

Perceptions of ESL Teachers from Tamil Vernacular Type Schools (SJKT) About Online Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools about online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. While there are studies on teachers' perceptions during Covid-19, less is known about ESL Tamil vernacular type schoolteachers' perceptions on teaching and learning during the Covid pandemic, where Tamil is the medium of instruction, with the Malay Language as the second language and English as the third language. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 ESL teachers from different Tamil vernacular schools in the Johor Bahru region. Using an explanatory sequential mixed method approach to collect the data, in the first phase, a close-ended questionnaire was used as a quantitative instrument. As for the second phase, an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. GNU PSPP software was used to analyse the quantitative data, while the qualitative data was analysed through descriptive content analysis. The findings of the study showed the perceptions of ESL teachers about online teaching and learning, such as online teaching and learning tools, skills needed to conduct online teaching, challenges in online teaching and learning as well as positive aspects of online teaching and learning. The findings show that the challenges the teachers faced during online teaching outweighs the positive aspects stated. This calls for more research about vernacular-type schools. The findings can be a reminder for the school management to provide more training for teachers on how to help students be more interactive, motivated and be less inhibited during online teaching and learning.

Keywords: ESL Teachers' Perceptions, Online Teaching and Learning, Tamil Vernacular Schools, Covid-19 Pandemic

1.0 INTRODUCTION

On March 18, 2020, the Malaysian government announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus in the country (Bunyan, 2020). To ensure the continuation of teaching and learning throughout the MCO period, the MOE instructed the teachers to utilise online educational technologies such as Google Classroom to conduct online teaching. Teachers faced difficulties due to the limited technological knowledge to utilise online educational technologies properly, and this affected the teachers' readiness, which in turn affected the effectiveness of the students' English language learning (Wen & Tan, 2020). Based on the medium of instruction, primary schools in Malaysia can be divided into 2 main types such as Malay medium National Schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan, SK) and non-Malay medium National-type Schools which are known as 'vernacular schools' (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan, SJK). Vernacular schools are further divided into National-type Chinese Schools (SJK Cina) with Mandarin as the medium of instruction, and National-type Tamil Schools (SJK Tamil) with Tamil as the medium of instruction. Since Malay is the main medium of instruction in National Schools, English is

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taught as a second language. As for the vernacular schools where mother tongue such as Mandarin or Tamil is the medium of instruction, Malay is taught as a second language whereas English is taught as a third language (Kumaran & Krish, 2021; Kumar & Sandaran, 2018). Learning English as a third language is one of the reasons for vernacular school students' poor English language proficiency and they perceive it as a difficult subject (Maniam, 2010).

Studies also reveal that time allocation for English language lessons is 5 hours per week in the national schools, but only 2.5 hours per week in Tamil vernacular schools (Kumaran & Krish, 2021). Students from Tamil vernacular schools thus, have less exposure to the English language which may hinder their acquisition of the English language. As stated by Kumar & Sandaran (2018), using the first language which is Tamil is prohibited among teachers and students during English lessons, and students struggle to understand the teachers' instructions, which are solely in English language. Since code-switching is not allowed in the classroom, some students have apprehensions about learning the English Language (Kumar & Sandaran, 2018). Apart from that, most Tamil vernacular schools lack adequate infrastructure and learning facilities, particularly those required for ICT learning while the teachers are under-trained and only accessible temporarily (Raja, n.d.). Considering the issues, it is necessary to investigate the perspectives of ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools to learn how they deal with the Covid-19 situation and play their roles in online teaching and learning. However, no studies specifically focused on the perceptions of ESL teachers from Tamil vernacular schools. Hence, this study aims to address the perceptions of ESL teachers from Tamil vernacular schools about online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Online teaching and learning can be defined as a form of education that takes place with the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- i. How do ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools utilise the online teaching and learning tools?
- ii. What are the perceptions of ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools about the skills needed to conduct online teaching?
- iii. What are some of the challenges faced by ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools during online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- iv. How do ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools view online teaching and learning in a positive light?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study investigates teachers' perceptions of online teaching and learning in relation to the tools, skills needed, challenges faced, and positive thoughts on online teaching practices. For this purpose, in this section, we review previous studies that are related to these aspects.

