

# Psychological Impact of Online Education on University Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study on English as Second Language (ESL) Undergraduates at Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka

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**Abstract** - This study aims to investigate the psychological impact of online education on English as Second Language (ESL) undergraduates at Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. In an unexpected transition from traditional in-class learning to online education in the university, online tools, techniques and new online learning methods have been often considered and experimented, however, students' mental well-being within the long-term online learning process is seldom addressed. This study addresses that research gap which prompts more attention on stress and anxiety encountered by undergraduates at a time of home-confinement in a pandemic situation. This study is mainly a quantitative study in which the research design is a survey method. A questionnaire survey was carried out on a random sample of first- and second-year students who follow ESL in the Faculty of Social Sciences & Languages at Sabaragamuwa University. Students' level of stress and anxiety, academic satisfaction, performance in online assessments and their perceptions of online learning were studied. The study revealed that negative psychological effects like stress, anxiety and hopelessness often occur due to the continuous endurance of online lectures and assessments with poor internet connectivity issues. The results further revealed the urgent need to develop an alternate mechanism to continue education without interruption to face unexpected future crises. Further, the study suggests providing students more time to get ready for online assessments and inculcate interactive sessions online in order to minimise stress and discomfort during the online learning process.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Online Learning, ESL Learners, Psychological Impact, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the year 2020, all university students across the globe had to suddenly pack up their belongings and continue their studies away from campus. Due to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, all students from colleges and universities were forced to switch into remote learning or distance learning via online platforms. It has already been two years since the outbreak of corona virus which transformed many aspects of human life, especially in those who were involved in higher education. The first case of COVID-19 disease in Sri Lanka was reported with an infected Chinese tourist on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020 and the first local person was identified on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (Erandi, Mahasinghe, Perera, & Jayasinghe, 2020). Then the number

of victims increased up to 3374 confirmed cases by 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020, though 3230 have recovered, 13 COVID deaths were reported. (Health Promotion Bureau, 2020). At a later stage, the pandemic gradually spread across the whole country to the extent of confirmed cases of 663, 786 with the total number of deaths of 16, 513 as of 22 May 2022 (WHO Corona virus dashboard, 2022). The country shut down all schools and universities nationwide on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020, and a gradual reopening was initiated in July, 2020 which caused a temporary closure again due to the concerned risks of a second wave.

Since then, almost all the universities in Sri Lanka moved to virtual learning mode which is exactly the opposite of what had been practised so far. Online education was not given much importance in the Sri Lankan higher education sector before the COVID-19. But the closure of universities due to COVID-19 had prompted the government of Sri Lanka to promote the online mode of education as an alternative solution to continue higher education activity during a crisis. As distance learning via online platforms was the best option at a time of a global pandemic, the underlying obstacles and challenges on both students and lecturers have not been accounted for. In this backdrop, this paper discusses some important factors that have been neglected to consider in this online learning culture with respect to students' mental wellbeing. Thus, the significance of this research paper is to explore issues, challenges and reasons related to the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ESL learners at university level. In this regard, students' reception and perceptions of distance learning in online platforms have been investigated throughout the study.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance education is defined as a method of teaching where the student and teacher are physically separated. It can utilize a combination of technologies, including correspondence, audio, video, computer, and the Internet (Roffe, 2004). Today's version of distance education is online education, which uses computers and the Internet as the delivery mechanism with at least 80% of the course

content delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Distance education is not a new way of teaching. It can be traced back to as early as the 18th century. Its evolution and progression over the last 300 years run parallel with discoveries and innovations in technology, so distance learning continues to exist in most educational institutions as a means of alternative to those who cannot follow in-class programmes. Through distance education was common in the late 1800s, its rapid growth began in the late 1990s with the advancement of the online technical revolution. It is far from a new phenomenon with the emerging technologies. As advancements in educational technology continue to exist, methods of delivering knowledge and reception of input in both the traditional and online classrooms keep changing.

Distant learning via online platforms gives immense benefits to students who cannot afford to travel to a foreign country to earn a degree, so distant learning offers manifold opportunities for students to learn anything at any time in any place in the world. Advantages of distance learning are recognized in many foreign universities as such that even online Master's degrees and also PhDs are available to be enrolled in different subject streams, however, in Sri Lanka, the importance of online education came into prominence only after the COVID-19 outbreak. Since then, online learning has become a significant part of academic activities in higher education sector.

A few number of researches have been carried out in the context of Sri Lankan universities with regard to online learning. Rupasinghe & Haththotuwa (2021) have carried out a research on adaptability to e-learning in higher education in which the main objective is to identify the feasibility of adaptability to e-learning in the Sri Lankan higher education system. Their study mainly focuses on identifying items, modes of connections and learning platforms and also students, problems and their suggestions to future online programmes in universities. The results of the study indicate that students mostly use smart phones and laptops in their online education and they connect to the internet in smart phone via hotspots. The study also discovers that a higher percentage of students like online learning even in the future which means that 'studying from home' has become more convenient.

Chandrasiri & Weerakoon, (2022) have conducted a research to investigate perceptions of allied sciences undergraduates at University of Peradeniya towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this study is to determine the perceptions of undergraduates by evaluating four main aspects with regard to the issues of online education at the Faculty of Allied Sciences: demographic information; details of online learning; perspectives and challenges of online learning. The conclusion drawn from this study reveals that majority of the students have a positive perception towards online learning which is perceived as an efficient learning strategy.

