Technical Analysis of Challenges Faced by EFL Learners in English Language Online Classrooms

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Abstract

English Language Courses in HEIs aim to enhance the communication competence of students with the promotion of four basic language skills. Due to the unprecedented crisis caused by COVID-19, the English Language classroom has witnessed rapid paradigm shift with the advancement of technology. A study is essential to find the predictors of success in online learning analysing the challenges faced by EFL learners. This study focuses on students' perceptions on the efficacy of synchronous online English classes despites the impact of its barriers. It involved 319 undergraduate students of V.V. Vanniaperumal College for Women, Tamilnadu, India. Results of the study indicated that low-speed internet connectivity and lack of interaction with peers are major challenges for language acquisition, however majority of the participants have positive reaction. Computer-assisted teaching pedagogy focussing on team work, grammar exercises, practical sessions, vocabulary games enabled them to overcome the challenges and enhance language skills.

Keywords: Online language learning, challenges of EFL learners, English Language acquisition, Language skills, Barriers to communication

Introduction

E-learning and digital pedagogy have been encouraged by the eminent educators and academicians for a decade of years. There has been a slow growth of interest so far found among the teachers as well as students. Unexpectedly, the outbreak of COVID19 has entailed every

inquisitive learning mind to have a mad rush to seize the online resources through webinars and MOOCs. Schools, Colleges and Universities have faced an entirely new challenge of teaching via online. The cyberspace has provided a place for students especially in remote villages to open up the magical doors of digital world. However, the learners have ample barriers such as lack of devices, insufficient bandwidth of internet, computer literacy to cope with the new educational setup. The teachers across the world especially in the under-developed countries have confronted many impediments to implement the virtual classroom. They have overcome those limitations with commitment and positive outlook in adapting ICT-enabled teaching pedagogy. It offers the learners a conducive ambience to learn by adopting strategies of flipped classroom. Definitely, there is a radical pedagogical change in language teaching as well as in learners' behaviour. Hence, this paradigm shift in education can be accepted as successful only if its efficacy is measured in terms of the enrichment of its beneficiaries' knowledge, skill and attitude.

Tertiary Learning aims to enhance the communication skills of learners in order to prepare them for the employment. But English is taught as a course rather than as a medium of communication. A course teacher of any discipline focusses on the way to teach the concept comprehensible for the learners. However, the EFL teacher, coping with the native language barriers, facilitates the learner to participate in the classroom interactions and focusses on the language skill development. Thus, teaching English Language to the foreign language learners has become an everyday challenge to an English teacher. It is mandatory for a language teacher to inculcate positive attitude towards the language, to impart knowledge on the components of language, and to enhance the four basic language skills. Hence, the English Language Teachers have to ensure that the teaching method should match with the methods of learning and also enrich the communicative competence of the learners. Teaching English Language through activities and games usually motivates the learners to develop a constructive attitude towards the language acquisition. The pandemic lockdown forced the English Language Learners to adopt the technology-based learning. Traditional pedagogy and Technology collectively could facilitate outcome-based English Language learning. During online classes, students faced many barriers such as poor reception of audio, less reading and writing practice, and lack of eye-to-eye contact with the faculty. Hence, the identification of challenges associated with successful online

learning of English Language would provide the necessary information for teachers to adopt feasible practices.

Literature Review

In India, EFL classes have been following umpteen teaching strategies to facilitate language acquisition for the students whose first language is not English (Piller, 2005). The rapid development of technology paves way for drastic change in the global teaching pedagogy. A plethora of studies proved that using technology in English Classrooms empower students to acquire language proficiency. The revolutionary method of teaching expects the faculty members and students of the 21st century to have digital skills for improving teaching and learning through integrating skills and knowledge. Students with digital illiteracy, poor socio-economic condition, learning disability find web-based online learning as highly challenging activity. Even though online language learning materials have high potential to equip an EFL learner with language skills, students encounter problems with internet connection (Zamari, 2012). Nevertheless, the students provided with electronic gadgets, digital education, and hi-fi technology have positive attitude towards e-learning and consider it as an effective tool for language learning. The digital natives find that online learning platforms facilitate user-friendly language learning ambience and engage them with new learning experience (Cakrawati, 2017).   However, there was a steady fall in performance with regard to the language proficiency of learners at the tertiary level (Abilasha, 2018).