Online Teaching and Learning Tools

Teachers mostly use Google Meet, Zoom and Microsoft Teams for synchronous teaching, webinars, and live chatting (Karatas & Tuncer, 2021; Bernazzani, 2020). They also use Google Classroom to create and

share educational resources in a variety of formats including images, videos and links (Ramly & Latiff, 2021). Some social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram and Youtube are adopted by teachers to deliver classroom content (Hamat & Hassan, 2019). Facebook is reported to facilitate the learning and acquisition of a second language, so, ESL teachers use this platform as one of the opportunities to immerse the students in a second language environment (Paepe, Zhu & Depryck, 2018). Today, WhatsApp, Telegram and Youtube have been used extensively by teachers for teaching and learning purposes in the wake of the Covid-19 virus. Teachers use WhatsApp (Lukas & Yunus, 2021) and Telegram (Alahmad, 2020) to post the tasks, notes, instructions, and homework for the students to attempt from home and Youtube is to upload, share, and view videos that are relevant to the lessons (Alias *et al.*, 2013). Apart from that, teachers use game-based learning tools, such as Kahoot!, Quizizz, Blooket, Wordwall and KABOOM!. These applications enhance the teachers to assess student's learning progress in a fun environment (Tan & Tan, 2020; Chaiyo & Nokham, 2017; Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016). Another tool that is commonly used by teachers is Google Forms but this is mainly for conducting online assessments (Alharbi, Alhebshi & Meccawy, 2021). Padlet is a virtual wall where all students have an equal opportunity to express their ideas through writing at the same time (Mahmud, 2019). Therefore, teachers adopt Padlet applications to conduct group discussions during online teaching and learning (Syahrizal & Rahayu, 2020).

Microsoft PowerPoint is one of the most used technologies to create teaching material in slides. Teachers can include graphics, images, animations, and sound to prepare attractive PowerPoint presentations and make learning more enjoyable (Uzun & Kilis, 2019). As an add-on application of Microsoft Powerpoint, teachers use Pear Deck which is an interactive PowerPoint application that helps the teachers to ask open-ended questions, engage with every student and discuss the students' responses (Haryani & Ayuningtyas, 2020). Teachers also use Canva, a graphic design platform to create social media graphics, presentations, posters, documents, and other visual content. It offers different themes and professional layouts to create a compelling infographic for presenting the teaching materials (Yundayani, Susilawati & Chairunnisa, 2019). Teachers also use interactive whiteboards such as Jamboard and Whiteboard.fi for online teaching. The teacher is required to open and share the Jamboard link with the students during the online sessions. Using the shared Jamboard, the students present their workings on their assigned problems (Ahshan, 2021). As for the Whiteboard.fi, teachers need to create a class, and the students can join in directly through a QR code, classroom link or room code. Every student will get their whiteboard to write or draw. Teachers nowadays prepare paperless interactive worksheets for the students through Wizer.me and Liveworksheets.com. Wizer.me worksheet builder enhances teachers' creativity by allowing them to quickly create a wide range of question types such as open questions, multiple-choice, matching pairs, fill-in-the-blank, fill image and tables (Kaliappen *et al.*, 2021). As for Liveworksheets.com, they include sounds, videos, drag and drop exercises, join with arrows, multiple choice and even speaking exercises that the students must do using the microphone (Naqvi & Zehra, 2020). Taking on board these views about online teaching and learning tools, our study also looks at the tools commonly used by teachers in the Tamil vernacular schools.

Skills Needed to Conduct Online Teaching

Many online tools can be successfully adapted to facilitate online teaching and learning. To use the tools effectively in the classroom, teachers need to have a variety of skills such as pedagogical, technical, and computer skills, among others. Every ESL teacher should have pedagogical skills (Paepe, Zhu & Depryck, 2018). Based on students' specific pedagogical needs, teachers need to choose online teaching strategies

that are most effective to achieve the learning objectives and learning outcomes (Sharoff, 2019). In order to use online educational technologies through technological devices, every online language teacher must have good technological skills (Compton, 2009), as, without adequate technological skills, teachers may not be able to resolve technology-related problems during synchronous classes, which may impact student access to learning materials. Aside from that, every teacher must have computer skills to use the technological devices such as computers and laptops for online teaching purposes (Albrkhill, 2013). According to Mistareehi (2021), a teacher with computer skills knows how to deal with basic computer programs such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. Computer skills also enhance their use of multimedia such as drawing tools, and online videos and conduct interactive activities. As stated by Paepe, Zhu & Depryck (2018), to produce attractive teaching material through multimedia, teachers need multimedia skills in addition to computer skills.

Teachers play multiple roles in students' life such as practitioner, developer, researcher, and trainer. To play all these roles efficiently, a teacher who is conducting lessons through an online mode needs to have technical skills. Technical skills are the abilities, knowledge or expertise required to perform specific job-related tasks. Aside from technical skill, every ESL teacher must have organizational skills to structure the teaching materials, and student portfolios, keep a record of student progress and for administrative work. Teachers must monitor the progress of their students by keeping a record of lessons, assignments and participation in the online class (Paepe, Zhu and Depryck, 2018). Every teacher needs communication skills both in the physical classroom and virtual classroom to communicate with the students in an effective manner and build relationships with them. Teachers with good communication always make things easier and more understandable (Khan *et al.*, 2017). Every teacher also needs specific psychological skills called social-emotional skills. These skills are imperative not only for their well-being but to improve student learning. Teachers with social-emotional skills recognize the emotion of their students and have insight into what is causing them, and this enables them to respond with compassionate understanding when a student behaves inappropriately instead of giving punishments (Zakrzewski, 2013).

