

Use of Digital Tools to Support Productive ESL Skills: Secondary ESL Teachers' Insights Post COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The teaching and learning landscape in the ESL classroom have made leaps and bounds owing to the rapid development of technology. Current pedagogical practices of teachers include the inculcation of digital tools in the ESL classroom- especially post COVID-19 pandemic. While it is safe to say that teachers in the present day and age are "ICT literate", it is essential to understand the meaningful use of technology in the classroom from their point of view. On the other hand, a common challenge with students' acquiring ESL productive skills- writing and speaking is the instructional strategies employed by teachers. There is a need to assess the potential of digital tools to support productive ESL skills as it will aid the transition towards a 21st century learning environment smoother. Data for this study was collected from seven secondary ESL teachers via open-ended surveys conducted over a span of one week. The findings of this study offer an insight to the various benefits and challenges from teachers' point of views- related to preparation of ESL writing and speaking lessons as well as while conducting lessons using digital tools. The benefits clearly outweigh the challenges in using digital tools to support productive ESL skills. The findings from this study hopes to aid and convince teachers to enhance the learning experience for their students with the inculcation of digital tools in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: Digital Tools, Support, Productive ESL Skills, ESL Teachers' Insights, COVID-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

The ever-changing landscape of technology has impacted how education is construed. With the advancement of technology, the way individuals gain knowledge has undergone a transition (Wei et.al., 2023). The teaching and learning (T&L) in classrooms now include various methods to cater for students regardless of their age and level of proficiency. In the era of Industrial Revolution (4.0), inculcation of technology in education has now taken a front seat among teachers and students alike.

The T&L in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in Malaysia are no different. It has undergone a "major educational paradigm shift" with the integration of technology owing to the educational transformation as highlighted in Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013-2025

(MEB). One of the pressing concerns is the level of English proficiency among students. Therefore, this transformation in the third wave of education highlighted expanding innovations and opportunities to strengthen English education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Muhridza et.al (2018) commented that the 'millennials', being students of this generation, are extremely technologically inclined as they make use of technology in their daily lives ranging from communication to education. Thus, it is absolutely necessary that teachers "upskill themselves" with the current developments in technology to be on par with the students. This in turn can contribute to a meaningful teaching and learning experience. With the advancement of technology, more contemporary pedagogies and methodologies should be employed by teachers in the classroom (Avelino & Ismail, 2021).

On the other hand, the educational landscape in Malaysia underwent a major transformation after the spread of COVID-19. In a recent report by New Straits Times (2023), the successful use and inculcation of digital learning within the Malaysian education system is being revised by the Education Ministry, with the Digital Education Policy in place. The efforts are to ensure our education system is transformed following the ever-changing global advancements in technology. Multiple virtual learning platforms, learning software, language applications and video conferencing tools have come into play to warrant 'continuous learning' through the tough times and beyond (Daim & Radhi, 2023).

With regards to the four skills in English education, students' competency and proficiency in productive ESL skills are still a major concern. Writing and speaking are referred to as productive skills as it requires a form of output produced by students, be it in written or spoken form. A pertinent number of studies have discussed the challenges faced in teaching of writing and speaking. As for writing, Ramamuthie & Aziz (2022) reiterated that the 'pedagogical approaches employed by teachers' is one of the main issues. Yuk et.al (2019) stated that some ESL teachers stick to the more exam-oriented methods which are rather traditional: such as drilling and rote memorization. Therefore, students struggle with constructing self-compositions as they are mostly presented with essays to imitate. Besides, teachers are grappling with motivating and igniting students' passion in writing (Chai & Hamid, 2023).

On the other hand, teaching ESL students the speaking skill has been a challenge as teachers spend most of their time preparing students for the examination-based format which entails a teacher-centred classroom. Students would be able to practise speaking while feeling more confident with a friendlier learning environment (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021). In order to achieve this, the instructional strategies employed to teach speaking needs to be re-examined. Students should be given opportunities to engage in authentic use of the language rather than memorising conversational patterns. Therefore, it is of necessity for teachers to conduct engaging lessons to keep students motivated.

Currently, teachers' pedagogical practices in a language classroom should reflect their ability to keep abreast with developments in educational technology. One such pedagogical practice which is undeniably popular is the use of digital tools in the ESL classroom. Digital tools have rapidly grown in popularity in the world of education due to their ability to increase the involvement of students and stimulate active participation in the learning process. Besides, the availability of many digital tools and learning platforms allows teachers to include fun and competitive aspects into their teaching and learning.

