

Teachers' experiences of online teaching in English as a second language classes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered the conventional face-to-face to a new modality of teaching and learning, all across the globe. Several changes have occurred as the pandemic ran its course and became a challenge for the majority of teachers. In this regard, this study aimed to explore teachers' experiences of online teaching in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study indicated that although others were getting accustomed to the use of technology in the teaching-learning process, the majority of language teachers expressed that online teaching has several limitations, such as access to the Internet and ownership of technological devices, classroom management in terms of low students' participation and teachers' readiness to facilitate online teaching, which might affect their experience in teaching ESL online. Hence, the researchers recommend that as the present situation continues to challenge the quality of education during these trying times, educators should have additional training in technology and should be given enough resources and support to ensure positive outcomes for the students.

Keywords: Teaching experiences, online learning, English as a second language (ESL), COVID-19 pandemic;

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, since first reported at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, became a public health emergency and one of the biggest calamities humanity has ever faced. It has profoundly altered the conventional face-to-face to a new model of teaching and learning. Many countries, according to Putri et al. (2020), have decided to close schools, colleges and universities as a precautionary measure to mitigate the spread of the said virus – thrusting schools and universities to disrupt traditional forms of face-to-face learning, giving rise to online-facilitated learning (Syahrin & Salih, 2020). As posited by Shahzad et al. (2020), educational institutions opted to adopt online learning as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning, as suggested by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations.

Online learning, as defined by Bailey and Lee (2020), uses computer hardware, software and educational theory and practice to facilitate learning. Hence, learning is separated concerning time as teachers and students should not have physical participation as they are situated in different locations at the time of the teaching process (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). In a language classroom, instructors create and manage educational resources to help improve students' learning. However, as the pandemic runs its course, learning online has become a challenge and pressing concern to teachers and students since distance learning has not been part of most educational institutions around the globe. As described in the study conducted by Hassan, Mirza, and Hussain (2020), the COVID-19 crisis resulted in a radical shift in the teaching–learning process as teachers and learners adapted to new technology-integrated pedagogy. Faculty are required to have higher levels of technological competency in navigating the requisite software to keep students engaged in learning – enough to significantly intensify workloads – shifting teaching content and materials into the online space (Allen, Rowan, & Singh, 2020). As discussed in the study of Cutri, Mena, and Whiting (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic forced the majority of traditional faculty into online teaching. Faculty, including teacher educators, were thrust to implement online teaching without a choice but to shift their pedagogical approaches and adapt to online distance education even if they did not feel properly prepared to do so. In addition, a study conducted by Jokinen and Mikkonen (2013) found that early exposure to technology-mediated learning varied among teachers. Others may have enough experience while others may have only utilised online teaching to deliver material via the Internet – once. With this, some teachers only used the online environment as a depository for learning material. Moreover, access to technology and the Internet, socio-economic status, training and experience, institutional or state-level mandates, and age/development of learners could have influenced the experiences of language learners, especially since little is known about how language educators carry out language teaching amid the COVID-19 crisis (Moser, Wei, & Brenner, 2021). This study is further supported by Bailey and Lee (2020); in their study entitled 'Learning from Experience amid COVID-19: Benefits, Challenges, and Strategies in Online Teaching', it was pointed out that many language instructors had a hard time adapting to technology-based teaching due to the lack of experience in online teaching. Furthermore, the same study showed that language instructors who are unfamiliar with the new learning arrangement had experienced difficulty in implementing courses through online class delivery. Indeed, the radical shift from traditional classroom-based teaching to online education had become a significantly difficult challenge for both teachers and language learners. The current situation has significantly affected students'

