






Language Learning Engagement Among Malaysian Undergraduates During MCO 1.0

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ABSTRACT

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The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the education practice in Malaysia. Online mode has become the new teaching and learning norm in Malaysia. This study applied the L2 language learning engagement to investigate the language engagement and motivation among the undergraduates in online language learning during the pandemic. The study was conducted in one of the local universities, the University of Malaysia Sabah as the research site. A survey by using questionnaire and interview session were administered to collect data for the study. The research sample of the study comprised of 42 respondents and five interviewees and they were the second-year undergraduates. The research findings of the study showed i) the synchronised online classroom learning is the main platform for the undergraduates to practise their listening skill; ii) all the undergraduates practised their speaking skill in language learning through online mode; iii) the reading material for the undergraduate students to practise their reading skill is related to the language lessons and preparation of course work and iv) the undergraduates write in the language they learnt when preparing for their course work and texting their language lecturers. The study also highlighted the telcos played the most importance role in making the online teaching and learning successful.

Contribution/Originality: The findings of this paper show some constraints in language learning, using the online mode during the MCO 1.0 period in Malaysia. The

poor internet connection is found to be the main factor which has negatively impacted the teaching and learning process.

1. Introduction

Since 8th March 2020, Malaysian government promulgated Movement Control Order (MCO) 1.0 to break the chain of the spread of Corona virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19). By introducing the working from home (WFH) policy, the Higher Education Ministry instructed all the higher education institutions to conduct distance education i.e. to change the physical teaching and learning to learning from home immediately. The learning from home applied through online learning approach or using different information and communication technology is a solution to ensure the teaching and learning process could be continued (Leli Efriana, 2021) during the Covid-19 pandemic. The approach is used by the education institutions around the world which changed the physical classroom to digital learning classroom (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioglu, 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Electronic Learning (E-Learning)

The method of carrying out specially designed instructional activities through various mediums connecting teachers and student in cases where the implementation of physical classroom teaching is not possible due to the limitations of traditional learning-teaching methods is distance education (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioglu, 2021). E-learning evolved from distance education.

The development of technology ensures the educational activities can be carried out through e-learning. E-learning or virtual learning involves educational activities conducted synchronously or asynchronously using designed course materials (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioglu, 2021). An internet network is required by the teachers and learners when using the synchronous and asynchronous e-learning.

Different platforms such as Whatsapp, Telegram, Zoom Cloud meetings, Cisco Webex meetings, Google Meet and Google Classroom used by the teachers and learners during their learning from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many studies were conducted on e-learning. In Indonesia, external factors such as not having a computer, not having enough budget to provide the internet quota for learners from middle to lower class economics for online classes (Syahranie Wahab & Marwal Iskandar, 2020), learners living in the remote rural areas face difficulties in accessing the internet network (Fipter Abdi Alam Nashruddin & Novalia Tanasy, 2020), teachers' performance (Syahranie Wahab & Marwal Iskandar, 2020) are the constrains of conducting e-learning. The effectiveness of e-learning also depends on the attitudes of people i.e. the teachers and students towards e-learning (Liw, Huang & Chen, 2007). Age and computer skills and experiences were important factors towards e-learning (Link & Marz, 2006). In this study, the engagement and motivation of the students in online learning is studied. The students are expected to have positive attitudes towards e-learning. They are also assumed to have high perception of computer self-efficacy in using Internet to receive and do their assignments by using different suitable and compatible applications.

2.2. Language Engagement

Engagement enhances students learning (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Starting from 1980s, engagement studies rooted on finding the variables to prevent the United States high school students' dropout. The student's academic engaged time may improve his/her achievement (Fisher & Berliner, 1985). Finn's Participation-Identification Model highlighted the importance of the student's development prior to school entry which may affect the student's participation, success and identification with school (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1990; Garnier, Stein & Jacobs, 1997; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000). Early childhood of student affects the readiness in academic skills and behaviour of a student.