Challenges in Online Teaching and Learning

One of the major challenges faced by most teachers during online teaching and learning is network issues. Studies show that teachers are not able to deliver their online lessons as they had planned due to unexpected situations such as poor internet connection (Lukas & Yunus, 2021). Aside from that, some of the online teaching and learning tools consume more data and students cannot afford to pay for it (Mounjid *et al.*, 2021). Next, technical issues are considered another major challenge that affects the online teaching and learning process (Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020). In a study done by Orhan and Beyhan (2020), video conferencing in distance education negatively affected students' attitudes due to technical problems like audio and visual and this did not enable teachers and students to have effective teaching and learning. The lack of technological devices among the students is another big obstacle for the teachers to communicate with them (Lukas and Yunus, 2021). Students at least need a laptop and smartphone for online learning but most of them did not own one, especially those from rural areas or poor family backgrounds (Kaden, 2020). Students' poor attendance is yet another problem faced by teachers in online teaching and learning. This problem is caused by a variety of factors, mainly network issues and lack of technological devices. Studies showed that students who stay in their hometowns, especially in rural areas where connectivity challenges exist, face difficulty attending online classes (Nambiar, 2020).

Lack of teacher-student interaction is another challenge in online teaching and learning due to the absence of a direct class environment. In contrast to physical classes, where teachers and students meet face-to-face, online classes allow them to interact solely through the screen of their laptops. As a result, it is extremely difficult for teachers to form an emotional bond with their students when teaching online mode (Kulal & Nayak, 2020). The lack of participation of the students during online classes was found to be very challenging for the teachers. Based on a study done by Mohammed *et al.*, (2020), students are not showing interest in online classes and not responding well to their teachers. This was identified when the teachers observe that students turn off the video and audio throughout the whole online lesson. Since the implementation of online teaching and learning, teachers started to face difficulty in evaluating the students. Some teachers conduct online examinations or quizzes, but they feel that assessing students' performance through this method is not entirely valid. This is because the grades and results of online examinations do not accurately reflect students' standard and learning outcomes as most of the students tend to copy and paste the information from the internet which makes the assessment totally unreliable (Hamad, Dafaallah & Alhaj, 2021). Improving students' English language competency is another issue that ESL teachers encounter during online teaching and learning. Technology can never replace the actual presence of a teacher. Therefore, relying on the applications to teach and learn the English language will make the language acquisition to be even harder for the students (Kaharuddin, 2020).

A suitable working environment has been associated with teachers' job satisfaction and performance. Thus, teachers need an optimum working environment at home to ensure teaching and learning effectiveness (Wen & Tan, 2020; Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). However, studies revealed that teachers that work from home can be distracted by their housework and childcare (Zhang & Ma, 2020). Some teachers perceive online teaching and learning as time-consuming because it demands long hours of multi-tasking work, especially for lesson preparations (Vadivel, Mathuranjali & Khalil, 2021). This is further supported by Nambiar (2020) because teachers in this study need to spend more time preparing extra materials for the students. Lastly, as discussed in the previous section, lack of skills which are necessary to conduct online teaching contributes to more challenges in online teaching and learning. Therefore, some studies regarded that lack of skills itself should be considered as one of the challenges that are faced by teachers in online teaching and learning (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina & Bruce (2020).

Positive Aspects of Online Teaching and Learning

Mainly, online teaching and learning is viewed as an opportunity for continuing education during the Covid-19 crisis (Dhawan, 2020; Orhan & Beyhan, 2020). This new method is completely safe for both teachers and students during this panicky situation as teaching and learning can be done from their respective places by utilising the technologies (Rahayu & Wirza, 2020). The option to teach and learn from anywhere and anytime through technologies has made teachers to perceive online teaching and learning as convenient, flexible, easily accessible and saved time (Alolaywi, 2021). In other words, it can be said that online teaching and learning can be done without the constraints of time and space which is one of the objectives of Education 4.0 (Fisk, 2017). In a study done by Todd (2020), teachers save hours per day since they do not have to commute. Apart from that, online classes can be recorded for future reference. This eventually saves time as teachers are not required to repeat the lessons for the students who missed the class (Nambiar, 2020).