Rameez, Fowsar & Lumna (2020) have conducted a survey on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education sectors in Sri Lanka. Their study attempts to give an insight into the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching and learning process of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and the challenges faced by the university in perpetuating online education system during the COVID-19. The findings of the study show that the university encountered several challenges in terms of online delivery, problems related to practical test via online mode, assessment, examination and supervision of the thesis. The study further highlights issues concerning online teaching and learning environment and a lack of online teaching and learning skills among staff and students that were considered critical to the smooth functioning of teaching and learning process of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rameez, Fowsar & Lumna, 2020).

As such, only a few research studies were conducted with regard to online learning in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Therefore, there is a huge gap prevailing to fill in with regard to the unspoken issues behind the screen within the online education system. It is high time to examine anxiety and stress regarding distance learning in colleges and universities in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Anxiety can be defined as an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes such as increased blood pressure according to the American Psychological Association.

Furthermore, according to Francis et al, anxiety can be understood in terms of stress and uncertainty and worry about insignificant life situations and unlikely future events (Francis *et al.*, 2012). When it comes to adult learners who carry out their entire university education via online platforms due to COVID-19 social restrictions, it is of a greater significance to investigate their mental health issues as stress and anxiety might impact their overall performance in academic matters. At this juncture, there is a great need to conduct extensive researches and surveys on online learning and its psychological impact on ESL learners in the higher education sector in Sri Lankan context.

#### *Transition from Onsite Mode to Online Learning at Sabaragamuwa University*

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, University of Sabaragamuwa used to carry out all the activities related to the academic calendar through the traditional system of onsite learning which means students and lecturers are physically at the university premises to have in-person classes. There was not a popular method to carry out online education, so students and staff members were not aware of any techniques or pedagogical approaches towards a successful online education system. The implementation of online education has become a structural change in the higher education sector so most academics and also administrative staff members have encountered problems and complications in carrying out their duties. The abrupt

transition to remote learning mode forced staff members to get in touch with possible methods to continue the education with the limited facilities and training. Thus, several workshops and training sessions were held during the first few months after commencing online education in Sri Lankan universities. Moreover, the government was able to implement some important solutions to minimise high costs during the online learning process by facilitating the Zoom app through the Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN) which is introduced as a LEARN Zoom free version to students and staff members. LEARN Zoom has been exclusively utilised for educational activities island wide. Most web providers offer free online access to universities and schools and also with low-cost data packages to facilitate students and teachers.

As all other universities, University of Sabaragamuwa had already used the LMS, Google groups, google drive and emails in order to share exercises and lecture materials and also Viber, WhatsApp and skype were popular communication methods among university students, however, they were not used for online teaching-learning purposes. After the pandemic, Zoom online platform has been the most popular online learning method in most universities in Sri Lanka, but Microsoft Teams has been also used alternatively by some private universities. Within the sudden transition from traditional education to online learning, one of the main challenges is to find ways as to how to teach ESL students effectively via online mode.

Language is often taught through communicative approach in traditional setting before the pandemic, so teaching a language via zoom platform was an extremely difficult task, especially to maintain the interest and enthusiasm of students towards English language learning. In the face of challenges and difficulties faced by undergraduates as well as lecturers, some important steps have been taken by the university administration to minimize the negativity of online education. Some training programmes and webinars were organized online to improve the usage of e-learning techniques.

In addition, Department of English Language Teaching guided students to organize online English Day programmes once in six months in order to make them practise communicative activities online. Moreover, the online English day programmes were very useful to improve their communication with their friends and also with lecturers/instructors.

Online English language camps were organized to conduct live discussions and dramas via Zoom. With the existing challenges and difficulties of the online education system, the department has initiated many events to promote language learning and communication among ESL learners. though most of the events were very interesting, everything happened online, so the space created for relaxation and mental well-being found to be less compared to face-to-face programmes.

### III. RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to examine psychological issues, stress, depression and frustration that were encountered by ESL learners of University of Sabaragamuwa in their long-term online learning process. The objective is to explore measures and precautions to prevent complicated issues that may occur with regard to students' mental well-being in future online programmes. When planning and launching online education on a full-time basis during the pandemic, students' mental well-being has been seldom discussed or considered. There is a gap existing within research work of online education in Sri Lankan context that even the few scholarly studies that were carried out so far explored only socio-economic problems and technical difficulties. Even the research studies and surveys outside Sri Lanka have discussed matters related to techniques of online learning, developing online syllabuses, flexible models and learning platforms within the online education system. This research paper addresses that gap which is to be examined in depth in relation to students' stress, anxiety and fatigue of incessant online lectures scheduled by the university.

### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is mainly a quantitative study, the research design is survey method. The population of this study included undergraduates who learn English as a second language at the Faculty of Social Sciences & Languages, Sabaragamuwa University. The target population consisted of students from various subject disciplines majoring either foreign or local languages or social sciences and they are supposed to follow ESL (English as a second language) as a compulsory subject in their degree programme. A questionnaire survey was administered in collecting primary data from students who have been involved in online learning from May 2020 to April 2022. An online questionnaire was prepared as it was impractical to meet students to collect data in the prevailing situation. The questionnaire was circulated as a google form to a random sample of 250 students from both the first and the second-year students, however, only 213 responses were received. The questionnaire was administered with a special emphasis on ESL learners' mental well-being in the face of challenges and obstacles during the current global pandemic and the possible facilities and solutions that can be delivered to overcome these problems in the future.