With time, the study developed from prevention of student dropout to student succeed in completion of study. Reschly's (2010) model of association between context, engagement and student outcomes provides feedback and supports of a multidimensional construct. This model shows home, school, peers and community contexts are related to student's learning outcomes in academic, social and emotional. The model describes the four types of students' engagement not only enhance students learning outcomes but also enhance their distal achievements such as the graduated students will continue for their post-secondary education, having a better employment rate and becoming productive citizens.

Reschly and Christenson (2006) proposed that the affective and cognitive engagement have higher hierarchy than the behavioural engagement. Affective engagement is the student's perceptions of belonging and connectedness with the school; cognitive engagement is the perceptions toward the value of learning and the relevance of schooling to the student's future aspiration (Reschly, 2010). The behavioural engagement is subtypes into academic engagement and behavioural engagement. The behavioural engagement refers to the student's participation in the classroom and extracurricular activities. The academic engagement of a student is related to the condition for the student to learn, student's everyday experiences in school.

Engagement reflects a person's active involvement in a task or activity (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch, 2004). Therefore, a learner's language engagement is the amount and type of learner's active participation and involvement in a language learning task (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, Vitta & Wu, 2021). Language engagement may describe how active is a learner involved in his/her language learning and to what extent the goal and purpose or the expected learning outcomes have driven the physical and mental activity of the learner (Hiver et. al., 2021).

2.3. Academic Motivation

Motivation and engagement are separate and independent (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Motivation derives from the Latin word *movere* means to move. The motivation of a student is "the degree to which a student invests his/her attention and effort in various pursuits, which may or may not be the ones desired by their teachers" (Brophy, 1998). A student with academic motivation may generate energy for the individual to perform for academic tasks (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioğlu, 2021).

McLean (2003) disagrees with the existing of unmotivated students. He agrees there are students who focus on learning more than the others. There are also motivation

students who are lack of motivation (Brophy, 1998). The students focus on learning could be they engage in learning. The behavioural model of motivation emphasises manipulating the students by reinforcement. The teachers use reinforcement to bring the desired behaviour from the students under their stimulus control. “Carrot and stick” is the popular approach applied by the teachers to stimulate the students through grading and report card systems or the awards ceremonies. However, if the students’ behaviour is not compatible with the desired behaviour of the teachers, punishment or non-reinforcement action is given to the students.

Meanwhile, the cognitive model of motivation emphasises the students’ thoughts and intentions. Motivation is the students’ subjective experiences and their willingness to engage in lessons. E-learning may change the students’ academic motivation because of the change of environment (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioglu, 2021). The needs and the motivation-related thinking of the learners are emphasised. The students’ academic performance is positively related to academic motivation (Coetzee, 2011). However, anxiety is the threat to learning (Brophy, 1998). As shown in Table 1, the students feel anxiety when the level of challenge is too high to the students and the students’ skill level is too low for the challenge.

Table 1: Relationship between Perceived Level of Challenge and Skill in Learning

Perceived Level of Challenge	Perceived Level of Skill	
	Low	High
Low	Apathy	Boredom
High	Anxiety	Flow

Source: Brophy (1998)

The computer self-efficacy perceptions and attitudes of students towards attending classes through e-learning may affect the academic motivation of students (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioglu, 2021). As the solutions for the learning threat, Brophy (1998) proposed to the teachers that: (i) to use a combination of instructional and emotional support to enable the learners to learn confidently and without anxiety; (ii) to have enthusiastic in teaching their students and (iii) to help the students to achieve the suitable level of challenge.

The students’ output or performance should not be the focus of motivation strategy setting. This is because the students’ motivation of learning also applies to the process of learning which includes the learning content and skills. Encouraging the students to attend lessons (or engagement) and the skill building during the lessons should be put as the first place in students’ motivation strategy. In language lessons, the strategy for four skills building which are the listening skill, speaking skill, reading skill and writing skill.

