

A Comparison of Online Learning Challenges Between Young Learners and Adult Learners in ESL Classes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Review

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Abstract—This critical review aims to make a comparison of online learning challenges between young learners and adult learners in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has forced the closure of schools and institutions and the shift from face to face classes to online learning which forced the learners to adapt with the transformation. The challenges being faced by the young and adult learners were categorized into three themes, namely learning styles, psychological effect and low academic performance. A total of 40 articles were screened from the years 2020 and 2021. Out of those articles, 29 articles were recognized for the adult learners' challenges and 11 articles for the young learners' challenges. The findings suggested there were differences of challenges between the young and adult learners. It is important to recognize the challenges faced by these two levels of learners so that these challenges can be addressed accordingly in the future.

Index Terms—ESL, online learning, critical review, young and adult learners

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the outbreak of pandemic Coronavirus alarmed the entire world. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (2020) claimed at the end of February, many countries in Europe and the rest of the world were badly affected. This has impacted many sectors such as business, tourism, transportation industries not to the exclusion of the education institution. The pandemic has also affected peoples' lives whereby many have lost their jobs, savings, earnings as well as their loved ones. Many countries have implemented lockdown to limit the movements of their people to curb the spread of the virus. This has impacted the education sectors by the closure of schools, institutions and universities and there was an inevitable shift from traditional learning to online learning. Jong and Tan (2021) reported due to the movement control order (MCO) implementation in Malaysia, teachers were forced to use internet-based technological applications as an immediate transition to deliver their teachings and for students to complete their home assignments.

A. Online Learning

Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) defined online learning as an open and distributed learning atmosphere that utilizes the pedagogical tools which are enabled by Internet and Web technologies to assist learning and knowledge building through meaningful interaction. Online learning is also known as e-learning, e-training and web-based instruction. The authors also emphasized that online learning comprises pedagogical tools, instructional, learning strategies, learning models, teaching and learning approaches. There are many types of tools that can be used for teaching and learning via online learning. They include emails, Whatsapp, Telegram, Google, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, graphics, video, video-conferencing, video recording, audio recording and many more.

B. Learning Styles

James and Blank (1993) opined that learning styles are complex conditions under which learners most efficiently and effectively perceive, process, store and recall information. There are three dimensions in the learning styles which are

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perceptual, cognitive and affective. Perceptual dimensions consist of physiological or sensory dimensions whereas cognitive dimensions consist of mental or information processing and the affective dimension is comprised of emotional and personality characters. These three dimensions were included in screening the articles. This is also stressed by Tan, Chan and Mohd Said (2021) that each student has their own learning style and they must be given a proper platform to show case the learners' talents and learn in their own way.

C. Psychological Effect

According to Deci and Ryan (2002), the psychological dimension is constructed by self-determinant theory (SDT) and this theory is a broad motivational framework that includes all the humans' innate psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, competency and social environments. Tan and Chee (2021) reinforced learners should feel they are a member of the learning community and pupils' intrinsic motivation can be stimulated when they are able to communicate and learn with their peers. Moreover, the closure of schools and home confinement can have unfavorable effects on the mental and physical health of the learners which was emphasized by Temban, Hua and Said (2021). For instance, Idris, Said and Tan (2020) mentioned young learners have a short attention span whereby within 10 to 20 minutes the young learners' minds will wander off. This significant role about the level of motivation and surrounding atmosphere is observed highly in the current study.

D. Academic Performance

According to Barnard (2004) academic performance is highly influenced by parental involvement at home as well as by the pressure for improvement. It is important for the parents to set the home in a conducive way for the learning event. This is to ensure the learners have a proper setting for learning so that they can perform well in their academic.

II. METHOD

This research used a scoping review methodology introduced by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) to make a comparison of online learning challenges between the young and adult learners from the aspects of learning style, psychological effects and academic performance. This methodology follows five steps, namely identifying research questions, identifying relevant studies, study selection, charting the data and summarizing and reporting the results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

A. Scoping Review Research Questions

Arksey and O'Malley (2005) stated that identifying research questions gives the roadmap for subsequent stages and it is crucial for the relevance of research questions to be defined clearly as these questions have implications for the search strategies. Research questions are usually broad as they seek to provide the extent of coverage of the chosen title (Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien, 2010).

