

THE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALS OF USING DIGITAL LEARNING TO
SUPPORT SPEAKING SKILLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Following the global pandemic of Covid-19, the educational setting in Malaysia has changed drastically. During the pandemic, ESL teachers must teach all four skills utilising their creativity and experience, using CEFR-aligned material as a guide. Despite the obstacles that both teachers and students face, all skills are given equal weight. The issue is how ESL teachers use various kinds of technologies to support speaking skills. While there is a lot of study on Covid-19 and digital learning, there is not much on the problems and opportunities of using digital learning to support speaking skills in the classroom. As a result, the obstacles and potentials of digital learning must be further studied so that the transition from a traditional classroom to digital learning can be achieved successfully. The design of this study was a phenomenological approach. It walked through the investigation of a phenomenon within a specific context, the Covid-19 pandemic. In this respect, 51 ESL teachers took part in answering a questionnaire. For the interviews, the sample size was small where 4 respondents involved to obtain in-depth views of the issues. It can be concluded that teachers are pleased with their online learning experiences. It also suggests that utilising digital tools to develop speaking skills has potential. However, as these teachers are still learning how to use the tools, a few points should be highlighted. Looking at the challenges, ESL teachers face similar issues where there are alternatives taken by these teachers to overcome them. Teachers must be able to equip themselves with adaptability, creativity, efforts, and proper planning to support students in learning speaking skills.

ABSTRAK

Pandemic Covid-19 yang melanda dunia telah mengubah lanskap pendidikan di negara ini. Guru - guru Bahasa Inggeris perlu terus mengajar keempat-empat kemahiran bersandarkan kreativiti dan pengalaman mereka, berpandukan kurikulum CEFR. Walaupun berhadapan dengan pelbagai rintangan dan halangan dalam pembelajaran, penekanan terhadap semua kemahiran diambil kira. Isu yang ingin diketengahkan adalah bagaimana guru - guru menggunakan teknologi untuk membantu memperkasakan kemahiran bertutur dalam kalangan pelajar. Pelbagai kajian telah dilakukan berkenaan pandemik Covid-19 dan juga pembelajaran digital. Akan tetapi, hanya sebilangan kecil merujuk kepada potensi dan kekangan pembelajaran digital untuk mempelajari dan memperbaiki kemahiran bertutur. Oleh itu, kajian ini telah dipilih bagi melihat potensi dan kekangan supaya transisi daripada kelas tradisional ke kelas digital dapat berlaku dengan baik dan tersusun. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah fenomenologi di mana soal selidik dan temu ramah dijalankan di daerah Johor Bahru. Hasil kajian menunjukkan para guru gembira dengan pengalaman mengajar secara atas talian. Selain itu, penggunaan alatan digital membantu dalam membangunkan kemahiran bertutur pelajar. Walaubagaimanapun, guru - guru masih dalam proses pembelajaran untuk menggunakan alatan digital secara berkesan. Dari sudut cabaran, mereka menghadapi isu yang sama di mana terdapat guru - guru yang mengambil langkah untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut. Guru - guru mestilah memperkasakan diri dengan kesesuaian, kreativiti, usaha dan rancangan yang tersusun bagi membantu pelajar dalam kemahiran bertutur.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MOE	-	Ministry of Education
PdPR	-	Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran di Rumah (Home-based Learning)

LIST OF SYMBOLS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The educational situation in Malaysia has changed dramatically following the spread of Covid-19 across the globe. There are currently more than 1.2 billion students in 186 countries who are out of school due to the pandemic (Li & Lalani, 2020). With this sudden shift away from the classroom in many parts of the world, the Malaysian government has revised the adoption of digital learning in the Malaysian educational system. Innumerable language applications, virtual tutoring platforms, video conferencing tools and learning software have been presented to teachers and students to ensure the continuity of the educational process in this challenging time.

Nonetheless, the administration and evolution of digital tools in education in Malaysia has begun since 1976 (Mukherjee & Tow, 1984). Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) was fast to realise the use of digital tools could be convenient for the Malaysian educational system (Ebrahimi, 2016). The educational authorities have viewed digital tools as a medium to transform both teaching and learning in traditional classroom-based, online, by innovating the digital tools and resources where 21st-century learners can explore, interpret, analyse and express themselves. Looking through the lens of speaking skills, it plays a major role in language acquisition apart from listening, reading and writing. It works as a means to transmit ideas and messages to others. Musliadi (2016) defined speaking as a way to convey information, express opinion and feeling, share experiences and maintain social relationships by communicating with others. It is, in fact, active use of language to convey meaning, and that spoken language is how a new language is discovered, understood, mastered and learned for young learners (Hosni, 2014).

