listening to audio-recorded data. After getting familiarized with the qualitative data, the researcher started on generating labels for significant features of the data in relation to the attitudes on virtual learning during COVID-19. At the third stage, the researcher searched for themes rather than constructing them. At the end of the third stage, the

researcher was able to collate all the coded data relevant to each theme. During the stage four, the researcher started checking the themes, in order to find out whether they tell a convincing story about the data. In the process of reviewing themes, the themes which have been already formed, split into two or three and also omitted some themes while searching for new theme/s development. In the process of defining and naming of themes a detailed analysis for each theme was developed based on the focus and scope of each theme. In the final phase, the analytic narrative and data extracts were combined while relating the analysis in to existing literature (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

### **3. Findings**

The collected data were coded into four categories: organization and clarity; flexibility; workload and academic support; interaction; skills and knowledge; and motivation.

#### *3.1. Organization and Clarity*

The participants appreciated the language lecturers' prompt and clear feedback, which they received online, as it was detailed and more specific on the mistakes that they had made in their writing. They were also happy as they could upload the assignments online rather than submit hard copies. They were given the deadline and the submissions were not allowed after the deadline, which always made them plan their work.

*We submitted the assignments on time because after the deadline madam said we cannot submit. This system is good because it supported us not to delay our work.*

Moreover, they stated that the instructions and course requirements were clear and transparent.

*We like to have guidelines online as they are easy to read and understand.*

#### *3.2. Flexibility*

One of the most significant advantages of online courses is flexibility. As in onsite sessions, if they are unable to attend the lecture, they will miss the lesson, but in online learning, as the recording is available, students will not miss the lecture even if they are absent for an unavoidable reason. They were also satisfied with the uploaded documents as they could refer to them anytime and as there was no requirement to get the hard copies. One of the major issues they encountered during the pandemic was less accessibility to communication centers to get the hard copies, so referring to uploaded materials supported them immensely when learning the subject content.

#### *3.3. Workload and Academic Support*

The participants were happy as they could interact with the lecturer more when they were in chat rooms than in onsite lectures. However, the signal failures constantly interrupted the smooth flow of the discussions.

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*We have technical problems during online sessions and then we get demotivated and uninterested to learn online. If there are no signal problem, online learning is also good.*

The students were satisfied with the uploaded lesson materials in advance as they could have access and get ready for the lectures beforehand rather than get the lesson materials in class during the lesson. As the lecturer uploaded more videos than in-class, most of them mentioned that they understood the lecture clearly better than listening only to the lecturer's explanations in class.

*Sharing videos and materials related to subject content is interesting without continuously delivering the lecture as in the class. We like it as we can check the uploaded things before and know about the lesson.*

*More than just describing the lesson longer, I would like it is presented through a video or any online method of teaching because sometimes listening for a long time lacks concentration.*

Some of the students complained that the workload was too much when they were having online sessions as the lecturer uploaded more worksheets for them to complete but majority of the participants considered it as an opportunity to improve their language competency.

#### 3.4. *Interaction*

Some of the students preferred to have in-class sessions as they did not prefer the virtual classroom for social interactions. According to these students, it would be better if they could have face-to-face discussions as they were bored and stressed out at home, but there was less possibility of having onsite sessions as the pandemic was spreading very fast. When they communicated online, they always felt that they were not having strong communication among their classmates and the lecturer.

The others preferred web-based learning for interaction as they got the opportunity to express their ideas with the group members more than they did in class.

*We are happy to use Google classroom for English to interact than in class which is good and new for building effective interaction with friends in class.*

*With the online lesson content and zoom meetings and conversation with students we get better online learning experience.*

Moreover, those who preferred online interaction for language learning claimed that they were able to have learning communities and the sense of belonging in virtual platform as they had it in the face-to-face physical environment.

#### 3.5. *Skills and Knowledge*

The participants commented that the online learning supported them in developing learner autonomy, confidence, problem-solving skills, team spirit,

time management, and empathy despite the psychological pressures they were experiencing during the lockdown.

*Online learning experience is new. But it is very effective method. It supported to improve macro skills of using English which is helpful for future. So, it is better to have online classes.*

Similarly, participants also stated that group discussions in online learning supported them in improving cognitive and creative skills, which led the majority of the students to thrive in critical thinking and judgmental skills, communication skills, and effective strategies in collaboration more than the discussions and group activities they had in onsite sessions.

