ATTITUDES OF ESL STUDENTS TOWARD VIRTUAL LEARNING IN POLYTECHNIC MERSING, JOHOR (PMJ)

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ABSTRACT

Learning English as a Second Language (ESL) has become a "life-threatening" issue among polytechnic students. They consider English a difficult language to learn and believe that improving their language skills will be a challenge. Various efforts are being made to assist them. While they were being helped, the world was unexpectedly shaken by the outbreak of COVID-19. The teaching and learning process abruptly shifted from traditional face-to-face learning to virtual learning. Although the content remains the same, students at all levels, from kindergarten to tertiary level, have been affected by technology adoption. The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitude of ESL students of Polytechnic Mersing Johor (PMJ) towards virtual learning. Therefore, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was used to assess the students' attitudes toward virtual ESL learning. Fifty (50) students from two (2) core departments of PMJ were randomly selected for this study. From the responses to the questionnaires, it is evident that the students have a positive attitude toward technology.

Keywords: Technology Acceptance Model, ESL learners, attitude, virtual learning

1.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, all educational institutions have shifted from face-to-face to virtual learning, including preschools, elementary schools, secondary schools, and higher education institutions. In light of this, the need to continue education is critical to ensure that students can complete their semester's curriculum on time. For this reason, the Malaysian government has made virtual teaching and learning mandatory for students at all levels. This has created confusion among lecturers and students as to whether technology will help students adopt this method of learning by providing a learning platform and transforming learning materials for virtual learning.

Thus, all lecturers at Polytechnic Mersing Johor (PMJ) are encouraged to provide virtual learning opportunities to students as it is an alternative way to impart knowledge. PMJ has three main departments which consist of the Department of Engineering (ED), the Department of Information Technology and Communication (ITCD), and the Department of Commerce (CD). These three departments are supported by the Department of General Studies and the Department of Mathematics, Science, and Computing (MSCD). The PMJ General Studies Department offers communicative courses to all three departments. Communicative English consists of three levels, namely Communicative English 1,

Communicative English 2 and Communicative English 3. These three courses are mainly offered to the students of ED and CD because their needs are more focused on communication skills. Unlike ITCD students study English for Digital Technology in their first semester. As ITCD students are provided with English for Digital Technology course early in the semester along with their core subjects, the lecturers found that they have no issues in adopting the ESL. Therefore, this study focuses on all first-semester students of ED and CD as they hardly use technology in ESL classes compared to ITCD students. They have basic knowledge of Information and Computer Technology (ICT) which they acquired in most courses before virtual learning was introduced after the pandemic. The same concept applies to lecturers.

In addition, the ICT and E-learning (electronic learning) Units of PMJ aided virtual learning by offering courses and teaching platforms to introduce faculty to virtual teaching. Lecturers participated in webinars to learn about different teaching and learning platforms step-by-step. A webinar is a virtual event attended exclusively by an online audience. Lecturers need to explore the virtual teaching methods through the webinars. Therefore, it is hoped that students will adopt a different learning environment in a virtual teaching-learning process through the courses attended by the lecturers, especially for all ESL-related courses.

However, it is anticipated that students in the CD, ED, and MSCD departments face quite a number of issues with technology for virtual ESL learning. Due to network issues, the majority of students have their cameras turned off, giving the impression that the lecturer is only speaking to the screen. Besides, students use their networks from different directories in Malaysia. The stability of the network is unpredictable. Some can prove that their connection is unstable, others are unable to do so. The main problem is the lack of cooperation among students. One of our students at Mersing Polytechnic reported that his connection tower in Sabah was on fire, consequently, he was unable to join the class sessions, and assessments were turned in late exceeding expectations.

Although virtual learning is proving to be a growing learning approach in education around the world, there are still some challenges to overcome. This transition has significant implications for all English courses taken. It is true that students encounter difficulties in the face-to-face learning phase of ESL learning. In order to achieve well in ESL learning, students must accept the use of technology in their classes. This statement is supported by Abbad, 2009, who asserts that successful system implementation and learner acceptance require a thorough understanding of user acceptance procedures and methods to encourage students to use these technologies.

This study investigated student attitudes toward virtual learning from PMJ ESL. This research is expected to help lecturers who will learn more about how attitudes affect ESL teaching and learning as a result of this study. In addition, the results of this study may provide useful information for future research on the effects of students' attitudes toward learning other languages, such as Tamil and Chinese, as alternative learning languages.