It is necessary for a student to have motivation but it is not sufficient for a student to be fully engaged in his/her study by only having motivation (Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006). The students do not have much motivation to learn may learn routinely if they enter a learning situation. This may happen if the teacher showed them the importance of the lesson content and the skill to be built (Brophy, 1998). In addition, the learners will take it seriously to attend the lessons due to the benefits of the lessons.

In addition, a conducive learning environment, using relevant teaching materials and have fun classroom activities motivate students to be engaged in learning (Lee, 2020). Engagement strongly depends on social, environmental and activities contexts. Connell's Model of motivation outlines how motivation influences student engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

The study is aimed to study the undergraduates' engagement in the online learning from home in a local university during the sudden shift from physical teaching and learning during the period of MCO 1.0 because of Covid-19 pandemic. Reshly's (2010) model of association between context, engagement and student outcomes and Hiver et. al.'s (2021) language engagement are applied.

3. Methodology

The studied university, University of Malaysia Sabah has of three campuses. This study conducted in one of the campuses that is the Labuan International Campus as research site. This campus is in the island of Labuan, Malaysian second federal territory. All the undergraduate students at the university are compulsory to attend language classes for two academic years or four academic semesters. The MUET or the Malaysian University English Test result of the students during their pre-university is used by the university as benchmark to sub-divide the new intake undergraduate students into two groups starting from their first semester. One group of the students is required to study English for four semesters and the other group of students is required to study an elective foreign language for three semesters followed by an advanced English course in their fourth semester.

The sampling group of this study was the second-year or the third-semester undergraduates of the research site. An online survey using Google form questionnaire was sent to 80 undergraduates randomly. 42 respondents returned their answered questionnaire. The respondents were either studying English or Mandarin (the elective foreign languages) during the academic calendar of semester one, session 2020/2021.

The respondents consisted of students with the following characteristics, namely (i) they attended physical or face to face teaching and learning classes during semester one, year one; (ii) they attended one month of face to face and three months of online language classes when they were in semester two, year one and (iii) they attended full online language classes when they were in semester one, year two. The respondents have the experiences of attending i) fully physical language classes; ii) semi physical language classes and semi online language classes and iii) fully online language classes.

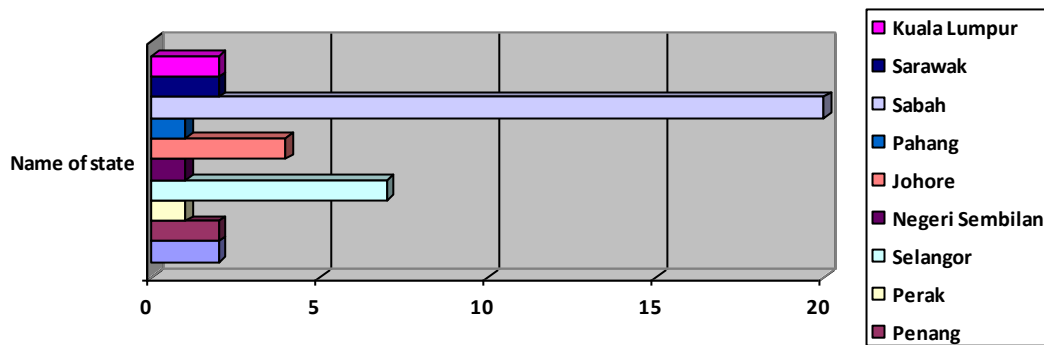
The questionnaire was used as the research tool to investigate the undergraduate students' engagement in language learning in four skills by using the online mode. The motivation in language study of the respondents was also studied. The Likert scales were used in this study. Statistical analysis which measured the frequency and mean was conducted to analyse the collected data.

An interview session with five undergraduate students was also conducted. Content analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The following section presents the outcomes of the study.

4. Result and Discussion

This section will present the demographic of the respondents, their engagement and their motivation to language learning by using the online mode. The respondents of this study are mainly from three states - Sabah, Selangor and Johore. About half of the respondents come from Sabah, 20 percent of them are from Selangor and ten percent are from Johore (Figure 1).