The research questions are given below:

1. What are the online learning challenges faced by young and adult learners in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the similarities and differences in online learning challenges faced by young and adult learners in ESL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The broad concept of online learning challenges has been narrowed down to the online learning challenges faced by two types of learners in this pandemic period. These groups included the young learners in primary schools at the age range of 7 – 12 years old and the other group of learners was from the tertiary education level. All the articles under review have the evidences of three themes; that are learning style, psychological effects and academic performance.

B. Identification of Relevant Studies

An investigation was made of original peer-reviewed articles in English language from the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Google scholar database. This was because these sources were easily accessible and the articles were retrievable in the PDF form and they are peer-reviewed educational journals. Most of the selected articles were from 2020 to 2021 as the topic of this study focused on the pandemic period. There were, however, a few articles that belonging the years before 2020. This was only to support and provide more information regarding this topic. The search was conducted using these keywords: young learners' online learning challenges during pandemic (6171); young learners' online learning challenges during pandemic in ESL class (1571); adult learners' online learning challenges during pandemic (7675); adult learners' online learning challenges during pandemic in ESL classes (2034); young and adult learners' challenges in online learning during pandemic (454); young and adult learners' challenges in online learning during pandemic (118). These searches totaled 1035 articles.

C. Study Selection: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The articles were reviewed at two phases. First of all, the duplicates were removed, and then the articles were screened by observing the titles, abstracts and keywords to see if they were related to the topic. In the second phase, the content of the articles was examined. The inclusion criteria were the peer-reviewed written articles, relevant topics and

similar methodology. The exclusion criteria, however, involved the removal of the articles not related to ESL classes and learners, as well as COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, among a total of 108 articles, 40 articles were analyzed.

D. Charting the Data

Next, the articles were categorized according to the themes based on the research questions in order to high-light the findings. Each article was sorted according to indicators such as authors, year of publication, location, research design, methodology, participants and the findings or results. For the first research question, the articles were categorized into three themes which were learning style, psychological effects and academic performance. Next, the second research question was to compare and contrast young and adult learners in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 shows the procedure for identifying appropriate articles for this study.