Next, online teaching and learning provided opportunities for teachers in exploring the technologies to a greater extent. For instance, enormous numbers of online teaching and learning tools are available in the market, so, teachers can use these tools to capture students' attention and improve their participation in

online class (Basilaia *et al.*, 2020; Wen & Tan, 2020). Since teachers are using technologies to replace physical classroom activities, it can be said that online teaching and learning is an exciting new way to learn about almost anything during the pandemic (Kulal & Nayak, 2020). Apart from that, continuous exposure in the usage of technologies has helped the teachers to upgrade their skills and boosted their confidence (Nambiar, 2020). In another study by Rahayu and Wirza (2020), teachers claimed that online teaching and learning improved their performance as the current situation forced them to learn ICT more. Another positive aspect is many teachers have gained interest in their careers and feel inspired to teach since online teaching and learning has been introduced after the Covid-19 outbreak. They are eager to try out the new educational approach and are curious about the potential effects it might have on their lives (Dhawan, 2020).

3.0 METHOD

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to collect and analyse the data. The quantitative data is collected in the first phase through 23 close-ended items of a questionnaire. After analysing the results, the second phase which is qualitative data collection is done based on the results of the quantitative data for in-depth support of the study. This is done through 3 open-ended questions in the questionnaire and 12 semi-structured interview questions. Data were then interpreted to specify how the qualitative results help to explain the quantitative results. The participants of this study were 30 English teachers from Tamil vernacular schools in the Johor Bahru region. All of them answered the questionnaire that was constructed in the Google Form and distributed through WhatsApp. Among the 30 participants who had answered the questionnaire, 3 of them were selected for the interview sessions which were done through the Zoom application. All the interview sessions were video recorded and transcribed into written form. The quantitative data that was obtained from the close-ended items were statistically analysed using the GNU PSPP software. Descriptive Statistical Analysis was done by calculating the frequency and percentage of the response choices. Descriptive Content Analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data that was obtained from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from both the questionnaire and interview.

Findings from Questionnaire

In the questionnaire, close-ended items 12, 14 and 18 refer to the skills needed to conduct online teaching. Items 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, and 23 refer to the challenges in online teaching and learning. Items 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 refer to the positive aspects of online teaching and learning. The responses of the participants for each of these items are presented below.

Table 4.1 Skills needed to conduct online teaching

Item No	Item	Response Choices	Frequency	Percentage (%)
12	Lack of computer skills makes it difficult for me to use the online teaching method effectively.	Agree	6	20 %
		Neutral	6	20 %
		Disagree	18	60 %
14	Online classes make me conscious about my teaching skills.	Agree	15	50 %
		Neutral	9	30 %
		Disagree	6	20 %
18	I feel my skills as a teacher have improved through online teaching methods.	Agree	15	50 %
		Neutral	11	36.7 %
		Disagree	4	13.3 %

As Table 4.1 shows, 50% of the teachers agreed that online classes make them conscious about their teaching skills and they feel that their skills as a teacher have improved through online teaching methods. Only 20% of the teachers agreed that a lack of computer skills makes it difficult for them to use the online teaching method effectively.

Table 4.2 Challenges in online teaching and learning

Item No	Item	Response Choices	Frequency	Percentage (%)
3	There is a lack of teacher-student interaction in online classes.	Agree	25	83.3 %
		Neutral	4	13.3 %
		Disagree	1	3.3 %
4	It is difficult to engage students in online classes.	Agree	24	80 %
		Neutral	3	10 %
		Disagree	3	10 %
6	Teacher-student disconnect is felt low in online classes compared to classroom methods.	Agree	17	56.7 %
		Neutral	7	23.3 %
		Disagree	6	20 %
7	Online classes are not a safe and secure method.	Agree	4	13.3 %
		Neutral	16	53.3 %
		Disagree	10	33.3 %
8	Difficult to keep classes for longer duration during online classes.	Agree	27	90 %
		Neutral	2	6.7 %
		Disagree	1	3.3 %
9	It is difficult to control group interaction during online classes.	Agree	24	80 %
		Neutral	4	13.3 %
		Disagree	2	6.7 %
11	Technical issues affect the flow and pace of online classes.	Agree	28	93.3 %
		Neutral	2	6.7 %
		Disagree	0	0 %
13	There is a lack of work satisfaction while taking online classes.	Agree	17	56.7 %
		Neutral	9	30 %
		Disagree	4	13.3 %
15	I feel a lack of motivation to take online classes.	Agree	6	20 %
		Neutral	11	36.7 %
		Disagree	13	43.3 %
16	I get easily distracted during online classes.	Agree	7	23.3 %
		Neutral	5	16.7 %
		Disagree	18	60 %