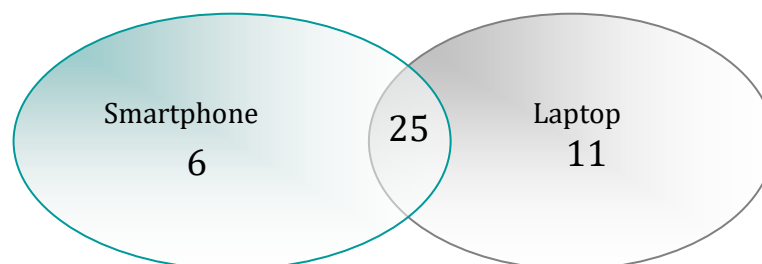
Figure 1: Respondent hometown demography



Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all the respondents of the study enrolled their courses through and they had to attend their lectures using online mode at their hometown. Selangor is the most developed and progressive state in Malaysia (Invest Selangor Berhad, 2021) and Johore is the “Southern Gateway of Malaysia” and it is one of the most developed states in Malaysia (Johor State Investment Centre, 2016).

Among the 42 respondents, six of them used a smartphone and 11 of them used a laptop to attend their online language classes. However, there are 60 percent or 25 respondents used these two devices i.e. smartphone and laptop at the same time during their online language classes (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Device used by respondents to attend online language classes



According to the respondents, they had to use the smartphone as the substitution for the hardware of their laptop when attending their online language classes. For example, the respondents used the microphone, speaker and/or keypad of their smartphone to replace the function of the mentioned hardware of their laptop. The respondents did so due to the following reasons. Firstly, the hardware of their laptop was broken but they were unable to send their laptop for repair. This was because all the service centres at their hometown were unable to provide repairing service during MCO. Therefore, using

their smartphone is a solution for them to attend the online language classes during the semester instead of waiting for the re-opening of the service centres; Secondly, sending the laptop to the service centres to repair the malfunctioning hardware would be an extra expense to the respondents. Smartphone has become an essential and every undergraduate has a smartphone. Using their smartphone is a solution to save the repairing expenses.

The study showed some of the respondents had problem of poor internet connection at their hometown though they were from the most progressive and most developed states (see [Figure 1](#)). Three percent of the respondents graded their internet connection quality as excellent. There were students having internet connection problem to attend the online language classes and/or they were unable to log in the online language classes because of no internet access and/or with unstable internet connection. The students agreed that the internet connection problem was more serious during bad weather days i.e. during the rainy days. They also found out that poor internet connection caused the problem of unable to connect their cameras during the asynchronous online language classes. To solve this problem, they paid more for a bigger and better coverage data plan to attend the online classes at home.

The students who missed the online lesson because of internet connection problem did their self-study. Their language lecturers sent them the recording of the online lessons for the reference of the students. Using the recording of online classes shared by their language lecturers, the interviewees did their self-study. Some of the interviewees also consulted their friends or their language lecturers regarding the online lesson content that they have missed in class.

The academic engagement reflects the condition for the student to learn and the physical and mental activity of the students to learn a language ([Reshly, 2010](#); [Hiver et al., 2021](#)). Though the undergraduate students encountered constraints in joining the online language classes, their engagement in their language learning was shown through their efforts of finding effective solutions to overcome obstacles to enable them to attend the online classes i.e. they used a smartphone together with a laptop during the online classes. In addition, those respondents who were affordable paid more by signing up new or switching to another telco which could provide stronger and more stable internet service. The study showed some undergraduate students unable to show their involvement in language learning synchronously. Their academic engagement was shown asynchronously though their condition to learn was not conducting.

4.1. Student engagement in language learning

The engagement of the undergraduates in their four skills of language learning is discussed in this section. The four skills are namely listening skill, speaking skill, reading skill and writing skill.