Comparing online and face-to-face English Language learning helped the HEIs to find students' needs and limitations of teaching pedagogy (Marta, 2018). EFL students regarded that the face-to-face interaction is necessary for the best English learning (Altunay, 2019). During Pandemic lockdown, the educators faced a tremendous crisis due to the lack of technological knowledge, insufficient electronic gadgets and inability to adapt into the digital platform for teaching and learning. Most EFL learners are not satisfied with continuing online learning, as they could not fulfil the expected progress in language learning performance (Mahyoob, 2020). It has become mandatory for the English Language teachers to be prepared and flexible in adopting cyber classroom management strategies in order to maximise e-learning potential

(Lukas & Yunus, 2021). The EFL teachers explored technology enhanced foreign language learning and maintained students' engagement (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Moreover, the issue of poor internet connectivity is to be redeemed for effective online classes (Jomana & Farrah, 2021). Further, no study has been attempted to probe into students' opinions on the impact of the challenges they face in synchronous virtual language classes.

Research Problem

In the traditional face-to-face classroom, the task-based language teaching enables students to gain good score in practical sessions, campus interviews and summative examination. It helps the English Language Teachers of Colleges comprehend the learning process and language competence of the EFL learners. But the advent of synchronous online English classes during the pandemic lockdown to some extent dampens the language learning process of the EFL learners. This critical statement shoots down the following questions.

1. What were the challenges that impede an EFL learner to acquire language skills in virtual English language classroom during Pandemic Lockdown?
2. Were the language skills acquired by the EFL learner in virtual English language classroom?
3. Was the EFL learner satisfied with the effectiveness of synchronous online classes?

There is a dire need to critically reflect upon the above issues to comprehend the efficacy of online English classes. The present research aims to analyse the factors that impede the English Language acquisition of the EFL learners during COVID19 Pandemic Lockdown and also to explore the reaction of them towards synchronous online English Language classes.

Research Hypothesis

Despite the challenges and limitations of synchronous online English language classes, the language teachers through blended learning helped the EFL learners to overcome technological, psychological and learning barriers and acquire the four basic language skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing.
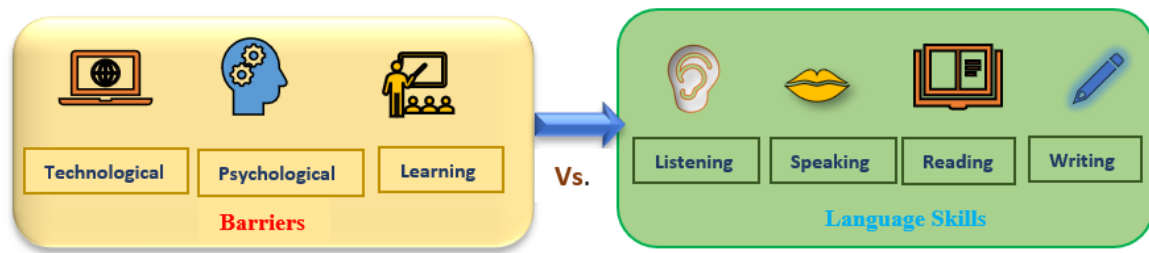
Figure 1. Online Language Learning Challenges

This study endeavours to answer the problem questions by testifying the following hypotheses.

H1: Students were unsatisfied with the efficacy of synchronous virtual English classrooms as they could not acquire the language skills due to the barriers in online classes.

H2: Students were satisfied with the efficacy of synchronous virtual English classrooms as they acquired the language skills overcoming the barriers in online classes.

Method

The participants of this study were students of different disciplines who learnt English Language as a part of their curriculum in the first four semesters of their undergraduate degree programme during the academic year 2020 to 2021in V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, an Autonomous Institution in India. The curriculum of Part II English Course concentrates on improving the communicative competence of students by developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. It includes literary texts, grammar, conversational English and vocabulary enrichment. For the total population of 2376 (I year-1306; II year-1070), the sample size is 331.

This study collected data directly from students in December 2021 and carried out a quantitative analysis. A structured survey of five heads was designed in Google Forms especially for this study to identify student's synchronous online class challenges in enhancing English language proficiency levels in the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A 44-item questionnaire consisting of predominantly five-point Likert scale closed questions was distributed to 441 students through e-mail. Participation to the survey was voluntary. The names of students were not collected. A pre-test was conducted in which it was answered by 16 students and their feedback on the questionnaire was considered to reframe the questions. Totally, 319 students (I year -165; II year - 154) responded to the questionnaire.