attitudes towards online learning since all the students are not trained accordingly and do not have the IT facilities, so they have some genuine concerns about it (Shahzad et al., 2020). In the study conducted by Famularsih (2020), it was found that students are most likely cynical about learning online. They feel forced to engage in distance learning, especially with the absence of electronic devices and Internet connections at home. These tools are very important for the teaching and learning process such as laptops, computers or mobile phones that will make it easier for them to participate and engage in the online teaching and learning process. Digital activities and the possibility of having technical issues, including audio and video problems, may also inhibit learners' engagement in the class or activity (Bailey & Lee, 2020). These challenges certainly have an impact on education, particularly on students' growth (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Despite growing concerns in carrying out online learning, Cakrawati (2017) stated that technological devices could be utilised by students to facilitate the new learning arrangement. Since students nowadays are viewed as digital natives, they are exposed to technology and a media-driven environment, which is a great help to facilitate online learning. In the English classroom, social media platforms could also be useful to language learners to discuss relevant global issues using the English language (Cakrawati, 2017).

In a nutshell, while others support online education as an avenue for students to experience learning with a variety of applications and online tools, the radical shift towards digital and distance learning received drawbacks and criticisms (Syahrin & Salih, 2020). According to Whalen (2020), educators have been ill-prepared to teach with technology. Such a challenge could significantly affect students' language learning in particular. To address this gap, the following research questions will be discussed in this paper to explore teachers' experiences of online teaching in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes during the COVID-19 pandemic and to better understand the transition and its consequences on learning ESL as students are getting accustomed to the use of technology in the teaching–learning process:

1. What challenges do the teachers encounter in carrying out online ESL classes amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect teachers' methods of teaching in carrying out online ESL classes?

2. Research design and methods

To explore teachers' experiences of online teaching in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, a narrative research design was used in this qualitative research – a purposive sampling procedure was also followed in this study. According to Martin (2018), purposive sampling is frequently used to gain access to knowledgeable people – those with in-depth knowledge of specific topics, which maybe a result of their professional job, power, network connections, expertise or experience. There is little benefit in seeking a random sample when most of the random samples may be largely ignorant of particular issues and unable to comment on matters of interest to the researcher, in which case a purposive sample is vital.

Regarding choosing purposively the respondents in this study, the researchers selected language instructors from Caraga State University in Cabadbaran City, Philippines. According to Butina (2015), in qualitative research, the sample size is difficult to determine since there are no

set guidelines for sample size. The size of the sample depends on the questions being asked, the theoretical framework, the type of data collected, resources and time and other factors. In addition, Martin (2018) mentioned that there is no clear-cut or simple answer for the sample size, for it will depend on a large array of factors including the size and nature of the population from which the sample is drawn. At Caraga State University, there are only five ESL instructors – 1 from Laboratory High School and 4 college instructors particularly from the General Education Department teaching ESL. However, only 3 of them gave their consent to be interviewed. Although there are many ESL educators in the City of Cabadbaran, most of them employed modular distance learning as a primary learning source, specifically those coming from the Department of Education. Several private institutions in the city have also implemented modular distance learning. Hence, the three ESL university instructors were interviewed to complete the study. All instructors are graduates of any English-related course and are teaching a majority of English communication courses during the academic year 2021–2022 at Caraga State University, Cabadbaran city. Although these respondents may not be representative and their remarks may not be generalisable, the main goal of such selection is to obtain in-depth information about their experiences with teachers' technological competence in learning ESL online. With that in mind, a specific distinction upon choosing purposively the respondents was made to separate either modular or blended to fully online teaching, given that there is stark contrast between the above-mentioned learning delivery modalities (Bailey & Lee, 2020).

This study employed structured interviews to obtain data and achieve the study objectives. Questions in the interview generally involved open-ended questions. It was completely performed online using Google Meet. Conducting an interview using the said videoconferencing service is the best method to collect data as the pandemic is still actively spreading around the globe. It aims to gain an in-depth explanation and description of teachers' experiences of online teaching in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers set a schedule for the interview which was recorded with the consent of the instructors as the respondents of the study. Only those who gave their consent to participate in the study were covered. The interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. For ethical consideration, before the interview, the respondents were informed that any data or information collected will be stored in an encrypted or password-protected device, and will be destroyed soon after being transcribed and analysed. The researcher also informed that participants' names would not be used throughout this study to ensure their privacy. Thus, everything will be kept confidential.

