

## COVID-19: Challenges of Online Teaching among ESL Educators of Private Higher Learning Institutions in Malaysia

Nalini Arumugam<sup>1</sup>

Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris,  
Akademi Pengajian Bahasa,  
UiTM Shah Alam, Selangor

Geraldine De Mello<sup>2</sup>

Akademi Pengajaran Bahasa  
(Academy of Language Studies)  
UiTM Cawangan Melaka. Kampus Alor Gajah  
Melaka, Malaysia

Selvajothi Ramalingam<sup>3</sup>

Department of Malaysian Languages and Applied Linguistics  
Faculty of Languages & Linguistics  
University of Malaya  
Kuala Lumpur

Mohammad Nor Afandi bin Ibrahim<sup>4</sup>

Akademi Pengajaran Bahasa  
(Academy of Language Studies)  
UiTM Cawangan Melaka. Kampus Alor Gajah  
Melaka, Malaysia

Puspalata C Suppiah<sup>5</sup>

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa,  
UiTM Shah Alam, Selangor  
puspalata@uitm.edu.my

Isai Amutan Krishnan<sup>6\*</sup>

University of Malaya  
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics  
Kuala Lumpur Malaysia

### Bioprofile

1. **Nalini Arumugam** is an associate professor at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia. Her research areas are creative learning strategies, Material Design, and Genre Analysis.  
Email address: nalini@uitm.edu.my

2. **Geraldine De Mello**, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka. She has taught a number of English courses at the diploma and degree levels. She is also keen in innovating and producing educational tools to help educators.  
Email add: geraldine@uitm.edu.my
3. **Dr. Selvajothi Ramalingam** is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia. The main fields of interest are sociolinguistics, mother tongue education, indigenous study, and language use in job interviews.  
E-mail address: selvajothi@um.edu.my
4. **Mohammad Nor Afandi bin Ibrahim**, who obtained his B. Ed Hons. (TESL) from National University of Malaysia (UKM) and Master of Arts in English Language from Universiti Putra Malaysia, received his PhD in English Language and Linguistics at University of Wollongong, Australia. He is a senior lecturer at Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka Malaysia.  
E-mail address: afandi664@uitm.edu.my
5. **Puspalata C Suppiah** is currently a senior lecturer at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia. She holds a Ph.D. from University Malaya Malaysia. Her main research interest is in critical discourse analysis.  
Email address: puspalata@uitm.edu.my/ puspa\_ts@yahoo.com
6. **Isai Amutan Krishnan\*** is interested in the area of in Human Resource Development & Management, Business, English Language Teaching (ELT), and performing arts. He is also a freelance consultant locally and abroad  
**E-mail address: amuthan.isai@gmail.com**

## Abstract

The serious consequences of COVID-19 have resulted in a temporary slowdown in different sectors of daily activities including the education sector. In Malaysia, the impact of the pandemic has caused all the classes to be conducted online. The present study aims to investigate the challenges faced by English Second Language (ESL) educators in online teaching. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth phone interviews were conducted with 20 ESL educators of Private Higher Learning Institutions. The findings indicated that they encountered problems such as isolation, lack of motivation in online teaching, technical difficulties with online teaching tools, time-consuming resources and work-life imbalance. The findings further revealed that ESL educators' work-life imbalance had emotionally impacted their families and social relations, which in turn had affected their professional lives. Thus, by understanding the problems, educational institutions can come up with short and long-term strategies to ensure that ESL educators can be productive regardless of the mode of teaching activities. Among them would be introducing pertinent courses in online teaching, Internet training, and the integration of multimedia resources that could improve online teaching.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, ESL educators, online teaching

\*corresponding author

Isai Amutan Krishnan, Magic Palms School, Department of English, Vientiane. Laos.

## 1. Introduction

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many problems in the education landscape whereby the English Second Language (ESL) educators have to adopt the new method of online teaching. Consequently, all educational activities have moved to online teaching in Private Higher Learning Institutions (PHLIs). Educators have struggled to switch to the new norm of online teaching within a short period of time especially in ESL.

A recent report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that in 150 countries globally including Malaysia, many educational institutions had closed since March 2020 (WHO, 2020). This sudden change in the education sector, has resulted in the implementation of alternative teaching methods (Oyedotun, 2020). This new teaching approach also known as online distance learning (ODL), offers the educators and students a new platform whereby they can interact for the purpose of teaching and learning (Khairuddin, Mohd Arif, Khairuddin, 2020).