Table 1. List of variables

Heads	No. of Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Reliability Scale
Personal details	9	.824	Good
Technological barriers	3	.719	Acceptable
Psychological barriers	4	.801	Good
Learning barriers	18	.904	Excellent
Opinion towards online class	8	.856	Good

Cronbach's Alpha index was performed to measure the reliability of the opinion given by the respondents towards the questionnaire items.
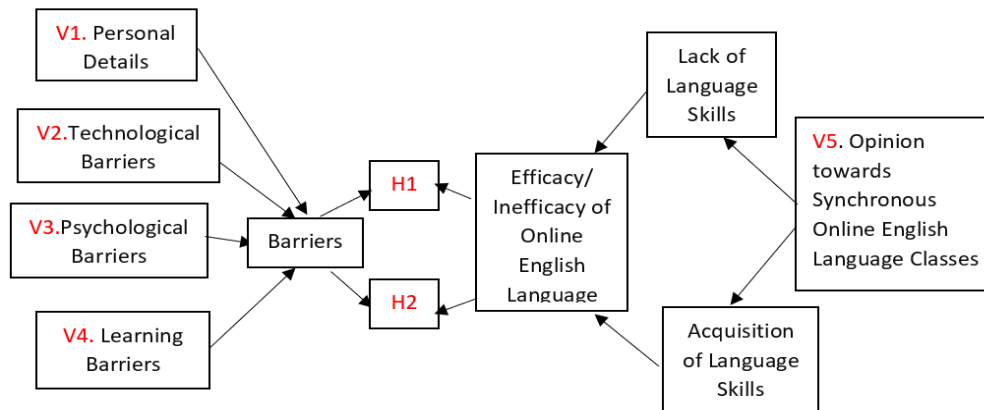
Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the study

Data Analysis and Findings

Data collected were statistically analysed through SPSS to evaluate students' perception on the utility of Synchronous Online English Language Classes (SOELC).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Profile

S.No.	Question Item		No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Location	City	26	8.2
		Town	160	50.2
		Village	133	41.7

2.	Monthly Income of the family	<= 5000	71	22.3
		5001 to 10000	134	42.0
		10001 to 50000	64	20.1
		50001 to 100000	37	11.6
		>100000	13	4.1
3.	First Graduate of the family	Yes	161	50.5
		No	158	49.5
4.	Possession of own electronic gadget	Yes	223	69.9
		No	96	30.1

Table 2 shows the population distribution based on student characteristics. Among the nine descriptors in students' profile, the factors which may have strong influence on language learning process during the unprecedented pandemic time are Location, Monthly Income, First Graduate, and Possession of own electronic gadget.

Major Challenges in SOELC

Table 3 shows that among the technological barriers such as inadequate technological gadgets, low-speed internet connection, and digital illiteracy, the respondents found low-speed internet connection (m:3.66) as the major barrier to learn English Language. Among the emotional barriers - lack of motivation to learn the foreign language, external disturbances at home, short attention span, constant exposure to digital screen - lack of classroom interaction with peer learning(m:3.58) hindered the enhancement of communication skills. In response to open question regarding any other language learning barriers, 67 respondents have pointed out that network issue and unclear audio dissuaded them to listen to the classes in foreign language. Some referred to the lack of communication between learners and teacher. Both barriers seem to be common challenges in virtual classrooms. Lack of motivation has the lowest mean score 3.33 which implies that the learners were interested to learn English via online.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Barriers

Barriers		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Score
Tech	Inadequate technological gadgets affected my foreign language	34	129	109	37	10	3.44
		10.7	40.4	34.2	11.6	3.1	

	Low-speed Internet connection reduced my interest in listening	64	136	77	31	11	**3.66**
		20.1	42.6	24.1	9.7	3.4	
	Inability to handle technological gadgets was a hindrance to attend do grammar exercises through gamification	53	123	92	37	14	3.51
		16.6	38.6	28.8	11.6	4.4	
Psychological barriers	There was lack of motivation to adapt myself to online classroom	38	112	103	48	18	3.33
		11.9	35.1	32.3	15.0	5.6	
	External disturbances at home distracted me from listening to	51	101	104	42	21	3.37
		16	31.7	32.6	13.2	6.6	
	Short attention span and too much exposure to digital screen disturbed my mind to comprehend the lessons taught in English.	47	118	100	42	12	3.46
		14.7	37.0	31.3	13.2	3.8	
	The lack of Peer-to-Peer learning (interaction friends via Google Meet) hindered my language learning process and the enhancement of my communication skills.	60	120	97	30	12	**3.58**
		18.8	37.6	30.4	9.4	3.8	

Acquisition of Language Skills

This study has analysed each of the language skills separately in order to determine if there were any differences in the development of each skill in virtual learning environment. The survey has considered a few significant challenges that may influence the learning process and language skill acquisition.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Learning Barriers