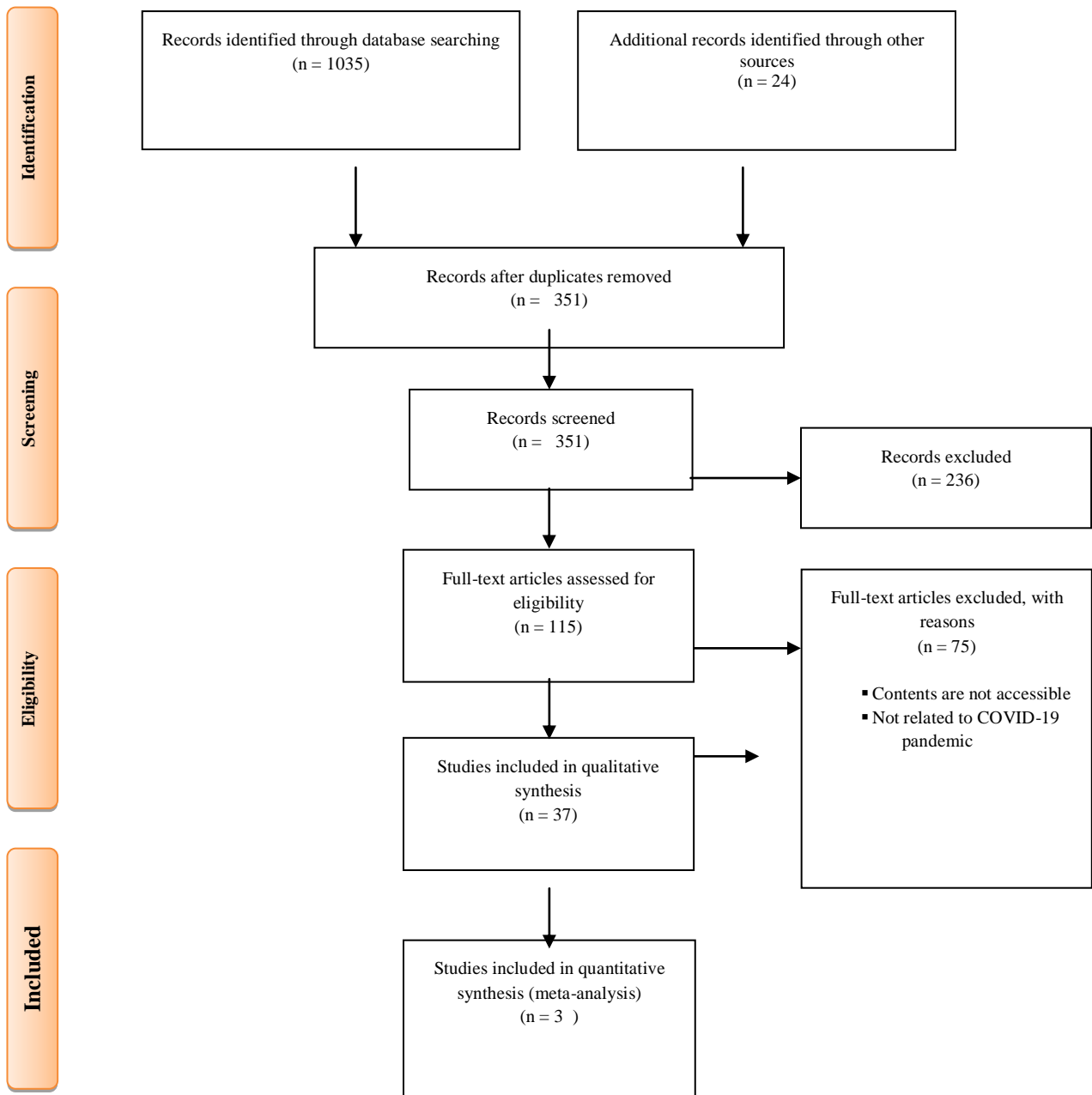


Fig. 1 Adapted from: Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The PRISMA Group (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 6(6): e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097

III. FINDINGS

A total of 40 articles were screened in order to identify the challenges faced by young and adult learners in online learning during COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020. Table 1 shows the results of Research Question 1.

No	Authors	Type of Learners	Challenges:		
			Learning styles	Psychological effect	Low academic performance
1	Mahyoob (2020)	Adult learners		✓	✓
2	Aboagye, Yawson and Appiah (2020)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
3	Ali (2020)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
4	Girik Allo (2020)	Adult learners			✓
5	Hijazi & AlNatour (2021)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
6	Jimenez (2020)	Young learners	✓	✓	✓
7	Syahrin & Salih (2020)	Adult learners	✓		
8	Atmojo & Nugroho (2020)	Young learners	✓	✓	
9	Aristovnik & et al (2020)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
10	Al-Jarf (2020)	Adult learners		✓	✓
11	Mathew & Chung (2020)	Adult learners		✓	
12	Alzamil (2021)	Adult learners	✓		✓
13	Fansury & et al (2020)	Young learners	✓		✓
14	Pasaribu & Dewi (2021)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
15	Alghamdi (2021)	Adult learners	✓	✓	
16	Amri & Alasmari (2021)	Adult learners	✓		✓
17	Sevy-Biloon (2021)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
18	Evisen, Akyılmaz & Torun (2020)	Adult learners	✓		
19	Nartiningrum & Nugroho (2020)	Adult learners			✓
20	Putri & et al (2020)	Young learners	✓	✓	✓
21	Karuppannan & Mohammed (2020)	Adult learners	✓	✓	✓
22	Boothe (2020)	Young learners	✓	✓	✓
23	Aliyyah & et al (2020)	Young learners	✓	✓	✓
24	Susilowati (2020)	Adult learners	✓		
25	Hartshorn & McMurry (2020)	Adult learners		✓	✓
26	Khanum & Alam (2021)	Adult learners	✓		✓
27	Sugianto & Ulfah (2020)	Young learners		✓	
28	Subekti (2021)	Adult learners	✓		
29	Sufyan & et al (2020)	Adult learners		✓	
30	Lau & Lee (2020)	Young learners	✓	✓	✓
31	Hakim (2020)	Adult learners		✓	
32	Oraif & Elyas (2021)	Adult learners		✓	
33	Hu & et al (2021)	Young learners		✓	✓
34	Vivoni (2021)	Adult learners		✓	
35	Arshad., Afzal, & Hussain (2020)	Adult learners		✓	✓
36	Adara, & Najmudin (2020)	Adult learner		✓	
37	Kruszewska, Nazaruk & Szewczyk (2020)	Young learners		✓	
38	Holisoh & Fitriani (2020)	Young learners	✓		
39	Joshi, Vinay & Bhaskar (2020)	Adult learners		✓	
40	Afrin (2020)	Adult learners	✓		