The questionnaire included questions inquiring information like time duration of online learning since the commencement of academic work, the number of online lectures per day, number of online assessments per subject, whether they like online lectures, whether they intentionally cut online lectures and if so, the reasons, whether they feel stress and anxiety during online learning, the reasons, and their positive feelings about online learning. The contextual information about online learning was collected from authentic websites like WHO, research articles and official reports. The survey data and percentages were analysed

using computer-aided software, and the results of the study were interpreted using texts and numerical information through bar charts and pie charts.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected from 213 ESL undergraduates at Sabaragamuwa University were perceived as a sample representing all students who follow online lectures at the university. This section presents the results gained from the questionnaire survey denoting information of the respondents, their willingness and reception of online lectures, their perceptions of the online learning environment, their responses regarding innermost feelings, stress and anxiety and discomfort throughout the online learning process.

### A. Respondent Information

Universities in Sri Lanka had the transition from onsite education to online education since May 2020. Therein all the activities related to the education system at Sabaragamuwa University were switched to online mode. The student sample includes both the first and the second-year students who have been learning online since the very inception of this transition of their academic lives.

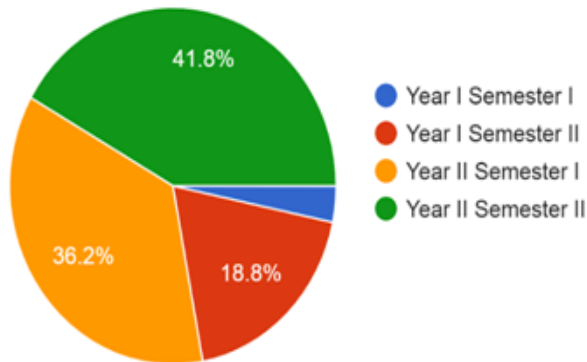


Fig. 1 Respondents' academic year

As indicated in the pie chart, about 42% of respondents represent second year second semester students. It is a higher percentage of the sample compared to first year students (semester 1 and 2) as they make up about 19% and 3% of the total sample. Second year first semester students represent 36% of the total sample. Second year students commenced their academic year in July 2020. They had onsite traditional in class learning only for two weeks and returned home due to the closure of universities with sudden the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, second year students represent a higher percentage of respondents who were fulltime engaged on online learning since the very inception of their higher studies.

### B. Duration of Online Learning

Following pie chart indicates the extent to which the online learning has been experienced by the total student sample.

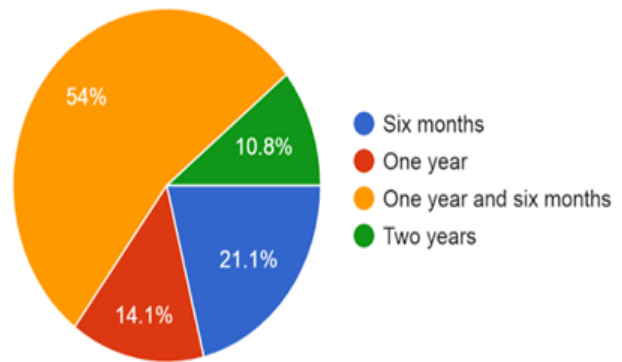


Fig. 2 Duration of online learning

According to this pie chart, it is clear that the student sample has experienced a considerable time period of online learning since the very inception of their university life. About 54% of the student sample has experienced online learning for one and half years whereas 21% of the sample have got just six months of online learning experience. About 11% of student respondents have completed two years of online learning since the closure of the physical education at the university.

### C. Positive Attitudes towards Online Learning

In the meantime, respondents' positive attitudes towards online learning were also questioned. Online learning has been recognised as a good strategy to address the educational needs at a time of a global pandemic. As Sabaragamuwa University is situated in a remote area from Colombo and other main cities in the country, most students from distant areas began to like online learning. They believe that online education saves time, money and also it minimises their physical fatigue of travelling.

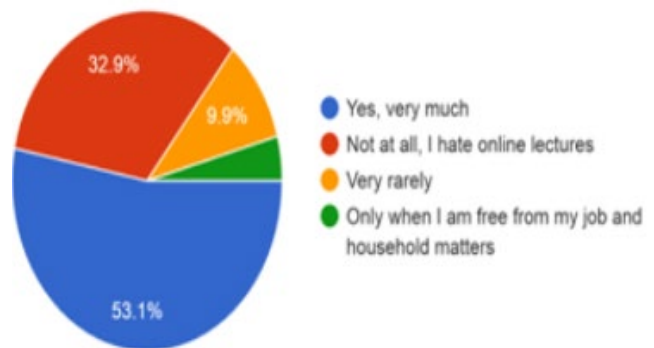


Fig. 3 Willingness to attend online lectures

As indicated in this pie chart, half of the student sample likes to attend online lectures on a regular basis. However, a considerable percentage of students (33%) state that they hate online lectures while 10% reveal that they like to attend lectures very rarely. The following bar chart indicates the positive aspects of online learning perceived by the selected student sample.