	Learning Barriers	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Mean Score**
Listening	**The gap between teacher's teaching pace and my level of comprehension discouraged me**	45	131	91	38	14	**3.49**
		14.4	41.1	28.5	11.9	4.4	
	Lack of language competence was a hindrance to understand the	31	122	105	45	16	3.34
		9.7	38.2	32.9	14.1	5.0	

	Literary essence of the prescribed texts was not absolutely absorbed by me due to the absence of	45	116	106	39	13	3.44
		14.1	36.4	33.2	12.2	4.1	
Speaking	**Communication became dreadful to me in online classes as I was a passive participant.**	45	129	94	38	13	**3.49**
		14.1	40.4	29.5	11.9	4.1	
	Due to the influence of mother tongue, it was difficult to organise and express the thoughts in English using appropriate vocabulary.	47	118	102	39	13	3.46
		14.7	37.0	32.0	12.2	4.1	
Reading	It was difficult to get the correct pronunciation of English words during online classes.	42	114	96	54	13	3.37
		13.2	35.7	30.1	16.9	4.1	
	The less practice of reading literary texts during online classes resulted in the inability of decoding the meaning of texts.	51	132	91	31	14	**3.55**
		16.0	41.4	28.5	9.7	4.4	
Writing	**It was highly challenging to learn the rules of grammar in online classes and write in correct English Language sentence structure.**	47	139	86	38	9	**3.55**
		14.7	43.6	27.0	11.9	2.8	
	It was extremely hard to learn the mechanics of writing (spelling and punctuation) during online classes and use them effectively in written composition.	35	128	106	41	9	3.44
		11.0	40.1	33.2	12.9	2.8	

Table 4 shows that the following barriers are found to be the major challenges for the EFL learners in SOLEC — the less practice of reading literary texts during online classes resulted in the inability of decoding the meaning of texts(3.55); it was highly challenging to learn rules of grammar in online classes and write in correct English Language sentence structure(3.55); the

gap between teacher's teaching pace and learners' level of comprehension discouraged them from following the language of the teacher(3.49); communication became dreadful to students in online classes as they were passive participants(3.49).

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Language Acquisition

	Language Acquisition Process	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Score
Listening	**The visual presentation of literary texts and interactive grammar classes kept me attentive.**	61	134	93	24	7	**3.68**
		19.1	42	29.2	7.5	2.2	
	I could summarise correctly what I listened to in the virtual English	56	128	101	29	5	3.63
		17.6	40.1	31.7	9.1	1.6	
Speaking	**I felt comfortable in my Part II English practical session in online classes.**	83	126	81	20	9	**3.80**
		26.0	39.5	25.4	6.3	2.8	
	I was encouraged to interact in English more confidently and clarify the doubts in online classes.	66	126	101	19	7	3.71
		20.7	39.5	31.7	6.0	2.2	
	I could converse in English with correct accent and pronunciation successfully.	58	129	110	16	6	3.68
		18.2	40.4	34.5	5.0	1.9	
Reading	**I have learnt to read many English words correctly and I have read louder and more confidently in English atleast once during Part II online classes.**	68	131	106	9	5	**3.78**
		21.3	41.1	33.2	2.8	1.6	
	Audios and videos played in virtual language classes have taught me to read with accurate accent.	65	132	92	22	8	3.70
		20.4	41.4	28.8	6.9	2.5	
Writing	I had enough practice to write in English during online classes and so I learnt the spelling of difficult words.	50	133	110	22	4	3.64
		15.7	41.7	34.5	6.9	1.3	
	I was able to enrich my English vocabulary and prepare essays for	56	129	108	22	4	**3.66**
		17.6	40.4	33.9	6.9	1.3	

	the online examinations.						

This section contains positive statements that highlight the utility of virtual classroom. It has included the practice of possible ways to overcome the barriers that might have enabled learners to enhance their language skills. When comparing the mean score analysis in Tables 4 and 5, the mean score for all the statements in language acquisition section is higher than that of the learning barriers. Thus, the knowledge was constructed regardless of obstacles. It is found that the learners were able to face challenges and through the classroom teaching practices, they gained the language skills. The research has suggested that the visual presentation of literary texts — movies, YouTube videos, ppts — may help the learners to follow the teaching pace of the professor; the passive participation of the learners shall be broken through viva or practical classes — self-introduction, group discussion, poem recitation, mock interview — in which the speaking skill could be enriched. The regular practice of making learners read louder could rectify their inability to decode the meaning of the texts. Generally, the major hindrance for the learners to gain writing skill is the lack of knowledge on grammar. They find it hard to be participatory due to the monotonous classes. But the interactive grammar classes via Quizizz, Nearpod, Pear Deck help them being attentive and write in English.