### 3.6. Motivation

Most participants claimed that they were not motivated to learn online as it started during COVID- 19, but gradually, they started to participate in online sessions willingly. They also realized that it is highly essential to get used to virtual platforms as technology is advancing around the whole globe. As some participants posit, online learning and social interaction opened new avenues that they did not have during the in-class sessions.

*When we have reliable and stable internet connection, it is exciting to learn online during this hard time in the country as we learnt many new things.*

The uploaded documents and videos also motivated them to learn English with interest, as they added variety to the monotonous learning in class. As some of them stated, though they initially considered the assignment submission online as a hassle, organizing the work and meeting the deadline molded them to continue it as a practice, which is one of the significant benefits they have gained during this period.

However, some students commented that the continuous changes due to the pandemic in the country and psychological and physical issues due to these changes made it extremely difficult to have the motivation and keenness they were having during the onsite sessions. As one of the students suggested,

*We all are exhausted with covid-19 as we are struck inside our houses. So, it is good at least if we can go to the university because online learning makes us more desperate. It is difficult to focus and learn well as we did in the language lab at the university.*

## 4. Discussion

The current study attempted to contribute to the scholarly literature surrounding language learning during COVID-19 in a developing country like Sri Lanka. Although there were not many positive responses from the students during the initial shift from onsite to online platform teaching and learning, the convenience, effectiveness of both online teaching and learning, and willingness to learn online gradually strengthened over time.

The current study results show that the attitudes of students towards online learning are positive and high. The majority believe that language learning can



benefit from online learning. They all agreed that modern technology and web-based learning have already become a part of our daily lives in this digital era. A considerable number of participants are highly familiar with the new technologies, and the majority have positive attitudes toward learning on online platforms to improve their language learning proficiencies. They are also willing to integrate technology into their language learning classrooms to improve their different language skills. It benefited them, significantly improving their writing skills as the language lecturer closely monitored them while giving individual feedback, which does not often happen in in-class sessions due to time constraints.

As the participants mentioned, they tried their best to attend the meeting when they had English lectures despite the signal failures and financial issues, but the majority had found it challenging to log in to the virtual sessions. According to Hara and Kling (1999), poor accessibility to technology and the internet often leads to disappointment and discouragement. However, when they could not attend the lecture, the students followed the lecture through the uploaded videos, showing their motivation and determination to improve their language competency. This aligns with the findings of Romero and Barbera (2011) as they state that for the performance and the quality of performance, the time they spend on tasks in e-learning has a considerable impact. Thus, as suggested by Romero and Barbera, learners should be guided to spend some quality time on a virtual platform for language learning.

Stern (2004), whose findings are more towards the effectiveness of traditional learning than online courses, asserts that the primary reason that online education fails is the lack of a learning community in virtual platforms. However, in the current study, when a considerable number stated that they communicated and contributed to group activities more than onsite sessions and had more interaction with their language lecturer, we can conclude that the learning community exists in virtual platforms. In language learning, teacher and learner interaction and peer interaction are undeniable, and the findings of the current study confirm that such interaction can be created in e-learning.

The finding of learner content with the use of multimedia in the online sessions aligns with the claims of Alsadhan, Alhomod, and Shafi (2014) as they highlight the importance of the integration of multimedia in online courses as it is essential to provide a high-quality interactive learning environment in web-based teaching and to promote continuous learner participation.

As it has been already proven that online learning has created a realm of digital environment for language learning and teaching in today's new-age learning, it is the responsibility of the policymakers and higher personnel in the education sector to pay more attention to the existing issues and find practical solutions for the challenges in the online language learning context.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings highlight that the online sessions during COVID-19 for language learning assisted students in experiencing web-based resources and advancements in technology, which could be utilized more than in the on-campus learning period. The majority of the participants asserted that they

gained a broader range of perspectives and knowledge through their online peer discussions and collaboration, and they also perceived that they acquired more guidance and close monitoring from their language lecturer than in onsite sessions. These perhaps surprising findings cause a re-think of how language courses might be further delivered through online mode; and how students might be encouraged and supported to use web-based courses more. Follow-up studies can be conducted to explore learner engagement and effectiveness in specific skills in online language learning sessions during the period of a pandemic. In addition, more studies should be conducted into the current realism and the effectiveness of the utilization of digital media in language learning during and after the COVID-19 era, as well as into the wellbeing of the language learners and teachers during a period of crisis, including the impact of increased levels of negative psychological, social, and economic aspects during a pandemic. The challenges and the utilization of virtual environment for language learning, which are discussed in the current study, will be an impetus for further research on investigating the effectiveness of web-based learning for language learning in a period of crisis like COVID-19.

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