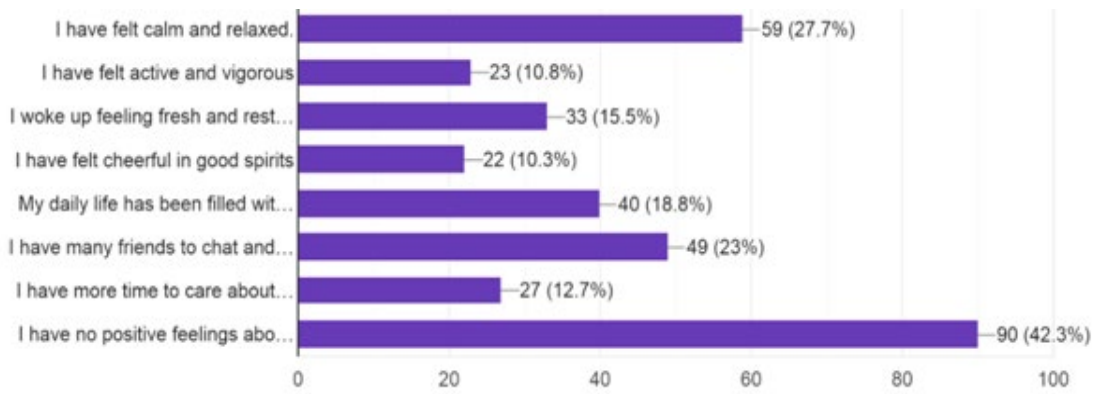


Fig. 4 Positive attitudes of online learning

About 28% of students feel calm and relaxed while 23% state they have many friends to chat and share their feelings. This type of distant education enabled them to improve the mutual understanding among counterparts. About 13% state that they have more time to care about their body and manicure while another 19% of students reveal that their daily lives are filled with things that interest them. With all these positive aspects perceived by some students of the sample, it is vital some students find it comfortable to learn being at home. However, a higher percentage of students (42%) say that they have no positive feelings about online learning at all.

*D. Device Used by Respondents*

The transition from traditional in-class learning environment to online learning was unprepared, so it is significant to consider the device used by students as most Sri Lankan students are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds with lack of advanced facilities to adapt to the new concept of ‘work from home’. The following bar chart indicates the most commonly used devices by students during their online education process.

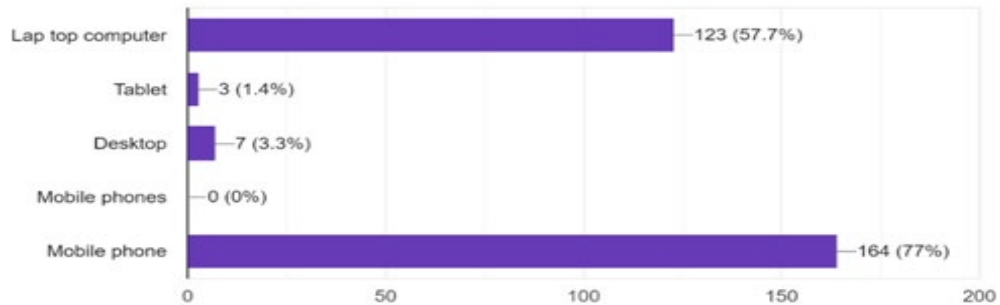


Fig. 5 Device used to attend online lectures

According to the bar chart, a higher percentage of students use their mobile phones as the main device to attend online lectures (77%). This manifests the practical issues in learning with a device like a mobile phone which could only provide a small screen to manage everything during the online learning process. In addition, this warns problems behind the stability of the internet connection of mobile phones. About 58% of the student sample owns laptops to attend online lectures.

at a stretch. When it comes to online learning, it might be the worst scenario as students are confined at home, with no leisure time and outings. Thus, the number of online lectures per day becomes a significant factor to address the mental well-being of undergraduates. The results of the questionnaire survey reveal the following information as indicated in the pie chart given below.

*E. Number of Online Lectures per Day*

The quality of education depends on the space and freedom that students entertain within any language learning programme. ESL learners follow not only the compulsory English programme, but other subjects like IT, sociology, economics, Tamil, Chinese, Japanese and Sinhala and English literature, etc. The scheduled timetable for the current students at Faculty of Social Sciences & Languages is highly packed with different lectures of different subjects

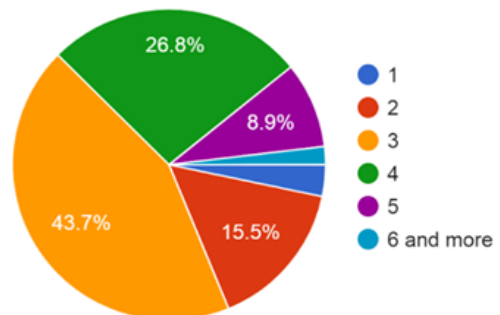


Fig. 6 Number of online lectures per day

According to this pie chart, about 44% of the student sample follows 3 online lectures per day whereas 27% of respondents follow 4 online lectures per day. Adding more seriousness to the situation, about 9% of the students have to follow 5 online lectures per day. However, only with 2 online lectures per day, about 15% of the respondent sample seems to be having time for themselves to spend on leisure being confined at home.

#### F. Student' Ignorance of Lectures and Reasons

The pie chart below indicates that only a lower of percentage of the respondent sample (2%) always cut lectures whereas about 45% of students do sometimes. About 12% of the student respondents never cut lectures which manifests the fact that there is a lower proportion of the sample that never cut lectures.