1.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of Technology Acceptability Model (TAM) was taken from "Recent Related Research in Technology Acceptance Model: A Literature Review' by Han, (2011). Davis proposed TAM in 1889 in Management Information System or known as MIS quarterly. Davis further states that this model is one of the most influential research models in studies on the determinants of information systems and information technology by individuals. The

technology acceptance model (TAM) was used in this study to explain students' attitudes toward virtual learning in ESL in PMJ.

1.2 THEORETHICAL REVIEW

According to Davis (1889), TAM has been widely used to predict the acceptance, adoption, and use of information technology. TAM has modified Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by substituting two key constructs: perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU). As explained by Han (2011) PU is the extent to which a person believes that using a particular information system or information technology would enhance his or her job or life performance whereby PEOU is the degree to which a person believes that using a particular information system or information technology requires no effort. It refers to the acceptance of a technology that would improve a person's work or life performance.

This is supported by Vainny et al,(2008) stated that Information Technology (IT) studies have replicated TAM or used TAM instrument (which has empirically proved to have high validity) extensively to investigate a range of issues in the area of acceptance of technology. However, these researches support the idea of learning technology. There is research being done by a Nigerian researcher on the attitude towards e-learning towards technology acceptance model in year 2014. In this study Odeshi(2014) concluded that if there is an easy accessibility to the technological system more positive attitude can be identified. Consistent with Odeshi's conclusion, the researcher agreed that both e-learning and virtual instruction fall into the same technology acceptance theory because both use online learning systems.

This study adapted TAM in checking the students' attitude acceptance towards ESL if they are being taught virtually. According to Egbe,2014 TAM adapted Theory of Reasoned Action(TRA) by replacing several of its measures with two key constructs: perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU). Based on this model, students' attitude is to be tested towards their technology acceptance and its effect towards their language proficiency and performance.

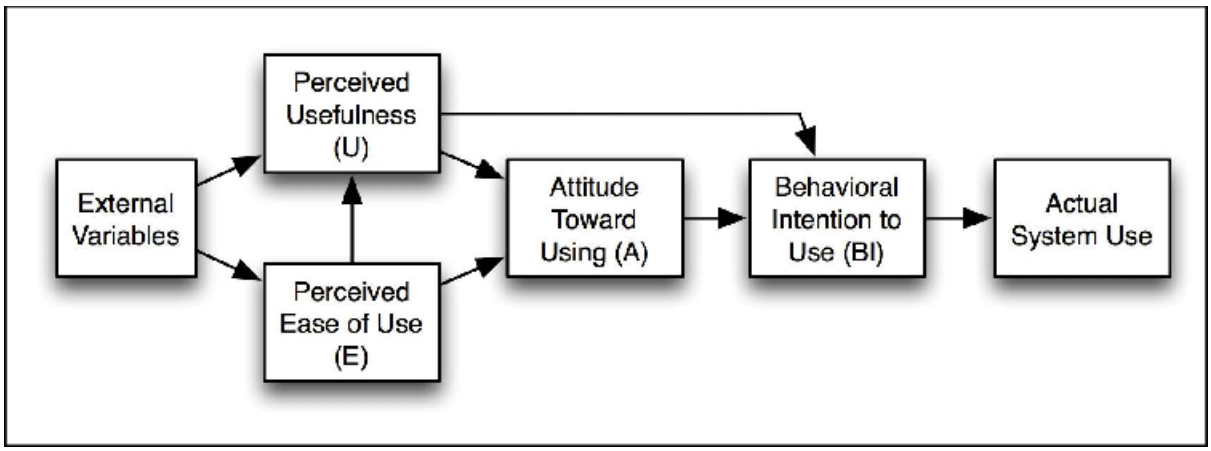


Figure 1. Technology Acceptance Model

2.0 VIRTUAL TEACHING

2.1 ESL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD VIRTUAL LEARNING

Some researchers have studied attitudes extensively, especially in Malaysia, where English is being learned as a second language. They consider attitude as one of the most important factors affecting language learning. They believe that without a positive attitude towards the second language, students will not be able to learn it. Consequently, attitude is crucial for learning English as a second language.

According to Stern (Jarvis, 1985), the cognitive aspect of language learning is more effective than students' other ordinary skills. According to Jarvis, attitude does not seem to be an important element in determining students' ability and achievement. If a student view learning a second language as a matter for his or her future and life, then his or her abilities will function optimally. Almost all studies agree that success in language learning is influenced by affective variables (Eveyik, 1999; Gardner et al., Skehan, 1989; Spolsky, 1989). Students' attitudes vary from time to time and according to circumstances.