ODL seems to empower students to learn individually from their homes or wherever they are by managing their own learning pace and time based on their needs and preferences (Amado-Salvatierra, Hilera, Tortosa, Rizzardini & Piedra, 2016; Wieland & Kollias, 2020). The educators have accepted this learning mode optimistically and they have made adjustments to progress steadily (Al-Rahmi, Alias, Othman, Alzahrani, Alfarraj, Saged & Abdul, 2018; Schwartzman, 2020).

Since the implementation of the Movement Controlled Order (MCO) in Malaysia, teaching and learning activities could not be conducted in the traditional way. Online teaching was introduced as an interim measure was expected to end in 2020 (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). Thus, educators had to grasp this new method of teaching and apply it in their teaching (Mei & Ka, 2018; Wei & Chou, 2020). However, both students and educators had encountered problems in adapting from the traditional face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning.

Although ESL online teaching and learning have been used in educational institutions worldwide in ESL classes, little has been done to study the efficacy of online teaching and

learning among the educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this paper focuses on the problems of educators and the methods to overcome these problems.

Based on the problems faced by the educators, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the major problems among ESL educators of PHLIs in the implementation of online teaching?
2. To what extent can educators assist in addressing online problems?

The following research objectives have been developed in accordance with the research questions.

1. The major problems encountered by ESL educators of PHLIs when implementing online teaching.
2. The extent to which educators in PHLI can assist to solve online problems.

## **2. Literature Review**

The new method of online teaching is viewed as a solution to overcome the current teaching crisis created by the pandemic. The Malaysian government closed all educational institutions like the rest of the world and switched to online classes. This change to online classes requires new teaching materials to be designed and developed based on technology and which are pedagogically appropriate (Schwartzman, 2020). The question is whether educators can accept the instructions from the management and introduce the transformation from face-to-face classes to online teaching within a short period of time. The impact of online teaching depends on the readiness of both educators and students to accept the new form of instructions that embraces technological knowledge (Jacqueline, 2020).

The impact and efficacy of online teaching depend on the technological competence of educators and their readiness to change quickly to this new method of teaching. Bender (2003) has advocated that to succeed in managing online teaching, instructors have to: (1) attain the needed skills to be an online teacher; (2) have prior experience in being an online student; and (3) assist students in gaining experience and use approaches to be excellent online learners. Bender's suggestion gives a strong hint that the knowledge of educators in technology plays a significant role in conducting successful online classes.

Carey (2020) argued that during the pandemic due to the quarantine the problem was not whether the online mode of teaching provided good quality of education, it was how academic institutions were able to adopt online teaching successfully. However, presently

educators are concerned with the objective of online teaching that is, whether students practise what they have been taught without the personal attention of educators (Dhawan, 2020). And also, the educators and students need to be sufficiently prepared to balance their work, families and social lives. Although there are numerous forms of technologies available for online instructions, they sometimes create difficulties which hamper learning and eventually lead to boredom during online classes (Favale, Soro, Trevisan, Drago & Mellia, 2020).

The online mode of teaching requires the knowledge, skills and confidence of teachers to achieve successful interaction with the learners that indicate the competence of the educators (Lauermann & König, 2016). Similarly, Aboderin (2015) too believed that educators, just like students, faced problems during online teaching due to lack of Internet access, inadequate technological devices and software. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, when educators worked from campus, they used the facilities provided by their faculties but now they had to rely on their own resources at home.

The success in overcoming the problems of ESL online teaching and learning, have been discussed by scholars. Researchers conducted online teaching have suggested different approaches, theories and assessment criteria that emphasise quality online teaching and learning (Tinungki, & Nurwahyu, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020; Juhary, 2020; Vladova, Ullrich, Bender & Gronau, 2021; Budur, Demir, & Cura, 2021). Similar approaches and steps have also been adopted by the Malaysian Education Ministry with the assistance of higher learning institutions to achieve positive learning results. Regardless of the new procedures and guidelines introduced by the Education Ministry, there is still uncertainty whether educators in Malaysia are prepared for online teaching, especially in PHLIs. Therefore, the present study intends to investigate the problems faced by educators in ESL online teaching and learning during the pandemic.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***Setting***

This study adopted a qualitative research approach as Creswell (2018) noted that spoken data can be analysed qualitatively. The data was collected with the consent of the educators and PHLIs. The selected respondents were from established PHLIs from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. All the PHLIs are approved by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) which offers courses to students from foundation to PhD levels. To add, there are also 15 public Government Higher Learning Institutions in the country monitored by MQA with their entry requirements being comparatively higher than PHLIs. As for the present study, the PHLIs offer more than

20 courses ranging from foundation, diploma, degree, masters to PhD levels. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, the original messages and emails are not shared as appendices.