To analyse the qualitative data gathered, the researcher utilised Terry et al.'s (2017) thematic analysis. A free trial of the latest version of an automatic content analysis software package – NVivo produced by QSR International – was also used by the researchers to analyse the data. In thematic content analysis, qualitative data are analysed holistically for broad themes and patterns. Thus, the answers given by the respondents were categorised into several patterns or sub-themes before the researchers proceeded with the report by writing the interview results.

For the development of the research instrument, researchers crafted online interview questions which were evaluated and assessed by a pool of experts in the field of English language teaching and qualitative research study. The questions in the interviews focused on exploring teachers' experiences of online teaching in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Results and discussions

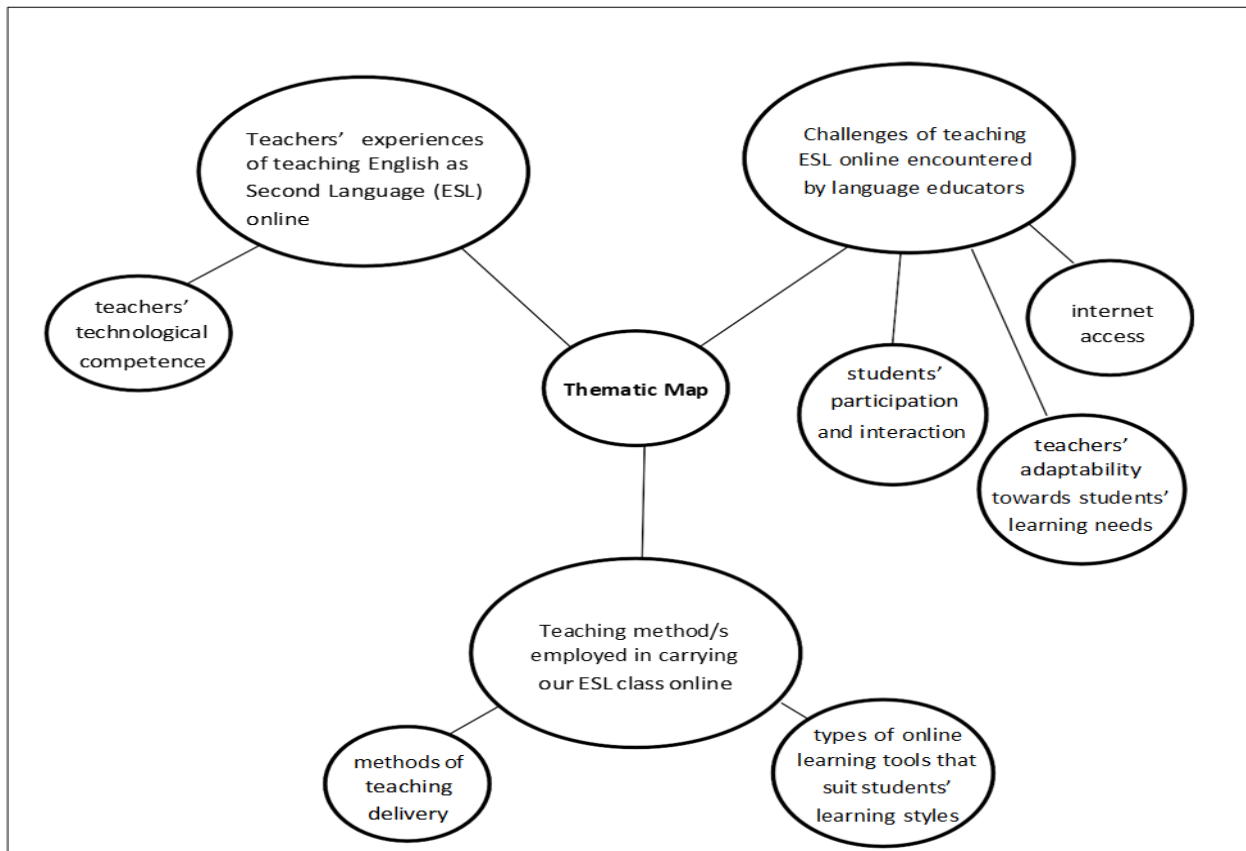


Figure 1. Thematic map

Figure 1 shows the six minor themes that were created during the interview analysis – Internet access, types of online learning tools that suit students' learning styles, students' participation and interaction, teachers' adaptability towards students' learning needs, methods of teaching delivery and teachers' technological competence. The themes were then classified into three major or main themes, depending on the answer to the research questions. The themes were classified as follows:

1. Teachers' experiences of teaching ESL online.
2. Challenges of teaching ESL online encountered by language educators.
3. Teaching method(s) employed in carrying out ESL classes online.

3.1. Teachers' experiences of ESL Online

The respondents had the same experience in teaching ESL online when all of them mainly utilised Google Meet and Google Classroom in their synchronous and asynchronous classes. The said online learning tools had been implemented by some teachers as an attempt to integrate technology into the teaching and learning process in the classroom. It also promotes both inquiry-

based and independent learning since the online platforms facilitate interactions between teachers and students, although they are not in the same room. Navigating the requisite online learning tools became extremely practical and convenient for them, particularly in keeping the students engaged in learning as the pandemic runs its course – enabling instructors to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication. The following are excerpts manifested by the interviewees:

'When I did asynchronous classes, it's only Google Classroom, PPT or Canva. And then Google Forms and then handouts—scanned copies of the book that I'm using. For the asynchronous, I'm using Google Meet and Google Form. And then in the future, I'll be using bamboozle. Hopefully I can use that. And then also, handouts, scanned copies from the books'. (Teacher 3)

'Based on CHED memorandum, we're doing flexible learning. One of our tools or methods used in CSUCC is online learning in which we use platforms like Google Meet or Zoom and Google Classroom'. (Teacher 2)

'For example, like Canva, Google Meet and Google Classroom mainly are the platforms I use'. (Teacher 1)

According to Allen et al. (2020), the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe has profoundly altered the conventional face-to-face to a new mode of teaching and learning. Several changes have occurred as the pandemic runs its course, including the use of technology-mediated instructions to facilitate online learning, paving the way for educators to adopt technology in education including the conduct of synchronous virtual classes through Google Classroom, which enabled them to interact with their students in real-time. It was posited in the study conducted by Kim (2020) that online learning experiences through distance education can either be done asynchronously or synchronously. Asynchronous learning does not occur in the same place or at the same time, thus students can choose their own time for participation in learning through different media tools or sources – Google Classroom, email or other learning management systems available that facilitate information-sharing outside the constraints of time and place among a network of people. As mentioned by Iftakhar (2016), Google Classroom is a learning platform that merely aims at creating, distributing and grading assignments. It was officially introduced as a feature of Google Apps for Education in August 2014. In asynchronous learning, students can log into, communicate and complete activities at their own pace. On the contrary, synchronous learning activities occur through live video and/or audio conferencing with immediate feedback. This kind of learning tool is real-time. It is like a virtual classroom that allows students to ask and teachers to answer questions instantly, through instant messaging (Kim, 2020).