During the pandemic, ESL teachers are required to teach all four skills using their creativity and expertise with the reference of the CEFR-aligned curriculum. This is to ensure all skills are given equal weightage despite the challenges both teachers and students are undergoing. Hence, this research will examine the concern raised regarding the use of digital learning to support speaking skills.

1.2 Background of the study

Over the years, technology-driven learning has shown to have the potential to expand learning opportunities, enrich experiences, and support greater equality of access around the world. Laptops, social media platforms, mobile phones, tablets as well as the internet open another dimension of teaching and learning methods where these technologies create new, connected relationships between teachers, students, and content to enhance the way the instruction is constructed. Also, technology shapes a more personalized form of learning. Digital learning is done to bring technology and pedagogy together. It is also to address the open education movement, the collaborative process of creating and sharing.

Learners require "real-world" experience to assist them to be more confident and realistic. By having more confidence in making decisions, it would result in the ability to complete assigned work. Given the advancement of technology - learners are more able to simulate or replicate real-life scenarios and these would help in better preparing them to adapt in the real life. Digital learning provides ample opportunities for learners to work together to learn skills and knowledge. However, it all depends upon the kind of technology used to create the teaching-learning environments.

While the outbreak of Covid-19 invading the world, the education system has shifted dramatically from the early years of education until tertiary institutions. Previously, digital learning was popularly considered as part of pedagogical technologies. Ghavifekr et al (2015) argued that a technology-based classroom promotes better learning experience compared to traditional classroom. However, it seems that it would gradually replace the formal education system if the current circumstance persists over time. The actual integration of digital learning while learners are home-based is yet another level. Although technology is known to make

learning joyful and active rather than dull, it may be a distinct case when it comes to implementing full online learning delivery at home.

Numerous studies have been conducted prior to the pandemic to see the whole context of digital learning in the various spectrum. Teachers nowadays are ICT literate, but it is undeniably vital to learn how the technologies can be used meaningfully in the classroom (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwicht 2010). In general, teachers express an inexperienced feeling in their curriculum to integrate digital teaching strategies (Coyle, Yañez, & Verdú, 2010). Most of the countries worldwide concur to employ virtual classrooms to sustain learning as they cannot afford to seize learning amid the outbreak. Lederman (2020) stated that this crisis makes teachers and students felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience.

As speaking skills is vital to acquire, ESL teachers must find ways to conduct speaking lesson despite the challenges they face. Through the use of various digital tools, they must have the initiative to explore all the possibilities. It becomes an issue on how to conduct speaking lessons effectively while being far apart from the learners.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) shares its aspiration to ensure every student receives equal access to education to achieve personal potential in embracing future undertakings. In other words, students deserve to learn despite not being able to go to school. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education has taken an initiative to introduce Digital Education Learning Initiative Malaysia (DELIma). It is to provide an educational platform through home-based learning following teachers and students' convenience.

According to MOE, home-based learning can be conducted through synchronous or asynchronous learning. Synchronous can be conducted with internet access or digital devices that enable learners to learn in real-time. Teachers can conduct home-based learning through

- I.Educational platforms such as DELIma, Cikgootube, EduWebTv, media social apps, or
- II.Live streaming apps such as Google Meet or Zoom
- III.Gamification, video, e-book, recordings or online tasks.

Home-based learning should be designed according to students' abilities and source readiness. Teachers play a role to conduct the following particulars;

- I. Rearrange Yearly Lesson Plan based on Dokumen Standard Kurikulum dan Pentaksiran (DSKP).
- II. Plan daily lesson plan based on Yearly Lesson Plan hence the syllabus can be conveyed effectively.
- III. Determine the flexible teaching approach based on the current situation with regards to students' conditions.
- IV. Prepare easily accessed resources that suit the teaching approach used.
- V. Ensure students receive tasks and exercises by teachers
- VI. Employ different assessment methods such as quizzes, exercises and projects to determine students' progress.
- VII. Conduct a meeting with parents or caretakers to support students' learning at home
- VIII. Record students' contribution to home-based learning using suitable methods.

In essence, the MOE allows teachers to conduct their lessons according to the curricula. For English language subject, ESL teachers are obliged to abide by the CEFR-aligned curricula that emphasise all four skills without neglecting any of them. The issue that arises is how ESL teachers implement digital learning in teaching speaking skills through various types of tools. While the volume of research concerning Covid-19 and education is vast, there is limited research done on the challenges and potential of employing digital learning to support speaking skills in the Malaysian context. Thus, the challenges and potentials of digital learning must be investigated further so that the transition of traditional classroom learning into digital learning could be accomplished smoothly with the collaborations of the educational authorities and learners.

1.4 Research objectives

This study dived into the current issues of digital learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysian contexts by meeting the following objectives;

1. Recognise the potential use of digital learning for future undertakings.
2. Identify challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching speaking skills through digital learning.
3. Identify the alternatives applied by ESL teachers to support learners' speaking skills.