### ***Sampling***

There were 20 educators who participated in this study and they have more 10-12 years of teaching experience. Fifteen of them have obtained their masters while five have doctoral degrees. All of them are teaching the English language and linguistics. They have attended several professional development programmes offered by the university to enable them to conduct online teaching and learning classes.

### ***Instrument***

Due to the restricted movement control, primary data were collected through phone interviews from September 2020 to November 2020. ZOOM and Google were not used due to poor Internet connection. An online form was dispatched to obtain the consent of the respondents. The phone interviews were entirely conducted in English to accommodate the preference of respondents. The semi-structured interview with each respondent lasted between 30 and 45 minutes while the entire interview session with all the correspondents was between 10 and 12 hours. The questions were adapted and modified from the study conducted by Krishnan, Mello, Kok, Munian, Ching, Kandasamy, Ramalingam, Baskaran and Kanan (2020) (see Appendix A). All the interviews were initiated by introducing the purpose of the study, assuring the confidentiality of their responses, explaining how the information will be used in the study and finally asking questions in relation to the problems they encountered with online classes during COVID-19. All the interview sessions were conducted during weekends as the respondents were busy with online classes during weekdays. An 'E1' letter was used as an abbreviation in the analysis for each Educator. At the end of each interview, all the notes taken from the respondents were read back to them to ensure that all their responses were complete and exact.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis Procedures***

The data were analysed qualitatively based on the themes. Only those responses that were relevant to the objectives of the study were chosen for analysis. In analysing of the data, Patton's (1990) thematic analysis was employed. This process is crucial considering the vast amounts of rich data gathered at the end of all the interview sessions. At the initial stage of data

analysis, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Then, all the interview responses were thoroughly skimmed and assigned codes using NVIVO. This software program was used for qualitative studies to analyse spoken texts, written texts, audio, video and images. The present data were collected from the spoken content, therefore NVIVO was used for the coding purpose. Once all the data were coded, the next step was to put together all the sections in an orderly manner based on the code. In the next stage, the collated codes were systematically organised into different themes. Lastly, each theme was reviewed and refined to see whether the data were clear, supported the theme and did not overlap with other themes. Two experts in transcription and coding were engaged to varify the transcriptions to determine the reliability and validity.

#### 4. Findings

The responses of the educators were analysed to identify the problems they encountered on online teaching and learning. Through in-depth interviews, the following five problems emerged, namely, (1) isolation, (2) lack of motivation in online teaching, (3) technical difficulties with online teaching tools, (4) time-consuming resources, and (5) work-life balance. The responses from the educators were summarised as follows:

##### (1) Isolation

- E1 ...I am surrounded with lots of students but now I am feeling lonely...
- E3 ...I am feeling lonely when I have online classes...
- E5 ...I feel I talk alone and no mutual interactions...
- E11 ...feeling empty like talking to the walls...
- E12 ...no mutual conversations...
- E17 ...less interaction with students, students became passive and not responsive, worried and shy to talk in in live class...
- E18 ...not connected to people, only laptop or computer- Computer- Mediated Communication...

From the above utterances, it was evident that respondents E1, E3, E5, E11, E12, E17 and E18 felt isolated. These educators revealed the teaching environment had changed following the

transition from face- to-face to online teaching. Online teaching had caused them to feel lonely as there was hardly mutual interaction with students.

The Educators' expressions such as '*I am surrounded with lots of students but now I am feeling lonely*', '*I am feeling lonely when I have online classes*' and '*I feel I talk alone and no mutual interaction*' clearly reveal their isolation'. E11 felt "like talking to the walls" and E 17 agreed there was "less interaction with students" while conducting their teaching tasks. E18 pointed out "human connection" was lacking "via computer-mediated communication".

The educators expected their students to respond to their questions instead they were quiet and waited for their educators to provide the answers. Although the educators were teaching online classes, they felt isolated when students remained silent and "passive" without interacting with them.

## **(2) Lack of motivation in online teaching**

- E1 ...not all lessons/subjects are effective when delivered online. I have to think about whether the lessons will help students connect with me, each other, and the subject matter...
- E2 ...unable to interact/ discussed with other educators or working colleagues regarding problems occurs while doing online teaching. All educators have different multiple problems with their online teaching...
- E7 ...feel that they should be equipped with several trainings to adopt the new transition in teaching and feel demotivated when lack of teaching skills via online...
- E9 ...self-solve problem. I have to solve problems by myself in terms of technical and students' issues...