3.2. Challenges of teaching ESL online encountered by language educators

Although others viewed the current situation in education as an avenue to be acquainted with the new approach towards teaching and learning, others also mentioned several limitations of learning online such as technological barriers in terms of Internet connection and available devices; classroom management in terms of students' participation and interaction; and teachers' adaptability towards students' learning needs. In the study conducted by Syahrin and Salih (2020), it was pointed out that while others support online education as an avenue for students to

experience learning with a variety of applications and online tools, the sudden shift towards digital and distance learning received drawbacks and criticisms. Many language instructors had a hard time to adapt technology-based learning due to a lack of experience in online teaching. Furthermore, it was stated in the same study that language instructors who are unfamiliar with the new learning arrangement had experienced difficulty in implementing courses through online class delivery. In addition, in the study conducted by Cutri et al. (2020), it was mentioned that the majority of traditional faculty were thrust to implement online teaching without a choice but to shift their pedagogical approaches and adapt to distance education, even if they did not feel properly prepared to do so. Furthermore, Whalen (2020) explained that educators have been ill-prepared to teach with technology. Also, with the pressing concern for the faculty to adapt to online teaching-learning, higher levels of technological competency in navigating the requisite software became a challenge – enough to significantly intensify workloads – shifting teaching content and materials into the online space (Allen et al., 2020). In the interview, a few of them mentioned several limitations of language learning online including technological barriers in terms of Internet connection and available devices.

'Attendance was never perfect. Many of the students were not attending the class given that they do not have internet connection. We have no control over that, and even the students. Say that the students will just chat you that they were experiencing power interruption or they run out of mobile data so they could no longer finish your online class, there are many excuses but you just can't say no to them; you just say okay instead. As per instruction we should be lenient, we have to understand circumstances because of the pandemic'. (Teacher 2)

'On my end, I have no problem so far, for as long as you have stable internet connection. I think it is more of a challenge to most of my students in a sense that others have to look for better reception first to connect with the class given that they live in far-flung areas, or others do not have mobile data to connect to the internet. I am also affected with their situations since without the majority of the class, I could not start my discussion. It has to be both of us or all of us to attend the class and have a stable internet connection. That's only my concern, if they do not have internet connection, then it would be very difficult to conduct classes through Google Meet'.

(Teacher 1)

'It will affect my methods of teaching in a way that it limits my discussion, especially in giving further explanations and examples on the subject matter, because again, I have to think and consider the situation of my students. Others just solely rely on mobile data, so they have to minimise their data consumption since they still have other classes to attend. Hence, I tend to limit my discussion and intend to double time. Well for me, I have no problem because we are provided with internet connection in school, but these students were not'. (Teacher 3)

The implementation of online learning as the pandemic runs its course thrust educational institutions around the globe, particularly educators and learners, to have enough Internet quota and accessibility towards the use of electronic devices needed to continue learning. Having such a privilege will help students to follow online learning smoothly. On the contrary, online learning in this pandemic situation has become a challenge for those who do not have an Internet connection and available devices to be used. Studying remotely without adequate facilities and infrastructure at home could affect the teaching and learning process. Such technological barriers

in terms of Internet connection and available devices became a challenge to educators in carrying out English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching online

The second main challenge for language educators in teaching ESL online was classroom management in terms of students' participation and interaction. Huriyah and Agustiani (2018) in their study revealed that interaction is the heart of the teaching–learning process. The more a teacher and learner interact, the more they opt to engage in a meaningful exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas. It was further emphasised that a teacher–student interaction is a great way to scaffold students' learning, thus catapults learners to a higher extent of cognitive lift. As studied by Sari (2018), interaction in a classroom setting is greatly influenced by the way teachers and learners undertake collaborations. In addition, interactive communication in a language classroom is an organised process of learning a specific language. However, the present situation of delivering materials online limits the interaction process between teachers and students. And with the existing challenge in Internet access and available devices, students feel demotivated in participating and interacting throughout the teaching and learning process. Due to these factors, students were gradually losing interest and motivation in joining online classes. This is also felt by some interviewees as shown below.