There are two different statements from different researchers about the influence of attitude on students' performance. Either they influence students' achievements or they have no influence on students' achievements.

2.2 LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

In general, fluency is equivalent to proficiency, but there is a difference between the two. One can be fluent without being highly proficient, and one can be highly proficient without being fluent. When learning a second language, some important aspects of fluency lie in the prosody of the language, pronunciation, and timing of dialogues. Without dialogue with a fluent speaker of the language, it is impossible to be fluent. Fluency, on the other hand, is primarily about your ability to understand and communicate accurately in the language. Mastery of the language is best practiced through reading and writing. (Rao, 2016). Based on Rao's (2016) statement, comprehension and communication seem to be the most important element in language learning. According to the researchers, only comprehension and communication affect language proficiency.

The above statements are different from the statement that the level of language proficiency of individual learners is influenced by the learners' attitudes. Accordingly, learners with a good attitude (motivated learners) will be successful. Likewise, learners with poor attitudes (demotivated learners) will fail rather than succeed. (Ellis, 1994)

3.0 RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, an attempt is made to practically investigate the attitudes of Mersing Polytechnic students toward ESL learning. It is descriptive research that examines students' attitudes through a set of adapted questionnaires. The reason is that this study attempts to determine the opinions of PMJ students. The respondents of this study were first-semester students of Mersing Polytechnic.

3.1 RESPONDENTS

The respondents in this study were first-year PMJ students. The reason for selecting freshmen is to determine their attitudes toward ESL learning in higher education, even though they have already been exposed to online learning in secondary school. Fifty students were randomly selected. The reason for this is that random sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which respondents are selected simply because they are an "appropriate" source of data for the researchers. In probability sampling, each element of the population has a known non-zero probability of being selected by a random selection procedure. (Lavrakas, 2008). This is a convenient sampling method for the researcher to obtain respondents due to time constraints.

3.2 INSTRUMENTS

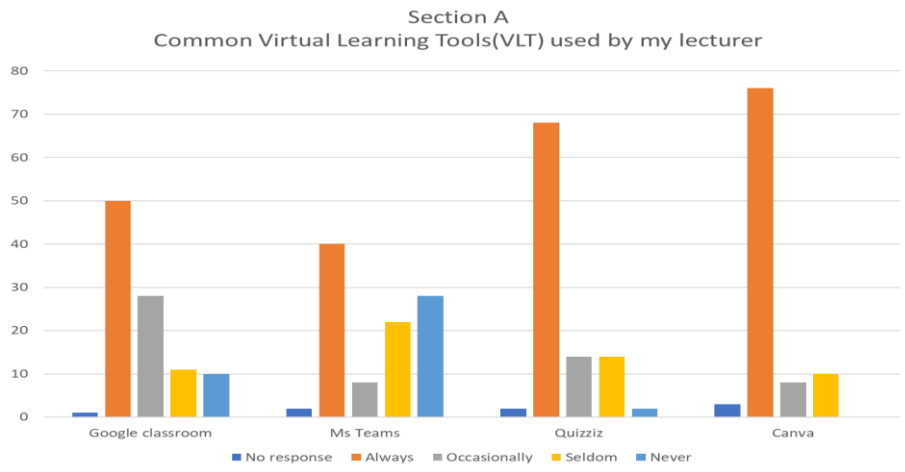
Questionnaires were used to collect data. They are implementations of LIKERT SCALE statements for survey research. The questionnaires were written to obtain students' feedback and opinions on the virtual learning tools used, as well as the students' perceptions of using the tools and virtual learning in English. The questionnaires were adapted from Adewole-Ogeshi-Egbe (2014), with some modifications had been done. Students are tested on the frequency of using the virtual learning tools before answering the questions to determine the impact of their attitudes towards ESL virtual learning.