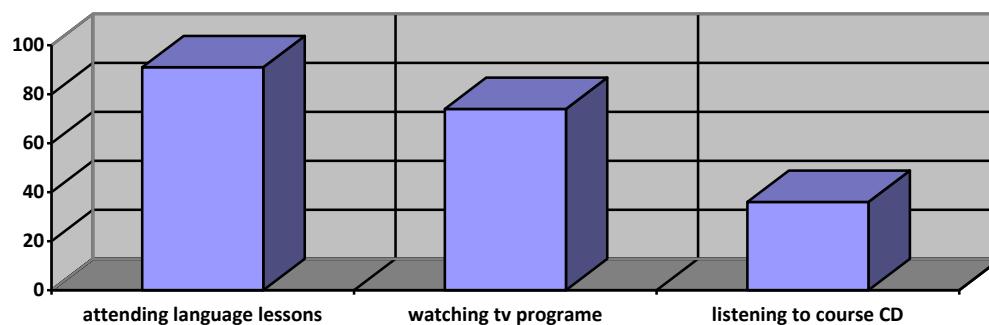
4.1.1. Student's engagement in listening skill in language learning

The synchronous online language classes were the main platform for the undergraduate students to practise their listening skill of the language they learn. The data showed that 91 percent of the respondents practised their listening skill during the online language classes. This showed the undergraduate students' listening skill was mainly drilled

during the classroom learning. The undergraduate students attended the virtual classroom during the pandemic that is using online mode.

In addition to online classes, the undergraduate students practised their listening skill through offline mode. 74 percent of the students watched television programme or other media and followed by 36 percent of them listened to the compact disc of their course book or the listening materials provided by their language lecturers (Figure 3). However, the above figures showed that about ten percent of the undergraduates did not practise their listening skill during their online lessons. This is because the students unable to attend the online language classes synchronously, they missed the chances to listen to their course mates and language lecturers to speak the language by using the speed and tone authentically. However, 64 percent of the undergraduate students did not practise their listening skill asynchronously because they did not listen to the course book CD or the listening materials provided by their language lecturers.

Figure 3: Engagement of undergraduates in listening skill



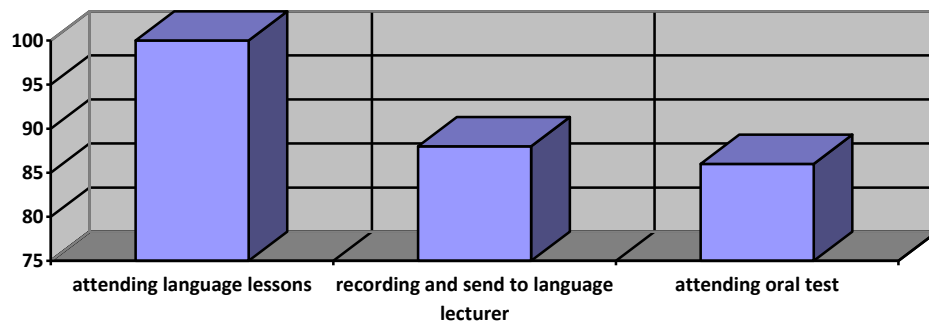
As mentioned by the interviewees, during the synchronous online language classes, they had difficulty to differentiate the sound produced by their language lecturers. For example they made mistakes of similar-sound words such as 'nian' and 'tian' and they agreed that sometimes, they couldn't hear the words clearly during the Mandarin online classes. This happened because of poor internet connection during the online classes. Listening to the course book CD asynchronously during the students' free time could be the solution to solve the problem.

The internet connection provided by the telco during the MCO was not supportive for the undergraduate students to have active academic engagement in language learning synchronously. However, 36 percent of the undergraduates had high cognitive engagement (Reschly, 2010), they practised their listening skill through listening to the course book CD during their free time asynchronously (Hiver et. al., 2021).