'It's really challenging, and what makes it challenging is the interactive part. As a teacher, I want my class to be lively, interesting, and interactive since we're teaching about purposive communication, we're teaching about language, and then, all of a sudden, we're facing screens or monitors so, the interaction that you want from a class is really not that good; it's not even present at all. Other students just mute themselves; they would turn off their cameras. So, for me, that's one of the most difficult challenges of this online learning'. (Teacher 2)

'So overall, I would say If I were to rank it from 1 to 10, 10 being the best, I think I will give 6 or 7, that's the highest for me. Because honestly, there is no actual interaction. You can't really be sure, sometimes you think you have given your best and you are satisfied with your discussion, only to find out that during assessment, only few have passed'. (Teacher 1)

'I really have to consider certain situations, because what if my students are just making fun of me, things like that. I have reservations when it comes to online learning, particularly in Google Meet, if we are to compare it to face-to-face basis or classroom setting'. (Teacher 3)

Famularsih (2020) states that teachers as a part of the educational support system should establish an online environment with a sense of community and belongingness to better facilitate interactive and engaging online learning activities for students, to decrease the existing barriers that confined learners in learning at optimum amid this pandemic. Such a move would increase students' motivation to participate in online learning activities.

Furthermore, moving offline conversation classes to a fully online environment poses several challenges, including teachers' adaptability towards students' learning needs. A primary characteristic of online teaching is that digital activities are the centre of students' needs to improve language learning. Despite the growing concern about the delivery of instructions amid the pandemic, educators must still perform a variety of tasks in the process of teaching to support and stimulate students' motivation. Since online learning is relatively new compared with

traditional teaching and learning, teachers are to make specific adjustments to continue teaching the English language amid the COVID-19 situation.

The following statements cover what had been claimed by the interviewees:

'What I've learned from this situation is we really have to keep our activities simple. For example, for the slide presentation, we have to keep it at a minimum. Instead of giving lengthy quiz, you opt for a shorter one so just for the sake of the students.

Also, you have to be lenient all the time, especially on the submission. So, instead of giving 1 and a half hour or 1 hour, you would give them the entire day, 2 days or sometimes even 1 week for a single activity since many of the students could not submit on time'. (Teacher 2)

'We should be sensitive to our students, although sometimes they were unreasonable. But we can't blame them or we can't always compare ourselves to their situation, especially when we were still studying given that right now, everything for them should be done through online. Although they have the privilege to study or to learn at home, it's still not the same because everyone has different ways or different when it comes to learning'. (Teacher 3)

'So first of all, you have to really adjust and feel the needs of your students, you have to be more understanding that not everyone has equal access to internet. So, you have to give them ample time. It was clearly mentioned by our chairperson that we should not give surprise quizzes to our students, especially during our synchronous classes knowing that not everyone could able to attend. We have to be patient and understanding, and we have to make adjustments the way we handle our classes. Do not give them plenty of quizzes, as well as do not bombard them with so much activities'. (Teacher 1)

Although teachers engage ESL students in interesting activities that encourage them to speak in class, it is difficult to do so in the online mode because not all students are comfortable with online learning, and it is even more of a challenge for language teachers to get feedback from passive students. In addition, according to Ying, Siang, and Mohamad (2021), success in online learning and teaching need a grasp of teachers' adaptability towards students' learning needs, as well as creating a strong learning community among class members, for a smooth transition given that the educational system around the globe is in the course of transforming and is adapting to a more contemporary rather than a mere conventional teaching-learning interaction, especially that experiences of change, novelty and uncertainty are common to the present situation.

3.3. Teaching method(s) employed in carrying out ESL classes online

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have led almost every region and global education system, particularly the institutional contexts under strain, thrusting educators to switch to online teaching and learning instantaneously. Its ramifications have proved to be significantly more directly to the online pedagogies employed to suit the interests of both instructors and students (Allen et al., 2020). Despite the difficulties and challenges brought about by the sudden shift in the teaching and learning process, teachers still have to ensure that learning can take place. In this study, respondents have mentioned various methods utilised in teaching

online, particularly the use of authentic learning materials such as lecture videos, oral recitation through video records and educational videos. PowerPoint presentations, game-based activities, online discussion, Google Forms and online quizzes were also utilised.