Item No	Item	Response Choices	Frequency	Percentage (%)
17	Online classes trigger anxiety in me.	Agree Neutral Disagree	10 6 14	33.3 % 20 % 46.7 %
19	I am finding it difficult to adapt to the online teaching mode.	Agree Neutral Disagree	3 8 19	10 % 26.7 % 63.3 %
21	Students do not take online classes seriously.	Agree Neutral Disagree	24 5 1	80 % 16.7 % 3.3 %
22	Students make a lot more excuses for not attending online classes and the reliability of it cannot be assessed.	Agree Neutral Disagree	26 4 0	86.7 % 13.3 % 0 %
23	Students show lack of interest and involvement during online classes.	Agree Neutral Disagree	12 11 7	40 % 36.7 % 23.3 %

According to Table 4.2, more than 80% of the teachers reported that there is a lack of teacher-student interaction, difficulty to engage students, difficulty to keep classes for a longer duration, difficulty to control group interaction, technical issues affecting the flow and pace of online classes, students do not take online classes seriously, students make a lot more excuses for not attending online classes and the reliability of it cannot be assessed. Almost half of the teachers agreed that teacher-student disconnect is felt low in online classes, feeling a lack of work satisfaction and students show a lack of interest as well as involvement during online classes. Very few teachers stated that online classes are not a safe and secure method, lack of motivation, are easily distracted, feel anxious and difficult to adapt to the online teaching mode.

Table 4.3 Positive aspects of online teaching and learning

Item No	Item	Response Choices	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Online classes are more effective than classroom mode.	Agree Neutral Disagree	2 6 22	6.7 % 20 % 73.3 %
2	Online classes are more convenient than classroom methods.	Agree Neutral Disagree	4 9 17	13.3 % 30 % 56.7 %
5	Online classes are more fun and interactive than the classroom method.	Agree Neutral Disagree	5 15 10	16.7 % 50 % 33.3 %
10	Online classes help me to use innovative teaching methods.	Agree Neutral Disagree	21 6 3	70 % 20 % 10 %
20	Online teaching has boosted my confidence as a teacher.	Agree Neutral Disagree	14 10 6	46.7 % 33.3 % 20 %

Table 4.3 shows that the majority of the teachers, which is 70% of them, stated that online classes help them to use innovative teaching methods. Around 46.7% of the teachers stated that online teaching has boosted their confidence as a teacher. However, only a few teachers agreed that online classes are effective, convenient, fun and interactive in comparison to classroom methods.

Based on the analysis of open-ended questions in the questionnaire, the 3 main themes are as follows:

Theme 1: Online teaching and learning tools

Theme 2: Positive aspects of online teaching and learning

Theme 3: Challenges in online teaching and learning

Table 4.4 Online teaching and learning tools

Theme 1	Codes	Frequency
Online teaching and learning tools	Google Meet	16
	Google Classroom	10
	Quizizz	6
	WhatsApp	2
	Padlet	2
	Google Form	2
	Liveworksheets	2
	Kahoot!	1
	Telegram	1
	Canva	1
	Microsoft PowerPoint	1
KABOOM!	1	

As can be seen in Table 4.4, different teachers prefer to use different tools. 16 teachers stated that they use Google Meet, 10 teachers use Google Classroom, 6 teachers use Quizizz, 2 teachers use WhatsApp, 2 teachers use Padlet, 2 teachers use Google Form, 2 teachers use Liveworksheets, 1 teacher uses Kahoot!, 1 teacher uses Telegram, 1 teacher uses Canva, 1 teacher uses Microsoft PowerPoint and 1 teacher uses KABOOM!

Table 4.5 Positive aspects of online teaching and learning

Theme 2	Codes	Frequency
Positive aspects of online teaching and learning	Interesting online activities	8
	Convenient	5
	Improvement in Computer skills among the teachers	5
	Attract the students	5
	New way of learning	3
	Continuing the education process	3
	Usage of technology	2
	Improvement in Computer skills among the students	1

Based on Table 4.5, we can see 8 codes were used to identify teachers' perceptions of positive aspects of online teaching and learning. Eight teachers stated that many interesting online activities can be

conducted during online classes, while five teachers perceive online teaching and learning as convenient, improves computer skills among the teachers and is attractive for the students. Online teaching and learning are perceived as a new way of learning for the students and continuing the education process by three teachers. Two teachers stated that online teaching and learning provide opportunities for them to use the technology. Lastly, one teacher stated that online teaching and learning can improve computer skills among students.

Table 4.6 Challenges in online teaching and learning

Theme 3	Codes	Frequency
Challenges in online teaching and learning	Network issues	10
	Low participation in the class	10
	Poor attendance	9
	Lack of technological devices	9
	Lack of teacher-student interaction	4
	Unable to evaluate the students	3
	Technical issues	3

According to Table 4.6 above, teachers' perceptions of challenges in online teaching and learning were represented by 7 different codes. Majority of the teachers, which is around 10 teachers complained about network issues and low participation of the students during an online class. Around 9 teachers stated facing problems with poor attendance and lack of technological devices among the students. 4 teachers complained about the lack of teacher-student interaction during online classes. 3 more teachers complained about difficulties in evaluating the students and technical issues during online classes.