There was a lack of motivation as expressed by E1, E2, E7 and E9 who revealed that their quality and way of teaching were affected while teaching online as they could not deliver effectively their lessons.

They were also demotivated as they could not discuss with their colleagues and solve their problems. This predicament of not being able "to interact/ discussed with other educators or working colleagues regarding problems" was expressed by E2. Similarly, E7 "felt demotivated with the "lack of teaching skills via online". Just like the other educators, E9 had



“to solve problems by myself in terms of technical and students’ issues”. From the problems expressed by the educators, it was evident they felt demotivated when teaching online.

### (3) Technical difficulties with online teaching tools

- E1 ...poor strengths of internet connection...
- E2 ...have different teaching styles...
- E3 ...Not all students have reliable access to technology especially those who live in the rural areas. Moreover, not all students ‘digital natives’, as some of them not technological savvy when it comes to handling unacquainted software. Always need to check chat box if any issues faced by students which can alert the educator opt out for alternative arrangements. This consumes time. Educators are not IT support team and they can’t fix everything...
- E7 ...unable to do student centered learning, games, class discussion. Q & A doesn’t take place effectively...
- E17 ...takes time when uploading teaching materials in online platforms...
- E18 ...educators are not well off with all the online tools used or been told to use and lack of IT knowledge...
- E19 ...complaints from students lack IT knowledge that they can’t hear the educators due to instability of WIFI connection...
- E20 ...malfunctions of the platforms itself...

From the above excerpts of the educators, it was evident they faced multiple technical problems daily when conducting online classes. According to E1, a basic problem was “poor strengths of internet connection”. The Internet problem was also felt by the students as revealed by E3, E17 further added that it took “time when uploading teaching materials in online platforms”. Apart from that, E20 mentioned there were “malfunctions of the platforms itself”. E18 further added “educators are not well off with all the online tools used or been told to use and lack of IT knowledge”. The Internet problem was also felt by the students as revealed by E19 who said “complaints from students lack IT knowledge that they can’t hear the educators due to instability of WIFI connection”. As a result of the poor Internet service student-centered learning, games, class discussion, Q&A could not be conducted. The excerpts of the educators revealed they encountered numerous problems when they conducted online classes.

Research has revealed that sufficient training should be regularly provided to educators to help them prepare suitable materials for their online classes. This is supported by Sywelem, Al-Harbi, Fathema, and Witte (2012) who suggest that educators should have adequate training to make them successful and productive in online teaching. Similarly, Hardaker and Singh (2011) have reiterated that educators need to acquire technological skills to develop good resource materials for online classes.

#### **(4) Time-consuming resources**

- E8 ...educators need to understand each student's learning style...
- E10 ...always available to help students in the learning process via email or social media groups...
- E11 ...need to do more preparation, in terms of educator notes, assignments, test, project work, ppt video presentation...
- E14 ...takes a lot time when uploading the teaching material...
- E16 ...we have to keep track of students' attendance, final exam entries, scores, reminder letters via online is really tough...

The excerpts above provide a glimpse of the time-consuming resources of the educators. As revealed by E8 the introduction of the online classes consumed more time as there was a need to "understand each student's learning style". It was further elaborated by E10 who said that students needed more help "in the learning process via email or social media groups". E11 agreed that there was a "need to do more preparation, in terms of educator notes, assignments, test, project work, ppt video presentation". E14 also shared the views of E11 that it was time-consuming as it took "a lot time when uploading the teaching material". Besides the increase in the regular workload, E16 informed there were other time-consuming tasks like keeping "track of students' attendance, final exam entries, scores, reminder letters via online is really tough". From the opinions expressed by these educators, it was evident the online teaching method was time-consuming as it had imposed additional tasks that demand equal attention.

#### **(5) Work-life balance**

- E2 ... more stressful and emotionally affected...
- E9 ...parents' interference when their children can't cope with online learning and they complained to head of faculties. Most of the time blame the educators even when any technical problems arise at their student's laptop or computers...
- E12 ...anxiety whether lessons have taken successfully...

E14 ...extended working hours than usual in a day...

E19 ...no family time or personal lifestyle affected...

