

## Students' Perceptions towards Learning English Online via Zoom: with Special Reference to Young Learners in an Urban Context

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional education globally, prompting a rapid shift to online learning. In Sri Lanka, platforms such as Zoom introduced a new mode of instruction known as “Learn from Home,” especially for subjects like English as a Second Language (ESL). This study investigates the perceptions of Grade 11 students from one government and one international school in Nugegoda toward learning English online. Using a mixed-methods approach—comprising a structured Likert-scale questionnaire (n = 100) and semi-structured interviews—the study explores students' views on learning English online, particularly their experiences with the four language skills, and the influence of IT literacy and study time. Quantitative data were analyzed using One-Way ANOVA and post-hoc tests via SPSS, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed. Findings show that students with higher IT literacy and longer study hours reported more positive perceptions. Reading was the most positively perceived skill, while speaking and writing were the most challenging. Students appreciated some features of Zoom but expressed dissatisfaction with limited teacher attention and peer interaction. The study highlights the importance of digital readiness, interactive engagement, and skill-specific instructional strategies in online ESL learning, offering insights for educators and policymakers.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; ESL learning; IT literacy; Online education; Zoom platform

### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted a global educational shift, introducing the Learn from Home (LFH) concept. Sri Lanka, previously unfamiliar with this mode of instruction, rapidly adopted online platforms like Zoom. This study investigates students' perceptions of learning ESL via Zoom during this abrupt transition, focusing on students in an urban Sri Lankan context. The study is grounded in the reality that English is critical for academic and career advancement in Sri Lanka. It focuses on Grade 11 students from both an international school and a government school. These students were preparing for their GCE O/L exams and had varying experiences with online ESL learning.

The research aims to fill a gap in the literature, which previously focused more on tertiary students in foreign contexts and often used only quantitative data. This study instead offers a mixed-methods approach, evaluating young learners' perceptions specifically toward learning English online, including a focus on the four language skills.

Therefore, the study investigates students' perceptions of online ESL learning via Zoom, including their attitudes towards the transition and their experiences with language skill development. To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives are to be accomplished.

- To explain students' perceptions of online ESL learning
- To determine attitudes toward the sudden transition to online classes
- To analyse how students perceived learning individual skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)

To reach the specific objectives, the research examines the following questions:

- What are students' perceptions of learning English online during the pandemic?
- How did they perceive the transition from classroom to online learning?
- What were their views on learning each English skill online?
- Did students perceive language learning differently from other subjects?

## **Materials and Methods**

A convergent mixed-methods approach was adopted to comprehensively understand students' perceptions of online ESL learning. This design enabled the integration of numerical trends with contextual insights, supporting triangulation and enhancing the reliability of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Semi-structured interviews via Zoom explored students' deeper reflections. Open-ended questions were aligned with the research objectives. Interviews continued until data saturation, and transcripts were thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines.

A realist paradigm informed the research, seeking to interpret participants' perceptions within their sociocultural context. The cross-sectional study was conducted during a defined period of the COVID-19 pandemic, capturing real-time experiences of online ESL learning.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing One-Way ANOVA and post-hoc tests to examine associations between variables such as IT literacy and study time. Qualitative data were coded and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and nuanced student experiences.

The study was conducted in two schools—one international and one government—located in urban Nugegoda. Grade 11 students preparing for the GCE O/L exam were purposively selected, ensuring participants had consistent access to online learning. Using the Qualtrics sample size calculator, a representative sample of 100 students (33 from the international school, 67 from the government school) was identified. A 26-item five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, adapted from Altunay (2019), was distributed via Google Forms. Items covered personal suitability, effectiveness, teachability, study habits, and skill-based perceptions. Demographic data on IT literacy and study hours were also collected. The instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure reliability.

## **Results**

One-Way ANOVA showed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .05$ ) between students' IT literacy and their perceptions of online ESL learning. Higher IT literacy correlated with increased comfort in using Zoom features and more favorable ratings for online class suitability, effectiveness, and teachability.

Furthermore, concerning the study time and perceived effectiveness, the post-hoc analysis indicated that students who spent more time studying English daily perceived the learning environment as more effective and conducive to skill development, particularly in writing and reading. The following were noted concerning the individual language skills:

- Listening: Frequently affected by technical issues such as poor audio and external noise.
- Speaking: Viewed as difficult due to limited real-time interaction and speaking anxiety.
- Reading: Perceived as the most accessible skill due to clear instructions and digital resources.
- Writing: Often hindered by delayed or limited teacher feedback.

Five major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview responses:

- Unwillingness to speak due to anxiety and lack of engagement.
- Lack of attention from teachers, especially in large virtual classrooms.
- Technical issues, including unstable connections and device limitations.
- Feedback inefficiency, particularly for writing and speaking tasks.
- Monotony and low interaction resulting in reduced motivation.

## **Discussion**

This study reveals that students' perceptions of learning English online via Zoom are shaped by several interrelated factors. Students with higher IT literacy reported greater ease and confidence in navigating online tools, aligning with Mantiri et al. (2019) and Menggo (2021), who emphasized the critical role of digital competence in virtual ESL contexts. Consistent with Agung et al. (2020) and Serhan (2020), it was evident that students who spent more time studying English online had more positive experiences. This suggests that both commitment and self-directed learning significantly enhance online language acquisition.

While reading and writing benefitted from structured digital tools and asynchronous learning opportunities (Fitria, 2020; Soliman, 2014), listening and speaking were constrained by technical issues and limited interactive opportunities—echoing findings by Ngo & Linh (2021) and Blake (2016). Speaking challenges were also amplified by anxiety, consistent with Maharani and Roslaini (2021).

The themes of feedback inefficiency and monotony align with global findings (Rakhmanina et al., 2020; Altunay, 2019). Students' appreciation of features like chat functions and breakout rooms suggests the potential for creative pedagogical strategies, as noted by Nurieva and Garaeva (2020). Yet, the overall experience underscores the need for personalized feedback, peer interaction, and responsive instructional design. The final research question—whether students perceived language learning differently from other subjects—was addressed in interviews. Students indicated that language learning, especially speaking and listening, felt more personal and interaction-dependent than subjects like Mathematics or Science, which relied more on visual instruction. This reinforces the need for ESL-specific strategies in online settings.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the complex factors influencing students' perceptions of online ESL learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. IT literacy emerged as the most significant determinant, affecting students' ability to engage with digital content and platforms. Study time was another strong predictor of positive attitudes and outcomes. While reading was the most positively perceived skill, speaking and writing were seen as challenging due to reduced interaction and limited feedback. Students appreciated certain Zoom features, but concerns about monotony, teacher attention, and technical issues prevailed.

To improve online ESL learning, several strategic measures should be implemented. First, schools should integrate digital literacy training into ESL curricula to ensure students are equipped to navigate online platforms effectively. Teachers must also enhance feedback mechanisms—particularly for speaking and writing—by incorporating timely, personalized responses that support skill development. Additionally, interactive strategies such as breakout room discussions and gamified learning activities can increase student engagement and reduce the monotony often associated with online classes. To address listening challenges, educators should provide asynchronous audio materials and offer guidance on creating distraction-free home learning environments. Finally, a formalized Learn from Home policy should be introduced to establish clear expectations for participation, communication, and assessment, ensuring consistency and accountability in virtual ESL instruction.

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