Facilitating Synchronous Online Learning through *ZOOM* in English Language Teaching for Undergraduates at the University of Kelaniya

Imani Randhuli
Department of English Language Teaching (DELT)
University of Kelaniya
Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
irandhuli94@gmail.com

Abstract — **Educators worldwide are moving from traditional setting to remote education. Due to the lockdown, physical classrooms are also adapted to virtual. The research aims to investigate the perceptions of students in using *ZOOM* as a learning platform in the context of English Language Learning (ELL). The study is conducted online with 60 undergraduates who study at the University of Kelaniya. The thematic analysis explains prominent themes such as challenges, use of *ZOOM* and its features in English Language Teaching setting etc. In a period where the world is attempting to cope with a pandemic, the study is significant in developing strategies in while identifying student perceptions and to manage the challenges that they undergo while using the platform in ELL and adopt online teaching. In fact, the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) is now more inclined towards a blended learning approach in which the study's results will be substantial.**

Keywords — *Online learning, ZOOM learning, online teaching for ESL*

I. INTRODUCTION

Online teaching has been a commonplace practice since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Educators tend to move away from face-to-face (F2F) lessons and adopt online teaching instead [4]. In Sri Lankan context, it is true that there can be many challenges that the students encounter in the transition process where they adopt online learning. In the long run, however, it tends to bring positive effects such as providing the students the flexibility to work independently, at their own pace, promoting natural language acquisition [1][2]. It is important that tertiary education continues in a pandemic environment which makes online learning not only a positive step but a necessity.

The research questions addressed in the study are as follows;

    i. How do students perceive 'online learning via ZOOM' in English Language Learning?

    ii. What are the perceptions on 'pre-recorded ZOOM sessions' vs live ZOOM sessions?

    iii. What are the challenges that students undergo in online learning via ZOOM?

As illustrated in Fig. 1. The interface is user-friendly and contains several options such as screen-share, whiteboard, chat etc. Hence, the research questions explore student perceptions of using the platform for language learning while considering the challenges. Identifying the challenges will lead to have a better online learning experience in the future when the concerns are addressed. In terms of online teaching, there is asynchronous learning where students have the ability to access a pre-recorded material. The study also draws attention to learner preference of pre-recorded sessions versus live ZOOM sessions concerning English Language learning. Hence, the study contributes to an ongoing challenge in the country in the field of ELT where interaction and engagement is most substantial in language acquisition.
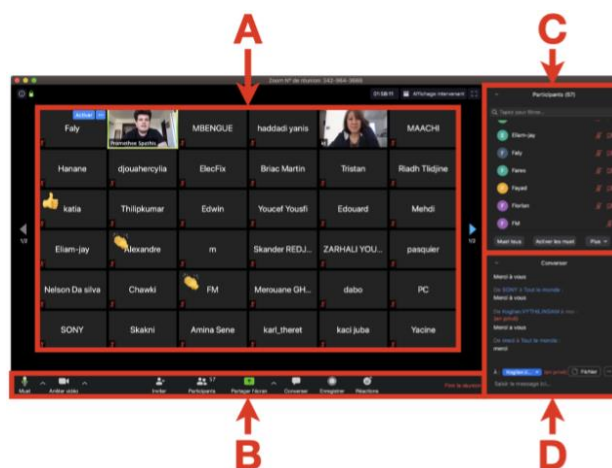

Fig.1.Screen capture of Zoom application window. (A) GalleryView, (B) ControlBar,(C) ParticipantPanel,(D) ChatPanel [6].

II. OBJECTIVES

The research addresses a current challenge in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Digital Divide is a burning concern which questions the fairness of continuing distance learning in a time of a pandemic when some undergraduates are unable to be a part of the session which they would have otherwise be.

The objectives of the research are (i) to investigate the perceptions of students regarding online teaching in ELT context, (ii) to evaluate the preferences of online teaching in ELT and (iii) to explore the challenges that are faced by the English language learners when they learn via ZOOM.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research follows a qualitative approach as it deals with factual data and perceptions. 60 participants who are undergraduates at the University of Kelaniya are chosen as the sample group. They belong to either Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences or Commerce and Management Studies who have taken part in online ZOOM lectures for more than two months. The rationale is that they are familiar with ZOOM hence, will be able to share the experience.

The participants were to fill in a Google form which mostly includes multiple choice questions followed by two open ended questions. The data was analyzed thematically while main themes were identified with the answers that the participants had provided.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Addressing the question regarding the online learning experience, 4 questions and 2 open ended questions were included in the Google form. The participants rate their experience as follows.
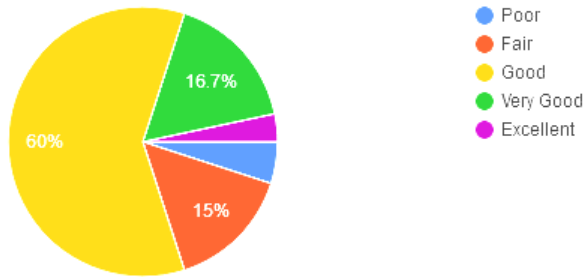

Fig.2. Rating online learning experience

Figure 1 illustrates how the participants have rated their online learning experience. Notably, the majority has rated the experience as being favorably 'good', 'very good' or 'fair' which shows that there is room for improvement. Having the ability to engage in remote learning has been 'progressive' and perceived as a way of learning in 'a relaxed space'.