Findings from Interview

To have a more in-depth understanding of the findings, we interviewed 3 of the teachers. Based on the interviews, we found that top on their list of online tools are Google Meet, WhatsApp, Telegram, Quizizz and YouTube. This is followed by Kahoot!, Wordwall, Blooket and Interactive PowerPoint. Sometimes they may use Liveworksheets, Google Form, Wizer, Jamboard, Whiteboard.fi and Canva. Our findings show that ESL teachers in Tamil vernacular schools are using various online teaching and learning tools to conduct online teaching. Most of them are using Google Meet for synchronous teaching. This is comparable to Linh, Lam and Ngoc (2021)'s findings, where teachers perceive Google Meet as their main online teaching platform. Teachers in the current study use Google Classroom for homework submission. Astuti and Solikhah (2021), found similar results when teachers in their study use Google Classroom mainly for homework submission. Aside from Google Classroom, teachers in the current study also use WhatsApp, Telegram and Google Forms to give homework depending on students' accessibility. According to Singh *et al.*, (2020), teachers were instructed by their school to have a WhatsApp group with the students for communication regarding academics, especially homework. As for Telegram, teachers in the study by Solomon (2021) agreed that this application is extremely convenient because it saves time and effort when completing and sending the assignment electronically. Then, Google Forms is used to create a worksheet for the students as stated by Singh *et al.*, (2020). The teachers in the current study also use Quizizz, Kahoot! and Blooket to give online quizzes for the students. Some teachers prepare quizzes through these platforms to give as a homework for the students. As stated by Bratel, Kostiuk, Bratel and

Okhrimenko (2021), teachers use Quizizz, Kahoot, Blooket and other gaming platforms to assess students' understanding on the lessons taught. Teachers also use YouTube videos that are suitable for their English lessons. They also use Canva to design their lessons because it is colourful and attract the students. This is supported by Lukas and Yunus (2021) because teachers in their study indicated that using videos, pictures and animations for online English instruction makes their students more excited and drawn to learn more. The current study also found that teachers use Padlet, Microsoft PowerPoint and KABOOM! to conduct online classes efficiently.

In terms of skills needed, all three teachers stated computer skill as the top skills needed to conduct online teaching. They also mentioned that pedagogical skills and technical skills are also important. One of the teachers explained that organizational skills are needed to plan the lessons and manage the timing as well as the students. In addition, one teacher mentioned multimedia skill as being important, while another teacher said that for online teaching and learning, teachers needed to have good psychological skills as it can be very frustrating to work with students who become silent, or disappear from the screen, and do not take part in the lessons. Teachers in this study believe that a lack of computer skills leads to difficulty in conducting online teaching. This is further supported by all the interviewees because they stressed that computer skill is a must to conduct online teaching. This is in line with Mistareehi (2021) that teachers need computer skills, meaning they should be able to use basic computer programs such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. Based on interview results, teachers need some other skills to conduct online teaching effectively such as technical skill and organizational skill. They are needed to handle problems related to network issues whereby, if teachers are not able to communicate well with the students due to poor connection, they must carry on with some other alternative activity. These findings are supported by the findings in Mistareehi (2021) because this study also revealed that effective online teachers should have technical skill and organizational skills. During the interview, teachers also mentioned that they should have the pedagogical skill and multimedia skill. Aside from that, psychological skill is needed to understand the students' problems. According to Paepe, Zhu and Depryck (2018), ESL teachers must have a pedagogical skill which includes awareness of learning objectives and learning outcomes of the lessons. The findings of the same study also pointed out that teachers need multimedia skill to download the videos, create animated videos and integrate audio files in animated videos to be used for their online teaching.

In relation to challenges they faced during the Covid pandemic, the teachers recalled poor attendance, lack of teacher-student interaction, lack of students' participation, difficulty to control group activities, network issues and poor English language proficiency as the greatest challenges that impede teaching and learning. Furthermore, 2 of the teachers explained that during online classes, a high rate of students did not submit their homework, and this added to the challenge as the classes tended to drag on due to a lack of student participation, which also made the lessons lengthy and needed more time. All three teachers in the current study reported that technical issues affect the flow and pace of online classes. According to teachers' written responses, they often face technical issues during online classes. During the interview, one of the interviewees stated that audio or video disconnection, poor audio sounds and problems in search engines occasionally happen during online classes. Similar findings were found in a study by Kamal and Illiyani (2021), in which teachers opined that they are facing difficulty to deliver content in online classes due to technical glitches that occur frequently. In the current study, most of the teachers agreed that students make a lot more excuses for not attending online classes and the reliability of it cannot be assessed. Based on the teachers' written responses, it was found that students blame the internet connection, but the teachers suspect that the real reason could be their laziness. The teachers stated that students do not own a laptop or smartphone. When the students' poor attendance was further explored in

the semi-structured interview, findings revealed that some students are having problems that make it hard for them to attend online classes such as lack of data and lack of devices. A previous study showed that the majority of the students abide the online teaching and only a minority would give excuses on not participating the online classes. Aside from that, many students come from low socio-economic backgrounds and therefore they could not afford laptops and smartphones (Singh *et al.*, 2020).