1.5 Research questions

The following are the research questions of the study;

1. How do ESL teachers perceive the potential use of digital tools in teaching and learning speaking skills?
2. What are the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching speaking skills through digital learning?
3. What are the alternatives applied by ESL teachers to overcome the challenges in teaching speaking skills in class?

1.6 Scope of the study

The research intended to gather data through questionnaires and interviews. The data generated a vivid picture of the ongoing situation. The area of research mainly focuses on speaking skills. It gained a few key insights on how digital learning contributes to supporting the skill. The participants for this study were selected following a purposive sampling procedure. In this respect, the sample for questionnaires were 51 respondents while the sample for interviews was 4 respondents to obtain in-depth views of the issues. The study was conducted among secondary school English teachers in the Johor Bahru district.

1.7 Significance of the study

This study was conducted with the purpose to allow the stakeholders in education to explore the potentials and obstacles to support speaking skills through digital learning. The points highlighted from the investigation will increase learning diversity and opportunities resulting in more choices of what and how to learn. These allow for introspection as ESL teachers always seek ways of redesigning online learning to enhance meaningful learning experiences.

i. School administrators

The head-body of the school may consider the result as baseline data to improve programs for school advancement after the post-pandemic.

ii. For future researchers

The result of this study can also serve as a basis for further study on teaching ESL pertaining to speaking fluency via digital learning. It may serve as an eye-opener to create and innovate digital materials and to use varied and appropriate teaching strategies.

iii. Policymakers

It is also hoped that policymakers under the Ministry of Education would gain benefits from this study, considering teachers' responses and feedback. Also to make changes as required. Speaking skills is crucial as it is part of the fluency component. Every policy done by the ministry in dealing with digital learning will impact learners' progress as a whole.