4.1.2. Student's engagement in speaking skill in language learning

The statistical results show all the undergraduates practised their speaking skill during the online classes. In additional, 88 and 86 percent of them recorded the material and then sent the recording to their language lecturers and attended the oral test respectively to practice their speaking skill of the language their learn (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Engagement of undergraduates in speaking skill



These showed the online mode language classes is a very important platform for the undergraduates to practise their speaking skill of the language they learn because they were actively engaged in speaking with their language lecturers during the online classes and during the oral test. Reschly's Model of association between context, engagement and student outcomes stated that the school and peers are related to student's learning outcome. In addition, the students were also actively engaged in the asynchronous task given by their language lecturers that is, they recorded the material and sent the recording to their language lecturers. Their language lecturers would give them feedback after listening to the recording. This showed that in this way, the asynchronous task has also enabled a two-way communication between the language lecturers and his/her students.

However, the interviewees were not satisfied with their speaking practice through online mode because the online mode did not facilitate their practise to enhance their speaking skills. Take for example, the speaking process was interrupted when they encountered any interference of noise. All students except for the one was speaking would be reminded to mute their audios and those who wanted to speak would need to 'raise their hand' before unmuting their microphone. In this way, as one interviewee put it, they could not speak 'freely' compared to when they were in the physical class.

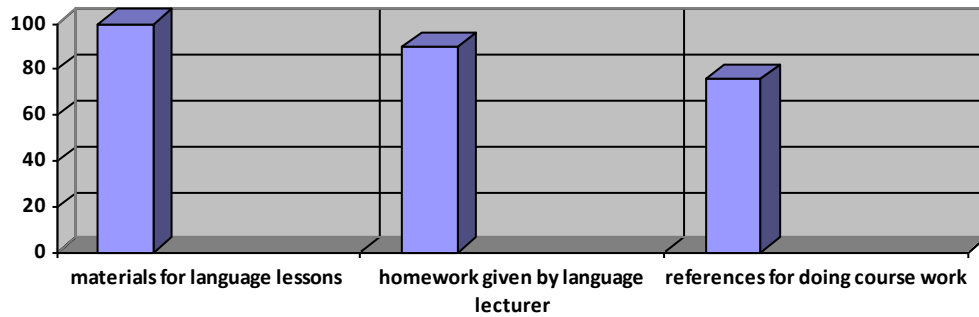
Furthermore, according to some interviewees, the inconsistency of internet connection during class has demotivated their learning. This is because they could not pay full attention to the lessons or the speaking practice as they needed to log in again and again to their Google Meet class whenever there was a disconnection. These constraints reduced the engagement of the undergraduate students in speaking during the online lessons (Hiver et. al., 2021).

4.1.3. Student's engagement in reading skill in language learning'

As shown in Figure 5, the undergraduates read the materials mainly related to their study and these materials are written in the language they learn. The students read the course textbook and the references they needed for doing their course work.

As described by interviewees of Mandarin course, reading activity conducted by the language lecturers was mainly reading of words and phrases especially the new vocabularies during the online lessons. The undergraduates of Mandarin course needed the guidance of their language lecturers when reading the new vocabularies.

Figure 5: Engagement of undergraduates in reading skill



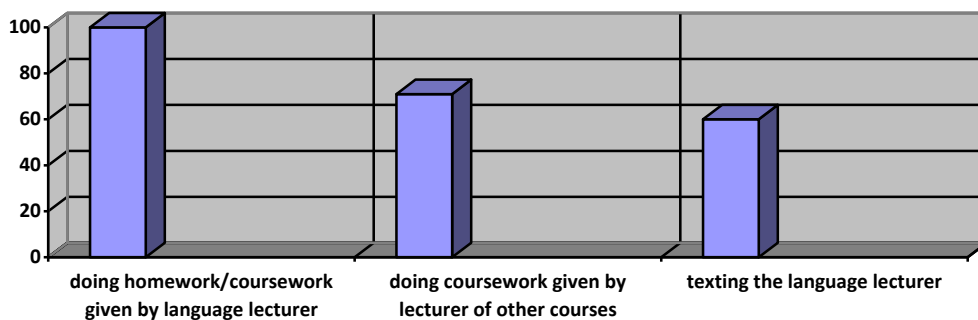
The study shows synchronous online mode was not an idea and effective platform for the undergraduate students to be engaged in practising language reading skill. The language lecturers were unable to guide the students to read paragraph or passage individually during the synchronous online language classes. The students have to self-practise their reading skill when / during asynchronous off-line learning. This could not be happened during the physical face to face classes.