The above expressions clearly revealed that the new online teaching method had impacted the educators' lives. E2 stated that life had become "more stressful and emotionally affected". According to E19, there were more parental interference to settle the problems encountered by their children like technical issues related to online classes and if he did not comply, the parents sent their "complaints to head of faculties". There was "anxiety" in E12 whether the lessons were successful or not. In addition, E14 felt his duties had "extended working hours than usual in a day". Finally, E19 expressed there was "no family time" and "personal lifestyle" was also affected. Based on the interviews it was evident the normal lives of educators were disrupted after the introduction of the online classes. The educators' personal lives were affected badly with long working hours.

The need to shift from face-to face learning to an online format has already become an integral part of many educational institutions in different parts of the world. The different forms of changes ranging from isolation to work-life balance were contributing factors that affected the quality of online teaching.

## 5. Discussion

The results indicated there were five issues encountered by the educators namely isolation, lack of motivation in online teaching, technical difficulties with online teaching tools, time-consuming resources and work-life balance. Past studies had proven that online learning offers many benefits as it was more flexible and allowed learners to be actively engaged in learning (Dhawan, 2020). Students had the privilege of taking classes anytime and anywhere (Luaran, Samsuri, Nadzri & Rom, 2014; Chan, Ranjit, Jamiah Baba & Eliza Parman, 2007). Besides, through online activities, students' interaction improved via asynchronous and synchronous tools such as e-mail, forums, chats, and video conferences (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Despite the advantages the online learning platforms offered, challenges related to online teaching were evident among the educators at PHILs s particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the findings obtained from this research, it was firmly established by the educators in this investigation that they felt unenthusiastic about online teaching and learning and favoured face-to-face method. They encountered problems in preparing lessons and materials for online classes which were challenging (Li & Irby, 2008). In fact, it was not that convenient to transfer the content of face-to-face materials to suit the online medium. This is supported by Choi and Park (2006), who lament that instructors face pedagogical problems, like not being able to

transfer their face-to-face lesson materials to the online environment effortlessly. Koehler, Mishra, Hershey, and Peruski (2004) stated that instructors were encouraged to take content, pedagogy, and technology into consideration when creating online lessons. König, Bremerich, Buchholtz, Fladung, and Glutsch (2020) provided an opposing view stating that instructors felt reluctant to change their teaching strategies especially in an online classroom setting.

Many educators also stated that they were unprepared to conduct online learning during the pandemic because of issues related to online communication efficiency. In line with the purpose of this investigation, a few inferences (implications) can be drawn. To start with, it was established that there was a lack of effort by educators to equip themselves with the latest developments regarding online learning. Next, the educators were unhappy with online teaching and learning as they experienced many difficulties and problems in contrast to in-person teaching. There was a predominant view among them that they would like to discontinue online instruction if they had the option for the upcoming semesters.

Osika, Johnson, and Butea (2019) said that the proficiency level of educators using technology was an important factor that contributed to their readiness to teach online. Responses from the educators revealed that a few of them with good Internet connectivity and IT skills favoured the online teaching and learning system and used their readily pre-recorded lectures that were uploaded to Google Classroom and YouTube. They wanted to avoid frustration caused by poor Internet connection. However, those who faced Internet connectivity issues found it a big obstacle when it came to online teaching and learning. Dhawan (2020, p. 16) in her study on “Online Learning: A Panacea in the Time of COVID-19 Crisis” agrees to this finding saying that, the “unavailability of proper digital tools, no internet connections, or iffy Wi-Fi connections can cause a lot of trouble due to which many students might lose out on learning opportunities”. Additionally, comments from educators who did not have a home based WIFI facility, revealed that the free broadband data provided was insufficient for conducting online teaching. This issue became evident when lecturers live streamed by utilising applications such as Google Meet, Zoom or Webex. In response to this finding, Chung, Noor, and Mathew (2020) concurs that Malaysian university educators using online teaching and learning faced problems during online classes as a result of unreliable Internet connections and broadband data limitations.

Hence, there is an urgent need for the Government to invest in long term infrastructure plans to develop high speed Internet connectivity (Chung, Subramaniam, & Christ, 2020). Efforts should also be made by private institutions to ensure that their faculty teaching staff are provided with good access to the required resources. Many universities have permitted students and educators who encounter poor Internet connectivity, especially those from the rural areas to return to their respective universities as there is better Internet connectivity to enable more

effective learning. Even this effort has not been very helpful or effective as the Internet speed at many campuses is slow and in dire need of upgrading. While the pandemic brought about online teaching and learning to public universities immediately, private universities too acted promptly in implementing technological tools and systems to enable a smooth transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning.