Learners faced challenges in online learning due to a sudden change from the traditional classroom setting to an online setting for the spread of COVID-19 virus (Mahyoob, 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). It was a challenge for the learners because they lacked communication with their lecturers. They had a low level of motivation, confidence and experience in online learning. This finding is supported by some researches (e.g. Aboagye, Yawson & Appiah, 2020; Amri & Alasmari, 2021) who found that learners needed to be self-independent, and they had a decreasing level of motivation to perform efficiently in school. Ali (2020) and Boothe (2020) learned that the learners faced such issues as low engagement, missing out the social values, lack of supervision, poor academic performance and a high level of dropouts. Hijazi and AlNatour (2021) arrived at similar findings whereby the learners were not efficiently engaged with online learning as it was merely listening to and watching the lecturers, and they were passive learners with only a one-way mode of communication. This was also reinforced by Sufyan (2020), who reported limited feedback from the learners.

As Jimenez (2020) suggested, it is important for schools to address the students' well-being, level of engagement and conditions for the online learning. Likewise, it was found that online learning made the learners lose their goals, develop low self-efficacy, experience low engagement and motivation, and have fear and a negative role (Al-Jarf, 2020; Arshad, Afzal, & Hussain, 2020). In their studies, Mathew and Chung (2020) found that the participants were happy with the online learning, but there were many requests for more interesting online lessons, despite the poor level of communication among the peers and the lecturers. In addition, Subekti (2021) also referred to some learners who were

able to perform in their online classes but could not do multitasking. Alzamil (2021) found that online learning failed to substitute for the face-to-face class, which means that the students preferred the traditional setting classroom as they believed online learning was boring and this finding was also supported by a study in which the learners faced challenges such as missing the classroom social environment, discomfort and physically inactive and inadequate online learning for practical lessons. Sevy-Biloon (2021) said the learners could not practice the language authentically due to the lack of clarification on the part of the lecturers and a hard time for concentration.

In addition, Girik Allo (2020) is of the opinion that the participants in the research did not face a big challenge in online learning, but their problem was that they expected the materials and assignments to be accompanied by an explanation and a tool to provide an instruction for the betterment of the academic performance. In this respect, Susilowati (2020) said the challenge was in making sure there would be effective methods and strategies that suited the online class. Syahrin and Salih (2020), and Holisoh and Fitriani (2020) believed that the types of learning styles of each learner would highly influence online learning while Vivoni (2021) stressed the importance of interactions with the professor and the students in learning English. Yet the courses the learners took did not endorse such interaction. In their research, Aristovnik et al, (2020) found out that learners who were studying at home needed higher self-discipline and motivation. On the other hand, they learned that online learning triggered negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, frustration, confusion and anger on top of critical level of mental health which was also emphasized by Karuppanan and Mohammed (2020). Pasaribu and Dewi (2021) said that the learners had communication challenges and a massive completion task though they found some positive attitudes such as ICT knowledge enhancement. And Afrin (2020) revealed the learners felt more relaxed and required some different learning styles.

Evisen, Akyilmaz and Torun (2020) stated that a majority of students did not enjoy the online learning and preferred a traditional classroom because there were such problems as isolation and helplessness in the beginning of the lesson. Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020) mentioned the lack of direct interaction. Putri et al (2020) pointed out that online learning was not part of learning culture and so the interaction was awkward when done virtually. Likewise, Aliyyah et al (2020) said that the lack of a conducive environment made the learners less active in class participation, and caused them to feel bored especially after two months of online lessons and this reduced their enthusiasm specifically when there was interruption of other students with irrelevant talks during the class. Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) referred to the level of stress that the learners had experienced and also found out that there was less development in the aspect of speaking skill compared to writing which was in line with the finding by Khanum and Alam (2021) who mentioned about the emphasis on a particular language skill and voted for a bilingual class for better understanding. Sugianto and Ulfah (2020) focused on psychological effects which included the learners' negative attitudes toward the online lesson and students' responsibility for their learning. Finally, Oraif and Elyas (2021) said that learning behavior and learning engagement were also affected.

Furthermore, Lau and Lee (2020) indicated that most learners faced problems in completing the tasks due to house environment, lack of interest, inability to complete the tasks independently, and so looked for a better learning support from the school and a balanced type of learning styles with more interactive features. It was also found that learners had a low level of motivation and a poor virtual connection with their instructors (Hakim, 2020; Adara & Najmudin, 2020). Hu et al. (2021), and Kruszewska, Nazaruk and Szewczyk (2020) also found that learners faced difficulty in joining the online lessons, and there was a lack of communication between children and parents and also inadequate support from the parents for the learning activity, which led to poor performance during the class. Similarly, Joshi, Vinay and Bhaskar (2020) indicated that the learners faced problems inside the home environment with the family disruptions during the online classes.