Table 6. Challenges vs. Measures

Language Skills	Learning Barriers	Language Acquisition	Gap Score
Listening Skill	3.42	3.66	0.24
Speaking Skill	3.48	3.73	0.25
Reading Skill	3.46	3.74	0.28
Writing Skill	3.50	3.65	0.15

Table 6 explicates that the EFL learners found it difficult to follow the measures to beat the challenges on acquiring writing skill (mean:3.50 & gap score:0.15). The study suggests that effective teaching and learning strategies have to be adopted to improve writing skill. Overall, students have overcome the barriers to obtain language skills.

Efficacy of SOELC

The questionnaire inquired about the opinion of students towards the efficacy SOELC. The learners have expressed their opinion on the practices as well as the methods adopted to beat the challenges. The respondents have a positive reaction towards SOELC as shown in the Table 7. The highest mean score of 3.71 implies that SOELC has helped the learners to adopt self-reading and self-learning which is the major objective of Higher Education. It is inferred that they were highly satisfied on the development of reading skill and they expect more grammar exercises for improving writing skill. The chance to build vocabulary and exercises to improve creative writing are the areas also to be focussed on. As par with the above results, next to Reading Skill, the SOELC has assisted the EFL learners to acquire Speaking and Listening Skills. Further, it is suggested that good rapport with teacher and team activities have to be concentrated on in virtual classrooms. Thus, the hypothesis H2 - Students were satisfied with the efficacy of synchronous virtual English classrooms as they acquired the language skills overcoming the barriers in online classes – is proven.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Learners' Satisfaction on SOLEC

Items	Outstanding	Very Good	Good	Average	Fair	Mean Score
Understanding difficult lessons/concepts taught in English	46	142	107	12	12	3.59
	14.42	44.51	33.54	3.76	3.76	
Grasping the meaning of English words while teaching	57	131	103	11	17	3.62
	17.87	41.07	32.29	3.45	5.33	
Scope for adopting self-reading and self-learning	64	147	77	13	18	**3.71**
	20.06	46.08	24.14	4.08	5.64	
Having good rapport with teacher through classroom interaction	58	138	84	18	21	3.61
	18.18	43.26	26.33	5.64	6.58	
Overcoming language barrier through active participation in team work	63	132	92	10	22	3.64
	19.75	41.38	28.84	3.13	6.90	
Development of writing skill through grammar exercises	49	145	82	10	33	3.52
	15.36	45.45	25.71	3.13	10.34	
Enhancement of creativity through writing exercises	54	135	91	16	23	3.57
	16.93	42.32	28.53	5.02	7.21	

Chances to build vocabulary	53	136	92	16	22	3.57
	16.61	42.63	28.84	5.02	6.90	

Conclusion

The findings of the study show that the EFL learners of V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women in Synchronous Online English Language Classes have overcome challenges to acquire language skills and hence they have positive attitude towards virtual classrooms. To the open question regarding the barriers, students replied positively.

Online learning was really too good. It was a new experience for both facilities and students. It is a platform where we explore ourselves and our professors have made it easier for us. I personally don't find any barriers in online learning.

I was satisfied with the online classes. The teachers did their best amidst the pandemic situation. I did not feel any barriers.

Understanding the language at the time while teaching became a slight difficult thing because of leaving the practice of speaking and reading, but after sometime we could recognize the mistakes and exact meaning of the language.

The low-speed internet connection or the inadequate data discouraged them to listen to online classes.

Network issue was very common problem for everyone. Interaction between students and teacher was missing when compared to offline classes.

Lack of internet facilities, online study was not comfortable and doesn't interact with teachers and doesn't discuss with our classmates. (sic)

Results of the study highlight that the students demanded practice exercises for grammar which has to be taught interactively. 87 respondents mentioned that Grammar is the hard nut to crack for them. Nevertheless, efficacy of SOELC proclaimed that during the lockdown, the EFL learners were encouraged to become autonomous learners.

The impact of independent variables – learners' profile, socio-economic status, locality, stream - on acquisition of language skills and opinion towards online learning was not considered. If included, it might have given a deeper insight into the research questions. There is

a scope for further developing the study with a comparison of online and face-to-face learning that could explore students' needs to adopt language acquisition.

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