4.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

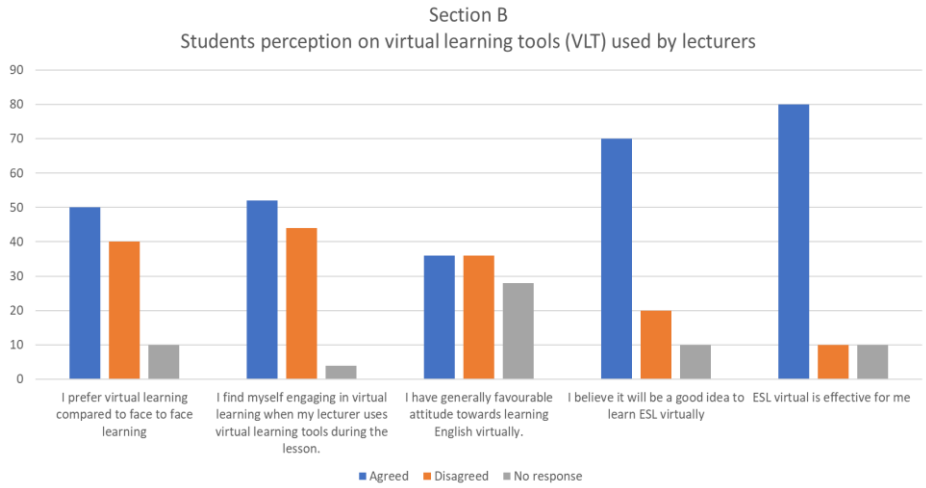
The data in this study are analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive analysis is used to analyze the type of data that helps describe, show, or summarize data points in a constructive way so that patterns can emerge that meet all the conditions of the data. Percentages are answered in relation to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What is Semester 1 students' attitude toward the learning of English virtually?

Section A shows the virtual learning tools used by the instructors and the frequency of their use by the students. Section B, on the other hand, shows students' perceptions of the virtual learning tools used by instructors in ESL courses in the Commerce Department, and Engineering Department. Both sections answer research question 1.



The chart above shows that students are quite familiar with the use and application of virtual learning tools as their lecturers use these commonly. In the virtual classroom, half of the respondents responded that their lecturers use Google Classroom. Only 40% of them mentioned that their lecturers use Microsoft Teams, while the other half rarely or never use it. Quizzes are being used widely by 68 percent of the lecturers for classroom assessments and exercises. Seventy-six percent use audio, while 10 percent do so only occasionally. The Canva application is used by the majority of lecturers, with only 3% not responding to the questions/statements. According to the table above, students are well-versed in virtual learning tools since lecturers frequently employ technology to facilitate the teaching-learning process.



Based on the above research questions, 50% of the respondents prefer virtual learning compared to face-to-face learning and 52% find themselves engaging when their lecturer uses virtual learning tools during the lesson. In addition, 70% believe that learning English virtually is a good idea, supported by the statement that it is also effective for them by 80%. Meanwhile, less than half of the students had a dismissive attitude toward virtual English learning and did not believe that this method would help them enhance their English skills.

From the data in Section A and Section B, it can be concluded that students have a positive attitude toward virtual English learning. However, some students who answered "No" are undoubtedly unsure of their attitude. Although the results suggest that the students have a positive attitude, due to some uncertainty, the researcher decided to obtain more reliable data by asking the students who were unsure of their answers. The feedback received was that the students were unsure of their answers and some remained silent. Moreover, with consulting with other lecturers whose students are involved in this survey they agreed that students have positive attitude towards ESL virtual learning.

Research Question 2: Does their attitude affect their performance and language proficiency during virtual learning?

Students attitude towards performance and language proficiency were analysed using students' class performance. It is clearly observed that students' attitude doesn't affect their classroom performance. This has been supported by Stern (Jarvis, 1985), that the cognitive

aspect of language learning is more effective than students' other ordinary skills. According to Jarvis, attitude does not seem to be an important element in determining students' ability and achievement. If a student view learning a second language as a matter for his or her future and life, then his or her abilities will function optimally.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that virtual learning affects students' views in a positive way. Virtual learning is preferred by students over traditional learning because it allows them to learn and attend lectures at their leisure. According to their responses to the surveys, lecturers employ a range of virtual learning technologies to make the lesson engaging. Furthermore, students believe that virtual learning is a wonderful idea because it allows them to save both time and money. Students in rural areas and other cities can save time by not having to drive vast distances or pay for travel or hostel expenses. Students can stay with their family and relatives.

To summarise, it is not an exaggeration to say that virtual learning can provide students with ease, happiness, and confidence while alleviating worry and frustration. Meanwhile, it has some disadvantages, such as a lack of internet connectivity, a scarcity of resources, a lack of technology, and so on. All of the students are not technologically savvy. Students may be introduced and oriented to technology. These shortcomings, however, may be overcome over time.

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