1.8 Conceptual framework

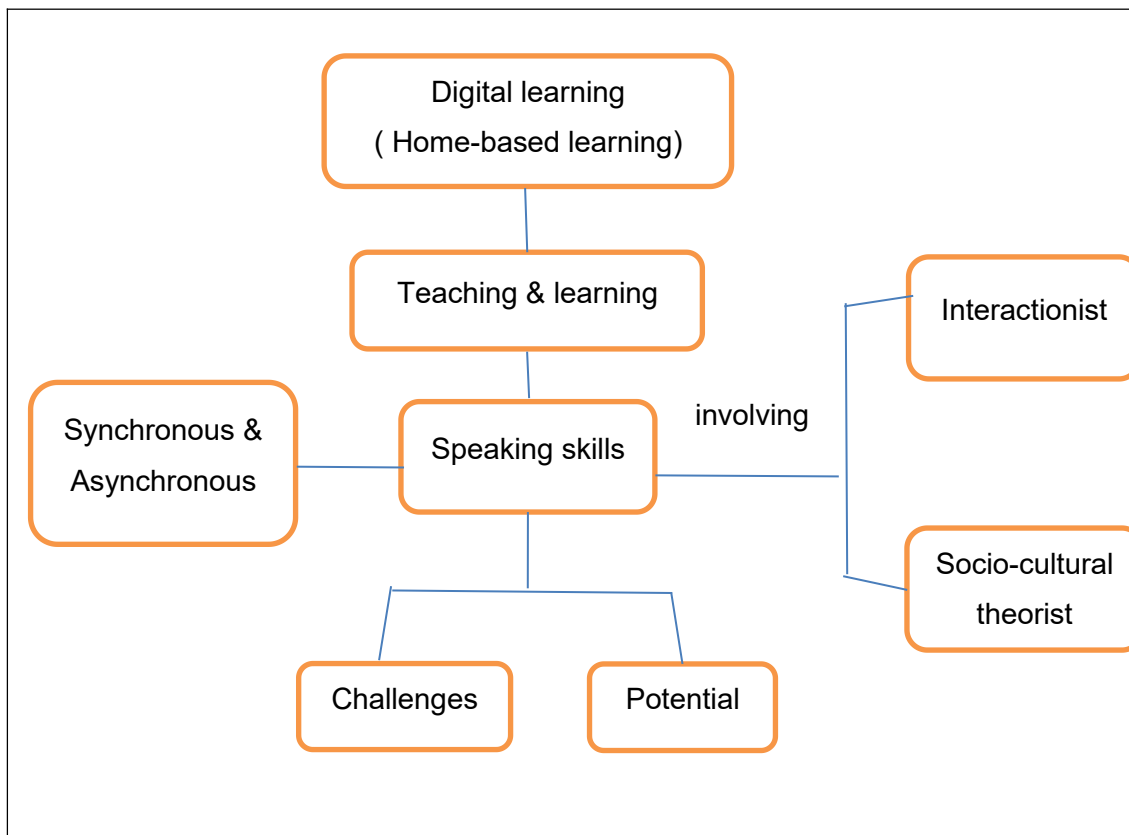


Figure 1.1 Teaching and learning speaking skills through digital learning

Technology is a very powerful tool as it inspires inquiry and excitement in the classroom. As the pandemic runs its course, the Malaysian government is implementing its standard operating procedure that limits people gathering in a small confined space. The regular operation of schools and colleges has been affected by such initiatives. Because the duration of such measures has been extensive – and is likely to continue for a certain time until a vaccine becomes available – Alternative strategies have been placed by the Ministry of Education for students and teachers to continue their lessons when it is not possible to attend school. The focus on approaches that will make schools ready for operating in a healthy setting is through home-based learning which can be synchronous and asynchronous.

In some respect, synchronous virtual learning allows live interaction between teachers and students while they are participating in a lesson. It is conducted in real-time as everyone logs in at a set time and can communicate directly with each other. Unlike asynchronous, teachers and students are temporally dependent, which means

that they must schedule their presence to coincide. Lesson length is usually fixed for a specific amount of time - from a single session to several weeks or months. This mimics the real classroom instruction' (Bernard et al, 2004). Teachers and students can be in rooms that are thousands of miles away and still interact together instinctively as though they were physically co-present. There are no regional limitations; there are temporal limits, however. Digital tools that support synchronous learning include instant messaging platforms such as Telegram and Whatsapp and video conferencing platforms such as Webex and Skype which provide whiteboards and application sharing.

Unlike synchronous learning, asynchronous involves students working with online curricular materials at their own pace and time, under the guidance of a teacher (Friend & Johnston, 2005; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). The teachers and students are separated in time and location hence there are no geographic or temporal constraints. Digital tools that support asynchronous learning include social media platforms such as Instagram or Youtube. Also, teachers may opt for other alternatives such as Google Classroom and BlackBoard. Asynchronous learning tends to be primarily dependent on text and voice independent excerpts when audio recordings are used. Bernard et al (2004) characterised asynchronous learning as 'individually-based as teacher and students do not need to meet virtually for recorded videos are available.

1.9 Limitation of the study

Regardless of the research aim which is to investigate the challenges of the utilisation of digital learning to support speaking skills during the Covid-19 pandemic, there would certainly be several limitations of the study that the researcher could foresee. One of the major limitations of this research is the lack of prior research studies conducted around education during the Covid-19 crisis in the Malaysian context. Citing prior research studies is the foundation to understand and support the research problem that the researcher is currently investigating. There are not ample studies that could perform as the support for the literature review. However, this limitation is also one of the main reasons to conduct this research. The researcher aims to provide more data in this area so future research could be conducted with more underpinning.

Furthermore, the researcher has also chosen the study to be conducted through the phenomenological research design. Thus, the data collected and analysed will be in the form of self-reported data. Self-reported data is limited by the fact that it rarely can be independently verified. These types of data contain several potential sources that could be noted as limitations which are selective memory of the respondents, attribution and exaggeration.

Also, time constraint has become part of the limitation. The insufficient time to study the research problem in detail may affect the result of the study. It is therefore subject to biases in finding the in-depth challenges and potentials. Further research is hoped to continue studying a similar topic in elongated duration hence more extensive results can be found.

1.10 Definition of terms

i.Challenges

Lodge et (2018) defines challenges as difficulties to execute an objective. In this study, ESL teachers face difficulties to provide nuanced and personalized support to help students enhance their learning particularly in speaking.

ii. Potential

UNESCO (2016) defines potential as existing of possibility. In this study, it talks about discovering abilities and chances to develop and succeed further by external assistance.

iii. Digital learning

Whyte (2017) defines digital learning as platforms for teaching and learning that can be used with computers or mobile devices to work with text, images, audio, and video. In this study; digital learning for language learning and teaching may include programmes for editing digital materials such as audio, video and platforms for collaborating and sharing resources such as Google Classroom and Padlet.

iv. Support

Celce-Murcia (2001) defines support as encourage students to actively engage in class through any means. In this study, support refers to develop students' fluency in speaking the target language as much as possible in class

v. Covid-19 Pandemic

WHO (2019) identifies Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as an infectious disease that has infected the world caused by a newly discovered Coronavirus. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, it spreads mainly by droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose. In this study, the Covid-19 pandemic refers to a period where students are required to learn at home through online learning.

1.11 Conclusion

Chapter one discusses the current issue occurring around the globe; learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research, however, attempts to underpin the local context, Malaysia. Despite digital learning brings positive impacts in education, it can be questioned when it is home-based while teachers and students face various challenges to get involved in the learning. Thus, in Chapter 2, the research will discuss further on studies done by others, globally and locally.

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