The teachers in this study also reported that there is a lack of teacher-student interaction in online classes. As such, teachers wrote that the lack of teacher-student interaction is due to the absence of a direct class environment. As students interact solely through the screen of their laptops during online classes, they may switch off their cameras and become silent, and teachers feel a sense of detachment from their students. According to Gao and Zhang (2020), students who were learning the English language in that manner lost complete touch with their teachers and they were not able to cope with the proficiency level of the teachers. Most of the teachers in the current study reported that it is difficult to control group interaction during online classes. One of the teachers interviewed stated that she has stopped conducting group activities as it makes the class very noisy. The teachers compensate by using Jamboard application for group activities where students share their answers in written form. Here, some students tend to delete other students' answers mistakenly as they are still not familiar with the application. Thus, managing groups during online classes is poses a challenge for teachers as it is difficult to control the group activities. However, recently she started to use breakout rooms in Google Meet where students can have group discussions with their group members. This is convenient for the teacher as well as the students. These findings reflect Almendingen *et al.*, 's (2021) findings that students collaborated better in digital groups such as breakout rooms. However, some students do withdraw from online group work because of feeling shy to interact with other students.

The current study also found that students show a lack of interest and involvement during online classes. When this was further explored in the qualitative part of the questionnaire, majority of the teachers complained that students are not paying attention, not responding well, not showing interest in studies, not submitting assignments, and switching off their cameras during the online classes. This is especially so for weaker students who tend to be very quiet in the class. They also added that those who are regularly absent for the online classes do not submit their homework. This is similar to the findings of Mohammed *et al.*, (2020) in which students do not show interest in online classes and do not respond well to their teachers. This was identified when the teachers observed that students turn off the video and audio throughout the whole online lesson. Furthermore, some teachers complained that students do not always commit to the deadline of their online assignments (Hamad, Dafaallah & Alhaj, 2021). Other challenges that have been reported by some of the teachers in the current study is lack of work satisfaction, lack of motivation to take online classes, get easily distracted during online classes, feel anxiety about online classes and difficulty adapting to the online teaching mode. All these issues were seen in other studies too. For instance, teachers are not satisfied and feeling demotivated to conduct online teaching due to the challenges they are facing (Kamal & Illiyan, 2021; Almahasees, Mohsen & Amin, 2021). Other than that, external distraction and family disturbance during teaching and conducting online assessments are also the key problems faced by teachers (Joshi, Vinay & Bhaskar, 2020). According to Singh *et al.*, (2020), many teachers faced anxiety thinking how to conduct the teaching and learning process smoothly. They also feel that they need a longer time to adapt to the online teaching mode (Lukas & Yunus, 2021).

Our findings also show that the teachers faced network issues such as a lack of data and poor connection, especially when using mobile data. Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh and Altunibat (2020) recognized that poor internet connection hindered the success of online teaching and learning in their study. During

the semi-structured interview, teachers regarded online classes as time-consuming in terms of preparing the lessons. Regarding this, Vadivel, Mathuranjali and Khalil (2021) agreed that online teaching demands long hours of multi-tasking work especially for lesson preparations. Improving students' English language proficiency is another challenge that is faced by teachers. Teachers are also concern about reading difficulties among their students. Students are not taking initiative to improve their reading skills at home. This is in line with Hartshorn and McMurry (2020), who revealed that learning of the English language through online mode had been completely ineffective and had not been providing any benefits to improve the proficiency level of the language.