'I would give them activities. They have to record themselves while doing the activity and submit it. For example, they would record a speech that they made and then they will submit it through Google Classroom. And then I would check it. So, that's one of the few things that would probably help them practice their speaking skills in this distance or flexible learning setup. And then the rest would be really up to them'.

(Teacher 2)

'When I have synchronous classes, I tend to give them oral recitation. I also give them in advance the reading materials so that whenever I start my class, they can still participate knowing that the lesson was already given beforehand—that's how I elicit learning. I also allow them to talk and share their ideas. I always throw questions to them to allow them participate in my class. It is really difficult honestly to engage your students in this online type of learning, especially that they preferred not to open their cameras. Hence, you really have to ask them questions to make sure to engage them and for you to get feedback from your students. I also allow them watch videos as supplementary material. Through these, you can measure and apply what you have been teaching'. (Teacher 1)

'When I have my asynchronous classes, I utilised Google Classroom, PowerPoint Presentation, or Canva. I also use Google Forms and Handouts; scanned copies of the book that I am using. For my synchronous classes, I use Google Meet and Google Form. And in the future, I might use Bamboozle'. (Teacher 3)

According to Moser et al. (2021), delivering online instruction effectively requires knowledge and skills related specifically to online language pedagogy. In addition, Bailey and Lee (2020) accentuated that the teaching methods and instructional practices that employ online teaching were found to be of paramount importance concerning students' expectations and academic achievement in the delivery of instructional courses in online space. All the facets of distance learning mentioned above have significantly affected teachers' experiences of online teaching in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly their performance in delivering knowledge to language students online. Thus, for a successful online learning implementation, the above-mentioned factors must be taken into account.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that although others are getting accustomed to the use of technology in the teaching–learning process, the majority of language teachers expressed that online teaching has several limitations which might affect their experience in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) online. These include access to the Internet and ownership of technological devices, classroom management in terms of low students' participation and teachers' readiness to facilitate online teaching. Also, many learning institutions expect teachers to adopt distance education as part of their regular academic workload. Furthermore, it was found in the study that several online learning tools such as Google Classroom and Google Meet have been utilised by some teachers as an attempt to integrate technology into the delivery of instructions. It was also mentioned in the study that not all students are comfortable with online

learning, and it was even more of a challenge for them to get feedback from passive students. Online pedagogies employed in teaching online were also reshaped to suit the interests of the students.

Undoubtedly, as the pandemic runs its course, learning online has become a challenge and a pressing concern to teachers and students given that distance learning has not been part of most educational systems around the globe. Furthermore, learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic has led educational institutions around the globe to reshape the traditional form of teaching and learning. Many countries have come out with alternatives to make sure that learning is still taking place. Faculty are required to have higher levels of technological competence in navigating the requisite software to keep students engaged in learning – enough to significantly intensify workloads (Allen et al., 2020). The present situation forced the majority of traditional faculty into online teaching, thrusting them to implement distance learning without a choice but to shift their pedagogical approaches and adapt to online distance education even if they did not feel properly prepared to do so (Cutri et al., 2020).

Hopefully, the outcome of this study will aid instructors, students and educational institutions to grasp a better understanding of the efficiency of online teaching, especially in language learning to bridge the digital gap caused by this unprecedented event. Additional training in technology and online teaching methods may also help educators to prepare for the eventuality of remote teaching. While educators worked to adapt instruction, create opportunities for interaction and provide learning experiences in an online environment, growing concerns about outcomes for students despite efforts to come out with alternatives to ensure learning is taking place. As the present situation continues to challenge the quality of education during these trying times, educators will certainly be required to deliver remote education – with enough resources and support to do so in ways that truly ensure positive outcomes for students.

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