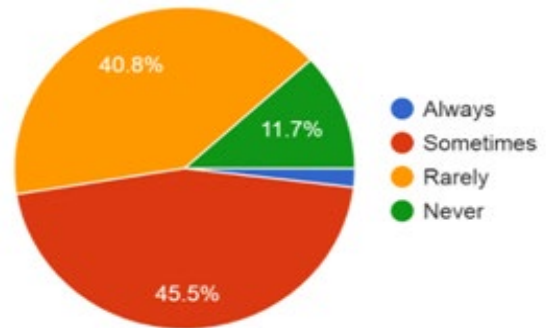


Fig. 7 Percentage of students who intentionally cut lectures

On the contrary, about 46%, a higher percentage of the student sample sometimes cut lectures. Another 41% of the respondents very rarely cut lectures.

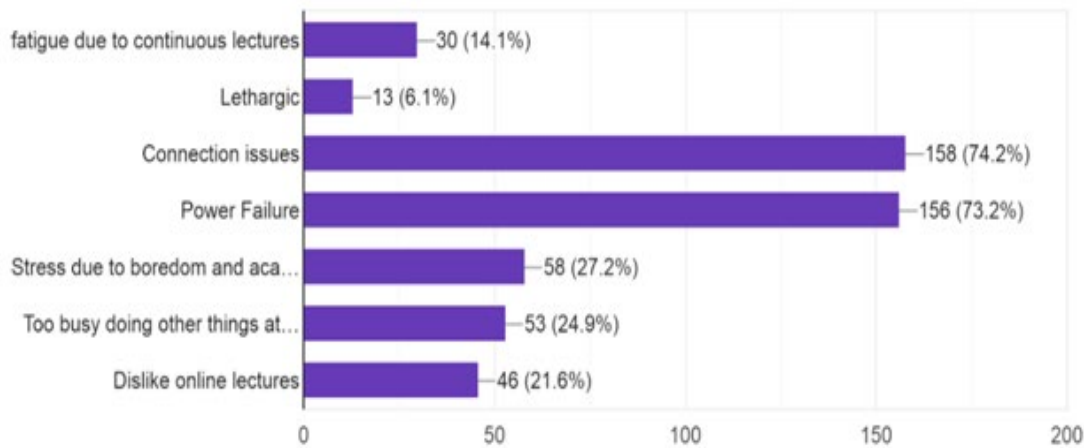


Fig. 8 Reasons for neglecting lectures

This bar chart reveals the students' responses regarding the reasons for neglecting lectures. The most significant reasons for cutting lectures can be identified as connection issues and power failures whereas the least important reason is lethargy. It is noteworthy that about 27% of the respondents cut lectures as a result of their stress and discomfort due to the boredom and academic workload. About 21% of students dislike the online lectures as revealed in the results of the questionnaire survey.

#### G. Number of Online Assessments per Subject

Whether it is onsite or online, assessment of student learning is a fundamental aspect of any degree programme. There are special challenges and practical problems in assessing student learning in online environments. When it comes to assessing English skills of ESL students in online platforms, it is quite challenging and also ineffective to a certain extent as there are barriers that cannot be crossed easily.

English is a language to communicate, thus assessing speaking skills via Zoom is recognised as very ineffective in

terms of students' scoring marks and their performance level. The student sample in this study experienced different types of online assessments within the online academic programme held from 2020 to 2022. The ESL students have four compulsory assessments which include one oral test (online), one online presentation and two take home assessments.

The oral test is designed to get a 3 minute impromptu speech on an unseen topic from every individual. The online presentation is meant to assess students in groups whereas time-restricted take-home question papers are sent to students' WhatsApp groups and within 48 hours the pdf answers should be emailed to the subject lecturer. This study incorporated a few questions regarding online assessments and the following information was gathered through the questionnaire survey as indicated in fig. 9.

As represented in the below pie chart, the results of the questionnaire survey clearly indicate the number of online assessments per week as responded by students. About 82% of the students submit 3 to 5 online assignments per subject whereas 9% of the sample submit 5 to 6 assignments per

subject. Yet another 9% of the students responded that they submit 6 and more assignments per subject.

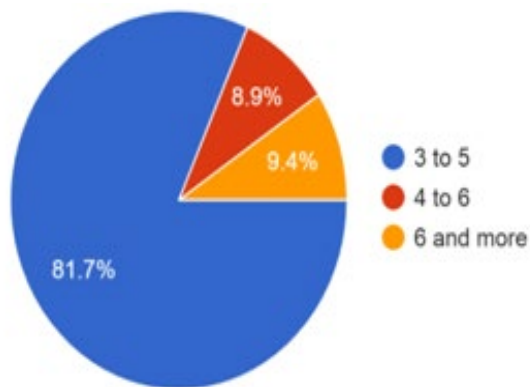


Fig. 9 Number of online assessments per subject

It is a significant factor to note that online assessments play a key role in the newly-formed online education process in the higher education sector that it affects students' overall scores for the final degree both negatively as well as positively. Most students get assistance for take-home assignments from their family and friends which might help students scoring better marks. However, the oral test provides clear evidence of their true level of proficiency.

The following pie chart indicates the percentage of students who state their experience about their readiness and time duration given for online assessments.