In terms of positive views about online teaching and learning, the teachers felt that they had improved in terms of computer and technical skills, class, and time management, learning to have more patience with the students, being more motivated to teach using online tools and feeling a sense of accomplishment when the lesson has achieved its objectives and the students have been cooperative, interactive, and motivated. Overall, the teachers felt that they had learned a lot using the online tools. The majority of the teachers in this study stated that online classes help them to use innovative teaching methods. Based on teachers' written answers in the questionnaire, there are many interesting online applications in the market. This provides the opportunity for the teachers to use the technology and apply various teaching methods to attract students. Teachers also stated that using technology has helped them to improve their computer skills. According to Basilaia *et al.*, (2020), online teaching and learning provided opportunities for teachers in exploring the technologies to a greater extent. Teachers use these technologies to capture students' attention and improve their participation in online class. As stated by Fitria (2020), continuous usage of technologies for online language teaching eventually enhances teachers' mastery of technology in education. Furthermore, teachers have become more creative and innovative. Teachers also believe that online classes are new way of learning for students. When students use the online applications and participate in the class activities, they can learn new things and improve their computer skills. When teachers resort to technology to teach English, the students are believed to be more motivated and would try to participate and connect with the teacher as much as possible. One of the main aims of utilizing the technology is to enable the students to participate and engage actively in learning the language and as a way to inspire them to attain English language skills in an applied manner and practical way (Hashim *et al.*, 2019; Sukadaria *et al.*, 2020). In addition, Weiner (2003) found that using the technology significantly improved computer skills among the students. Online teaching mode is perceived as convenient only by a few teachers in the study. According to teachers' written responses, online teaching is convenient because it could be taken from the comfort of their homes. This is further supported by semi-structured interview findings where teachers expressed that they could spend time with family and do multitasking while teaching the students. Consistently, Fitria (2020) revealed that teachers are doing online teaching at home while babysitting their kids. Few more teachers in the current study reported that online teaching has boosted their confidence which is also reported in Nambiar (2020) findings. This is consistent with Orhan & Beyhan (2020), who claimed that teachers do not have to meet the students directly, but they can share more materials through online to be learned by the students which is safe during the pandemic situation. The teachers in this study revealed that they are feeling motivated to conduct online teaching. They feel motivated by the students' responses in class, their positive feedback, and their ability to share what they have learned because it demonstrates that the learning objectives have been achieved. Their motivation also comes from properly presenting classes and completing the syllabus. Besides that, using various online teaching and learning tools motivates teachers to conduct online teaching. Regarding this, Dhawan (2020) goes on to say that teachers have gained interest in their career and feeling motivated to teach since online teaching and learning has been introduced after the Covid-19 outbreak. They want to experience

the new teaching system and are excited to know what outcome it could bring in their life. As a result, they take an effort and work very hard to offer the best for their students.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The findings from the current study showed the perceptions of ESL teachers from Tamil Vernacular Schools in Malaysia, about online teaching and learning tools, skills needed to conduct online teaching, challenges in online teaching and learning as well as positive aspects of online teaching and learning. The teachers use various online teaching and learning tools that are easily accessible and convenient to conduct online teaching such as Google Meet, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Form, Quizizz, Kahoot!, Blooket, YouTube, Canva, Padlet, Liveworksheets, Microsoft PowerPoint, Interactive PowerPoint, KABOOM!, Wordwall, Wizer, Jamboard and Whiteboard. The findings show that some of the skills needed to conduct online teaching effectively, as stated by the teachers, include computer skills, technical skills, organizational skills, pedagogical skills, multimedia skills and psychological skills. The study also reported that their skills have improved with continuous exposure to online teaching and learning tools every day. The teachers also mentioned that they had faced a lot of challenges such as technical issues, poor attendance, lack of teacher-student interaction, difficulty in controlling group interactions, lack of interest and involvement, no homework submission, network issues, time consuming and difficulty in improving students' English language proficiency. The findings also highlighted the positive aspects of online teaching and learning. Firstly, availability of various online applications in the market that enabled the teachers to use the technology and apply innovative teaching methods to attract the students, which, according to them helped to improve the teachers' as well as the students' computer skills. Other positive aspects mentioned include online teaching mode as being a convenient approach and able to boost confidence of the teachers. They also perceived online teaching as a form of continuous education for the students, which also leads to the teachers feeling motivated to conduct online teaching. In sum however, the findings emphasise that the challenges faced by the ESL teachers in Tamil Vernacular schools in relation to online teaching and learning, greatly outweighs the positive aspects of online teaching and learning.

Online teaching and learning are practically possible to be conducted anywhere in the world. However, the knowledge about online teaching and learning tools, skills needed to deliver online teaching, challenges and positive aspects of online classes are the key elements that every ESL teacher must be aware of. The findings of this study can be a good reference for all ESL teachers to be knowledgeable about these key elements to guide them on conducting effective online teaching with less obstacles. The findings of the study will also provide a better understanding to the ESL students about online teaching and learning from teachers' point of view. Most of the challenges faced by the teachers in online teaching and learning are student-related challenges. Therefore, knowing about these challenges, could be the starting point for the teachers to focus on how to make the students cooperate well with their teachers in reducing or overcoming the challenges. This study will also enable the school management to design more training workshops for the teachers to improve their interactions with students. It will also show the school management that they are responsible in helping the teachers to acquire the necessary skills for effective online teaching and address the challenges faced by the teachers.

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