Based on the analysis, it is evident that there is a sense of urgency in implementing online teaching and learning that has resulted from the pandemic. It is important for private institutions to re-evaluate current managerial or staff resources to enable online teaching and learning, assets and funds for technological upgrading, and implement regulations to support the critical requirements for online-based teaching, particularly for instructors. The anxiety of educators should be resolved as soon as possible to prevent issues that could hinder online teaching and learning. This can possibly be done by providing proper guidelines to help both educators and students with ways to access and use the different e-learning tools in online teaching and learning. In addition, Dhawan (2020) also suggested that to reduce digital divide, institutions can take initiatives to ensure that all the educational apps function on mobile phones to help students who do not have laptops.

## **6. Implications**

For decades, educators have been comfortable with the traditional ways of teaching or face-to-face approach, hence, the hesitation and apprehension in accepting any new change. Under the current pandemic state, educators are left with no other alternative than to accept and change to the online teaching mode that works best for them and their students. They are placed in a critical situation and need to make use of the Open Educational Resources (OERs) that are free to guide them in their programs and subjects that interest them. Other than the OERs, educators and students can use the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which have been introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.

Another issue of particular importance in relation to the adoption of online teaching and learning is related to online appraisals, tests and exams. This aspect of online learning requires close scrutiny and careful planning by the university's examination department which should take extra care to ensure that there is accountability regarding the exams. These should include conforming to existing rules, conditions and strict Quality Assurance, and making sure online examinations are easily assessable, and technical problems like Internet availability and other related issues are fixed immediately.

Some of the steps that can be taken include conducting interactive ESL e-classes and

inclusive e-exams using Microsoft Teams as well as setting up a wide-range of e-library materials and self-paced learning. While a number of Malaysian universities are undertaking similar steps, more needs to be done to enable excellence in the presentation of lectures and courses. It can safely be said that many Malaysian universities that have been successful in this transformation, have met the needs of their students and have improved their ranking. The significance of online learning as a study option can enable educational institutions to attract overseas students to study in Malaysian universities, either in person or online from their countries. University managements should make greater efforts to transform online education from being seen as ‘the need of the hour’ into an opportunity to offer new ways of education.

## 7. Conclusion

The current investigation was undertaken in order to understand the problems encountered by educators better and, there is an urgent requirement by the universities to arrange additional training courses to prepare them to be more effective in offering online teaching. Besides improving the devices and applications utilised for online teaching and learning by the university, it is also vital to prevent educators from issues like wasting time dealing with a host of different web applications. The assistance from the universities can greatly assist in alleviating the problems of educators in relation to online teaching.

There are a few limitations to this investigation. The numerous issues involved in introducing online teaching must be clearly understood by the institutions in order to achieve success. Educators must be familiar with Internet technology and have a positive mind with regards to ODL for successful learning outcomes. For this to materialise, the necessary training must be provided to all educators and others for a university to succeed in attaining greater academic excellence. Educators should not only provide technical assistance to students but have proper training to use the various Internet-based technologies so that well-edited videos and tutorials can be presented productively. The training should not be like a brief refresher course but a realistic, inclusive and hands-on training designed to inculcate self-assurance in educators to apply the systems confidently.

All these issues are apparently interlinked with each other; hence if a problem arises and is not adequately resolved in the early stages, then the whole online presentation and learning system will be affected. For instance, if educators are inadequately training, then they will be spending more time to overcome the difficulties encountered by students. An unstable, slow Internet system, vulnerable to downtime, virus attacks and technical difficulties can result in annoyance and exasperation among educators.

Future research should be conducted with a larger group of participants, which include students from various faculties and multiple geographical locations. Additionally, research should also be undertaken to evaluate the possibility of the existence of mitigating features between lectures and students and their online teaching and learning preparedness. There is also a need to investigate academic achievement as a consequence of online learning. The findings from these investigations can support universities in their efforts to advance online teaching and learning. The results might also be useful to all institutions of higher learning that intend to institutionalise online education.

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## **Appendix A-Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. How did you react when you were asked to switch to online teaching mode?
2. Were you mentally prepared to conduct online classes?
3. Do you have proper facilities to conduct the online class?
4. Does the university monitor you?
5. Does the university provide any facilities to assist your online teaching?
6. How do you feel after several weeks of online classes?
7. What are some of the challenges you faced during the online classes?
8. Were you able to overcome those challenges? If yes how? If no, why?