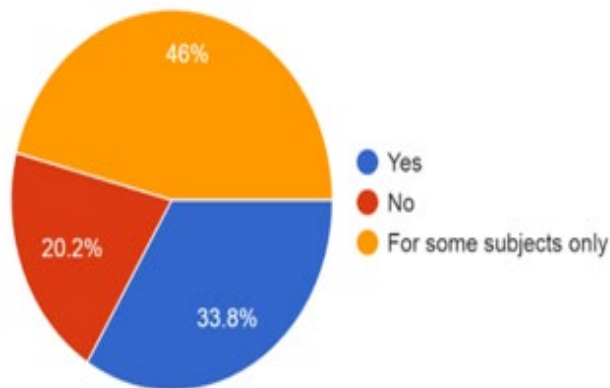


Fig. 10 Readiness for online assessments

Only about 34% of the sample state that they get sufficient time to get ready for online assessments whereas 20% of the sample state they do not get enough time and space. However, about 46% of the sample state that only for some subjects they get sufficient time which manifests the fact that it depends on the subject that they follow and also on that particular subject lecturer.

#### H. Psychological Impact of Online Assessments

Facing exams is a stressful situation for any student in any context. When it comes to online exams and on the spot

assessments on oral skills, students might be negatively affected due to their lack of practice and fluency in English. When there are online assessments for every subject at a stretch, increasing stress and anxiety is inevitable. However, during online lectures, ESL students are given much space and freedom as well as ample opportunities to practice talking in English in group work via breakout rooms in the Zoom platform. Unlike in traditional group work, it is often noticed that students are reluctant to communicate in breakout rooms as they rely only on those who speak. The following pie chart clearly represents the students' reception of online assessments in their academic process.

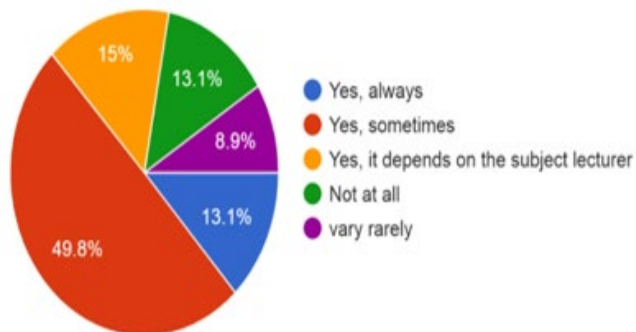


Fig. 11 Percentage of students having stress and anxiety during online assessments

As indicated in this pie chart, about 15% of the students say that their level of stress during online assessments depends on the subject lecturer whereas another 13% say that they never get stress at all. On the contrary, almost half of the student sample (50%) responded that the online assessment procedure sometimes lead them to get stress and about 13% of the respondents state that they always get stress within the online assessment procedure. This is a serious issue to be dealt in future researches also as online assessments contribute to students' overall grades in the degree programme, so if students continuously get depressed due to stress, fear and anxiety, it directly and indirectly affects their academic progress. Compared to online assessments, offline assessments carry advantages for students in different ways. Especially, when it comes to a speaking activity, group members have enough space to coordinate among themselves rather than in online breakout rooms. Even if it is an individual speech, live conduct in front of the classroom adds more confidence to the student as his or her fellow students are attentive to the speech as a collective group, thus the student doesn't get isolated in onsite assessments being physically present in the classroom.

The results of the questionnaire further reveal that mental well-being and incidents of stress and anxiety due to online assessments are less focused in academic programmes. The next bar chart discloses the feelings and emotions of students led by online learning mode. The following bar chart represents their reception and reaction to online lectures and assessments in their degree programme.

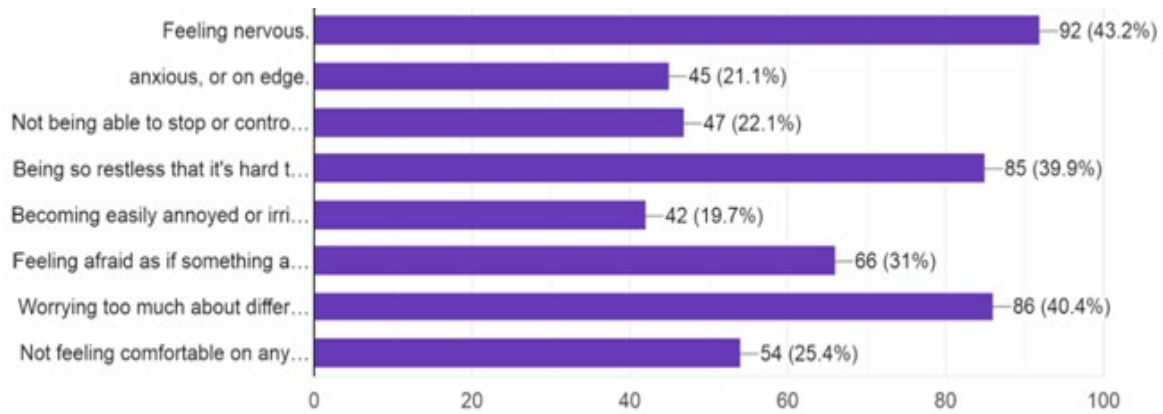


Fig. 12 Percentage of students who get disturbing feelings due to online learning

A higher proportion of the student sample feels nervous and worries too much within the online learning system (43% and 40% respectively). About 40% of students feel restless that it is hard for them to sit still during online lectures. About 31% of the students are afraid as if something awful might happen due to the continuous online learning lifestyle

while 25% of the sample do not feel comfortable on anything positive in the online learning platform which troubles them and they cannot get a relaxed mood at all. The next bar chart reveals the results of the students' responses to the reasons for getting stress.