In a nutshell, the participants were asked whether they feel relaxed during ZOOM lectures, traditional lectures or whether they do not feel a significant difference between the two. 51.7% feel more relaxed in traditional classrooms, 36.7% do not feel a difference, and however, 11.7% only feel more relaxed in ZOOM lectures. The proportions are repeated in the question about inquiring feeling anxious during lectures. Hence, there is the implication that ZOOM language teaching has more room for improvement in terms of 'student engagement' which has been the challenge. Unlike in a physical classroom, the students at times are not provoked to be 'forward' or outspoken since they are in an isolated space. Active learning, as the results presents, happen more in physical classrooms hence the learners choose it over virtual concerning engagement factor.

In online teaching, just as much as synchronous teaching, there is the option of asynchronous teaching where the teachers upload pre-recorded videos or ZOOM videos after recording with or without students. Islam et al. (2020), in their research find out that a majority of 53% of the participants prefer pre-recorded videos. The findings of the present research contrast with that of Islam et al. (2020) where students prefer live streamed ZOOM sessions as illustrated in Figure 3 [3].

As illustrated in Figure 2, the majority of participants prefer to take part in live ZOOM sessions rather than merely watching recorded lectures. It reiterates that they feel more engaged in live sessions and they enjoy participating. If the learning is totally replaced, they would rather go for real-time sessions which are more 'active' where learners could pose questions immediately. However, future research can investigate into the reasons why 30% would prefer uploaded sessions. There could be different reasons such as linguistic competency, network issues, having the opportunity of learning anytime etc.
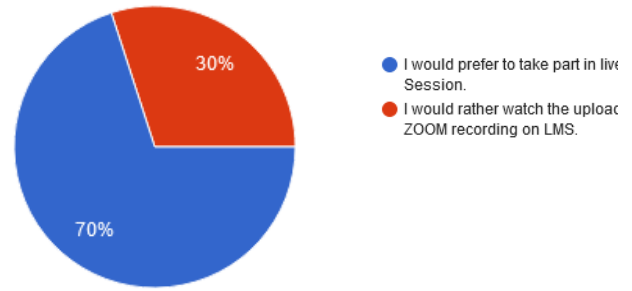

Fig. 3. Preference for Live stream ZOOM session versus Pre-recorded Sessions out of 60 responses.

In relation to the above concerns related to engagement factors and interest factors, the author has posed a question on the use of two prominent features that are used by the participants. Screen share has is a commonly-used method whereas 'breakout rooms' (group/pair) method is not used as much as the PowerPoint. The researcher assumes that this could have an impact on student interest on ZOOM lectures to be less interesting compared to traditional setting. However, further research can be conducted in order to verify the validity.
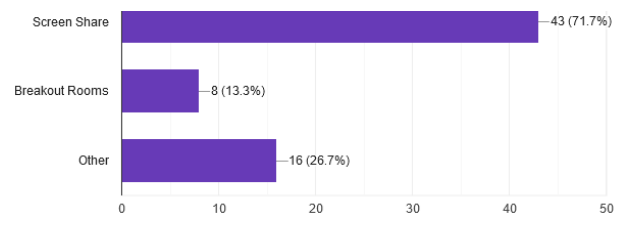

Fig. 4. Familiarity with Common Features in ZOOM

In terms of language acquisition, the research analyses the perceptions on linguistic improvement. Notably, the participants have been enrolled in 6 weeks (or more) in a ZOOM lecture series. Hence, the assumption is that these tertiary learners are able to self-evaluate their improvement.
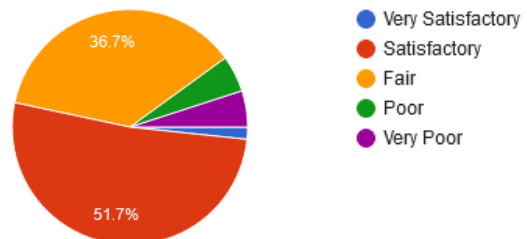

Fig.5. Perceptions on Language Improvement

Thus, the data shows that the majority of the participants consider their improvement has been 'satisfactory' or 'fair'. However, it needs to be noted that very few have rated it as being 'poor' or 'very poor'. Constant attention is required to make it a better experience. There could be reasons why the progress was slower as compared to a physical setting. Technical issues, lack of student-centeredness could be among these concerns.

Drawing from the data gathered from open ended questions, there are recurring themes such as (i) Preference for live stream ZOOM sessions, (ii) Challenges such as Network issues and (iii) ZOOM as a continuation of course. The ideas presented by the participants explain how important they

perceive having ZOOM lectures as a means of continuing learning which would otherwise be interrupted time to time due to the pandemic.

V. Conclusion

The study investigates several dimensions in relation to ELT in online setting. The findings show that the students overall, perceive that they have a good experience in online learning concerning English language acquisition at tertiary level. However, when they rate interest, it is clear that they are moderately engaged. Moreover, it can be concluded that students prefer live ZOOM sessions to pre-recorded ones. Majority has highlighted on the engagement which they have in a physical setting being converted in a similar manner as opposed to recorded sessions where active learning does not take place. Majority of the participants prefer evening lectures to morning ones. The recurring idea in the open-ended question is that ZOOM has been very useful in continuation of English Language education for tertiary level students at the University of Kelaniya. Except

for technical issues, prominently network issues, the participants do find ZOOM useful with a user-friendly interface compared to Skype and Google Meet. Further research can be conducted in order to investigate into the reasons for mediocre engagement within the ZOOM platform and to look into ways to develop English Language Teaching and learning experience via ZOOM.

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