Synchronous online mode was not a conducive platform for students to be engaged in language reading skill during MCO 1.0 in Malaysia because the undergraduate students read the materials related to their language course asynchronously i.e. the offline mode during their free time when they did the course work given by their language lecturers.

4.1.4. Student's engagement in writing skill in language learning

As shown in Figure 6, the undergraduates practised their writing skill of the language they learn also mainly asynchronously that is when they were writing their course work. However, there are 60 percent of the undergraduate students texted their language lecturers using the language they were learning.

Figure 6: Engagement of undergraduates in writing skill



Unlike the listening and speaking skills, the interviewees explained that it was difficult for them to practise writing skill during online language classes. They did their writing up such as making sentences or writing essay through offline. They emailed the completed task to their language lecturers for comment or marking. This is because more time was needed for the undergraduates to complete the writing task and they were unable to produce an essay spontaneously during the online language classes.

However, the undergraduates did some simple practice of writing during the synchronous online language classes i.e. they were requested by their language lecturers to type short answers individually at the “in-call messages”. Feedback of every student’s answer was given by their language lecturers immediately during the online classes verbally. This could be done by giving answers verbally instead of typing the answers during the physical face to face language classes.

The study shows the online mode is also not an ideal platform for the undergraduate students to be engaged in practising writing skill of the language they study. The writing of coursework of the language course was carried out by the undergraduate students asynchronously.

4.2. Motivation in language learning

The internet connection instability and the challenges of learning the foreign language using online mode made the respondents and interviewees feel anxious before and after the online language classes (Mustafa Çevik & Büşra Bakioğlu, 2021). The undergraduate students felt worries if they were unable to join the online language classes synchronously because of the constraints before the online language classes. Furthermore, they felt worries again when they did not join the online language classes synchronously. Those students who did not join the language classes synchronously, missed the opportunity to practise listening and speaking skills with their language lecturers and course mates. In addition, their language lecturers could not give them feedback and comments regarding their listening and speaking skills. This was practised by the language lecturers during the online language classes.

Brophy (1998) stated that students feel anxiety when their skill level is too low and the level of challenge is too high for them (Table 1). However, the study showed the students also felt anxiety because of external factor such as internet connection.

The interviewees agree that the language lecturers motivated the undergraduates in their language learning being understanding, friendly, emphatic and conducting more fun activities during the online classes. They also used the record function recorded and sent the online language lecture to those students who did not attend the online language lecture synchronously because of the internet connection problem, technical and equipment challenges (Brophy, 1998). The students could do self-study by watching the recordings. Such moral support and action have helped the undergraduate students to learn without much stress and to participate in the class activities actively.

5. Conclusion

The internet connection is the main factor of the success or failure of the teaching and learning of language lessons using online mode during the MCO 1.0 in Malaysia. The findings of the study show the teaching and learning of languages in online classroom was unable to be conducted effectively to undergraduate students who had problem of poor quality of the internet connection. The online mode platform is unable to replace the physical learning classroom. Furthermore, the online classroom is unable to provide an effective platform for students to perform their reading and writing practices.

The researcher would like to highlight that language learners need to have extra motivation and commitment to be engaged in the language lessons using online mode

than the physical classroom learning. The weaknesses of online learning in terms of not being able to enough practice to enhance the reading and writing skills among the undergraduates could be solved through offline or asynchronous activities. However, the telcos that provide the services of internet infrastructure play a very important role in solving the unstable internet connection problem. This may help to relieve the pressure of teaching and learning process in an online language class.

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The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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