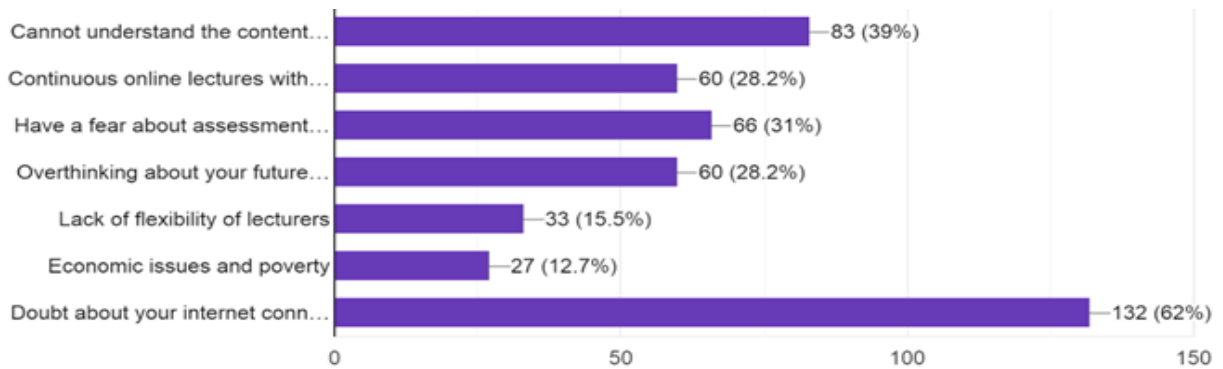


Fig. 13 Percentage of students with different reasons for stress

The bar chart reveals that the major reason of getting anxiety is students' doubt regarding their internet connection and their practical problems related to connection issues, they are anxious that they will miss certain parts of the online lesson which affect their learning process negatively. Internet connectivity is a critical challenge for most students as they live in rural and remote areas, they have no proper internet facilities. About 39% of the student respondents get anxious due to their inability to understand the content of the lesson.

As the lecture is conducted online, there are issues of comprehension unlike in face-face onsite learning. The economic issues and poverty seem to be the least important reason for their anxiety during the online learning process. About 28% of the sample is anxious about two facts: their lives are just moving with continuous online lectures, over thinking of the future within the restricted learning system. In this scenario, there is a psychological dimension that should be addressed apart from the subject related facts and theories. However, the following pie chart indicates that they have a good rapport with the lecturers to discuss matters related to anxiety and stress.

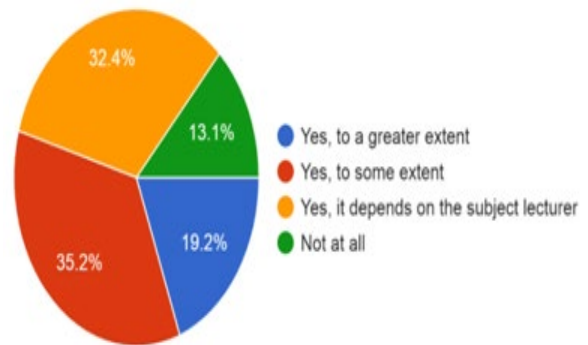


Fig. 14 Percentage of students with different levels of rapport with lecturers

Except 13% of the student sample, all other respondents have a positive response regarding the space that they have with their lecturers to discuss problems related to stress and anxiety. About 19% of the student sample has a very good relationship with lecturers whereas 32% of the respondents say that the rapport depends on the subject lecturer. About 35% of the sample indicates that only to some extent they have a positive relationship to discuss their stressful issues with lecturers.



In the meantime, 13% of students don't have a positive relationship with lecturers. Though it's a lower percentage, this study disclosed the fact that lecturers should pay individual attention to students within the online teaching procedure. Thus, this study opened space for future researches as well in terms of exploring innovative approaches to minimise students' stressful moods and anxious feelings within the online learning environment.

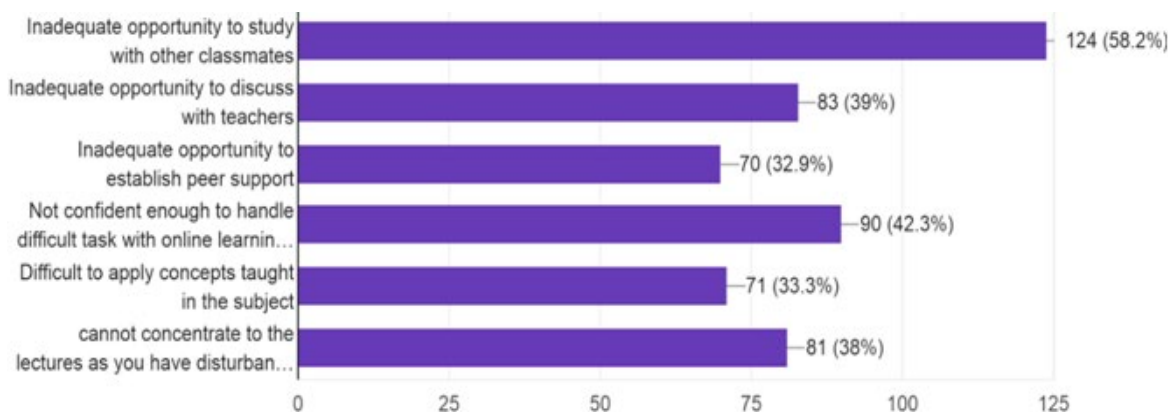


Fig. 16 Percentage of students who have problems and difficulties of online learning