Based on the second research question, it was recognized that the young learners of this study needed more attention. This is supported by Lau and Lee (2020) who reiterated that it was important for teachers to create an interactive platform for young learners because it would sustain the young learners' attention span. Apart from that, they also mentioned young learners needed support from their parents for the online class activities and the parents' role was important in motivating the young learners since home environment was not a proper setting to acquire the formal education. Kruszewska, Nazaruk and Szewczyk (2020) supported Lau and Lee about the young learners' engagement in online learning as it was crucial in achieving the learning objective and obtaining knowledge. On the other hand, adult learners were motivated in learning by self-directed learning without any parental support, which was addressed by Subekti (2021). Amri and Alasmari (2021) conceded that adult learners had to be self-independent learners too. Clearly, adult learners had to take on the learning responsibility whereas young learners learning responsibility was on their parents' shoulders (Sugianto and Ulfah, 2020).

IV. DISCUSSION

Online learning has emerged in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic and this has made the learners adapt to this type of learning in order to continue their education. However, young and adult learners are faced with different challenges in this type of learning in terms of learning style, psychological effect and poor academic performance.

As for the learning style, online learning demanded the learners to be self-directed, and pushed them to be more visual and audio learners as technology demanded (Subekti, 2020). Apart from that, the learners could not apply the social learning style because online learning had revoked socialization among peers in order to observe physical

distancing from other people (Tan and Farashaiyan, 2012). Syahrin and Salih (2020), and Holisoh and Fitriani (2020) stated that learning style was important in administering online learning which was suitable for the learners' needs for different types of learning style.

On the other hand, psychological effects largely impacted the learners because they had a low level of motivation, engagement and self-confidence in online classes, and gave limited or no feedback (Mahyoob, 2020; Atmojo and Nugroho, 2020; Aboagye, Yawson & Appiah, 2020; Amri & Alasmari, 2021; Ali, 2020; Boothe, 2020; Jimenez, 2020; Al-Jarf, 2020; Arshad, Afzal & Hussain, 2020; Alzamil, 2021; Hakim, 2020; Adara & Najmudin, 2020). It was also identified that the learners missed the traditional, face-to-face classrooms with direct interaction, and the lack of a conducive environment affected their level of concentration (Fansury et al., 2020; Alghamdi, 2020; Lau & Lee, 2020; Joshi, Vinay & Bhaskar, 2020). In addition, the learners also faced mental health issues such as fear, stress, burden, confusion, lack of interest, boredom, isolation, and helplessness (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Karuppanan & Mohammed, 2020; Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Aliyyah et al., 2020; Evisen, Akyılmaz & Torun, 2020).

Lastly, other issues that were observed included poor academic performance, lack of supervision, a high level of dropouts, passive learners, demand for more interesting online lessons, lack of authentic language learning, lack of clarification for materials and assignments, absence of effective strategies and methods (Ali, 2020; Boothe, 2020; Hijazi & AlNatour, 2021; Mathew & Chung, 2020; Sevy-Biloon, 2021; Girik Allo, 2020; Susilowati, 2020) and the learners could not perform well due to the importance given to a particular language skill (Khanum & Alam, 2021 & Hijazi & AlNatour, 2021).

However, the challenges that were experienced by the young and adult learners were slightly different as the adult learners had to be responsible for their studies and they had to be self-directed in learning, self-independent, able to cope with the online learning without any support (Subekti, 2021; Amri & Alasmari, 2021 & Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020). In contrast, young learners needed support from their parents or adults, a more interactive online platform, and more motivation from parents due to the home setting (Lau & Lee, 2020 & Kruszewska, Nazaruk & Szewczyk, 2020).

V. CONCLUSION

This study discussed the effects of the transition of education from traditional classrooms to online learning on the learners' lives from different aspects and age groups. It is important for learners to face this problem as online learning is actually not a new learning mode but is part of education evolution. Parents and teachers play important supporting roles in online learning and learners need to be consistent and persistent in online learning to complete their education. Therefore, the challenges that have been detected learning styles, psychological effects and poor academic performance need to be addressed in order to maintain the level of learners' interest in and motivation for online learning, regardless of age group and level.

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