A higher percentage of the student sample (58%) state that they have no adequate opportunity to study with batch mates while 39% indicate their inadequate opportunity to have discussion forums with teachers and lecturers within the online learning platform. This issue is related to difficulties of language acquisition in terms of practical usage in communication. As indicated in the above chart, one of the major challenges of online learning is its lack of opportunities to gain practical and experimental knowledge of using English in real life contexts. Learning English is not just reading comprehension, studying grammar rules and doing fill-in-the-bank exercises which could be easily managed in the Zoom platform. ESL learners should be involved in task-based sessions which require high engagement in oral skills, problem solving and questioning in group tasks. Zoom platform offers breakout rooms for group tasks, however, students' enthusiasm is very much less compared to the onsite face-to-face classroom setting.

Yet another significant problem encountered by ESL students is that they are not confident enough to handle difficult tasks in Zoom. About 42% of the sample is not confident enough to study online while 32% need more opportunities to inculcate peer support in group discussions. There are some other difficulties faced by the student respondents during their online learning progress. About 33% of respondents find it difficult to apply concepts taught in the subject when writing answers and making presentations. Using Padlet is one of the options that can be used to conduct writing lessons via Zoom, however, the overall student involvement is less as they have the freedom to refrain from writing on the Padlet unlike in the real classroom. There are external factors such as disturbances in the background which make them difficult to concentrate on the online lesson. About 38% of the sample has problems

### I. Problems and Difficulties of Online Learning

Whatever the favourable method, at this juncture, students have to continue their university education via online mode willingly or unwillingly. Students' genuine responses of their first-hand experience in learning English via Zoom platform have been analysed in the questionnaire survey as indicated in the following bar chart.

related to their home environment as studying from home causes distractions so, they state they cannot concentrate on the subject taught online. In other words, in the online learning process, students do not have a proper classroom setting as they find in the onsite learning mode; they have no proper mood to study as their home environment is busy, noisy and interruptive due to family talks, laughter and carefree background.

### VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper examined the perceptions of university students regarding their mental well-being during their online learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, so the study identified psychological effects of online learning on ESL undergraduates at Sabaragamuwa University. A higher proportion of the sample undergoes stress and anxiety during online lectures and also online assessments. The study reveals that major challenges encountered by ESL learners that lead to get stressful in online learning are internet connectivity and technical issues. Some learners faced internet connectivity issues with no coverage, so accessing classes on time is often hindered. As a result, they are unable to cope up with the subject content taught online. Yet another reason for being depressed is that they do not get sufficient time to get ready for online assessments, thus one important suggestion brought out from this study is that there should be a regular mechanism to carry out online assessment without causing heavy workload on students from all subjects at once. As revealed in students' responses to the open-ended question, they suggested providing at least 2 weeks study leave before the scheduled online assessments. The students suggested to include fun activities within lectures such as online games, movie time and discussion forums to improve the

relationship between students and lecturers/instructors. All the respondents are of the view that online assessments should not be done in a way of formative assessment, but it should be conducted at the end of each semester and they request for a study leave period for two weeks. In the meantime, they state that they need breaks and intervals during lectures so that they can get relaxed and feel fresh within the online learning process. Thus, this research paper recommends the following suggestions to Sabaragamuwa University to improve the quality of online education for the betterment of not only ESL learners but learners of any discipline towards maintaining a healthy mind during their student tenure.

It is necessary to develop an alternate mechanism to continue education without interruption to face future crises even when universities are re-opened to start onsite learning. It is better to inculcate a hybrid education system in future to face unexpected crises. Hybrid system includes both traditional and online mode of education which allow staff and students familiarise with the e-learning system as well as in-class procedure and to face the challenges in future. It will be helpful to minimise problems and issues in an unprepared situation in future where online learning might be the only option. In this regard, the university needs to develop infrastructure facilities to continue educational activities in both physical and online modes. In order to improve communication skills of ESL learners, there should be activity -based teacher training programmes to the staff members so that students will have better input even in online learning platform. In addition, traditional grammar teaching methods should be replaced with task-based student friendly activities to enhance knowledge on the use of grammar in appropriate contexts. Furthermore, there should be a regular mechanism for every subject to conduct online assessments by considering the students' mental well-being; there should be a counselling programme for those who are depressed and hopeless about their studies and their own lives at a time of lockdown or home confinement. Relaxation techniques during online learning should be further enhanced. Providing a study leave period before the assessments should be implemented for online assessments also; it will benefit the students to a greater extent. The ongoing method of online assessment is similar

to formative assessment approach which is not effective to score marks on the part of students. These initiatives will immensely help the university to improve its quality and standard in the sphere of online education at an unexpected crisis in the future. Meanwhile, it is highly recommended that further research should be conducted to study more on psychological effects of online learning on young learners at school level as well as university level.

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