Zoning in on the context of the use of technology and digital tools in ESL classroom, it is noticed that a number of studies have been carried out prior to and whilst the pandemic

focusing on either benefits or challenges. While teachers in the present day and age are “ICT literate”, it is essential to understand the meaningful use of technology in the classroom from their point of view. However, there are a limited number of comprehensive studies on the opportunities and challenges of using digital tools to support ESL productive skills. With the plethora of available digital tools, there is a need to assess the potential of these tools to support productive ESL skills. As a result of further research on such digital tools, it may better aid the transition from a traditional classroom towards a 21st century classroom.

This paper aims to:

1. Explore ESL teachers’ views on the benefits of using digital tools to support productive ESL skills.
2. Explore ESL teachers’ views on the challenges of using digital tools to support productive ESL skills.

Literature Review

Integration of ICT in teaching and learning

With the ever-progressing field of technology, it has changed the way individuals gain knowledge. The integration of technology in the teaching and learning process has transformed the classroom from its traditional “chalk and talk” strategy. This shift in the learning environment has also resulted in a change in teacher’s role as they are now more of facilitators than knowledge providers (Kadian et.al., 2019). Previously, teachers were tasked with delivering lesson content to students entirely. In recent times, the method of teaching has transformed where students now participate actively to gain and construct knowledge (Hernandez, 2017). One reason that could lead to this change is the incorporation of ICT in the teaching and learning process. With regards to language learning, current technological innovations provide opportunities for teachers to provide students with a cut above learning experience. To elaborate, the use of visual, audio, animation and educational games makes learning more effective and appealing (Wijaya & Helmi, 2018).

Integration of technology in ESL classrooms post COVID-19 pandemic

The Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia has put forward educational shifts to improve the quality and standard of teaching and learning. The seventh educational shift in the MEB discusses the inculcation of ICT in the classroom whereby it is hoped students are able to make use of a variety of learning content that is more interactive and engaging (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013). The inclusion of technology is vital to promote a fun learning environment for students (Boholano, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic rendered us even more reliant on educational technology with the shift to remote teaching and learning. ESL teachers had to adapt to using many different technologies such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing tools, game-based learning tools and social media applications (Wen & Tan, 2020). All these technologies guaranteed continuous learning and preserved motivation. The teaching and learning process that has transformed with the use of online learning and distance education during the pandemic has rendered teachers to be able to enhance their 21st century skills, namely computer literacy.

Despite the various challenges, they were able to cope with the “new norm” and are now, after the pandemic, more adept with the use of technology (Saeed et al., 2022). The use of technological tools encourages lifelong learning by allowing teachers to share experiences, research and present activities assigned for students. However, this immense technological

changes post the pandemic could result in everyday challenges for teachers as well. They are expected to be able to handle technological challenges, therefore ensuring they have resilience when trying to adapt to advancements. Besides, the teachers' active use of technology results on the level of technology integrated in the lesson delivery. Therefore, teachers' digital literacy encourages their ease and intention of use of technology (Bai et.al, 2021). This pandemic propelled ESL teachers to ensure they acquired the necessary skills to better equip themselves despite their initial level of competency. It has also led teachers to make the use technology a sustained part of their teaching and learning practice (Moorhouse, 2023). Choi et.al (2021) commented that the standard of ESL lessons post the COVID-19 pandemic may be modified due to the higher level of acceptance and competency among ESL teachers.

However, there are only a limited number of studies that have addressed the benefits and challenges of the use of digital tools in secondary ESL classrooms post-pandemic. It is necessary to understand the teachers' views as it pertains to anticipating educational trends in the future and understanding their intentions to incorporate technology in the classroom (Sung et.al, 2021).

Past studies on the use of digital tools in ESL writing classrooms

A number of studies have discussed the use of digital tools in ESL writing classrooms, weighing in on the benefits and challenges. Zoning in on the type of digital tools used, the most frequent would be the use of educational technology tools such as Rashid et.al (2019); Mahmud (2019); Arif et.al (2020); Jong & Tan (2021), Kahoot! Yunus et.al (2019); Azam et al (2019), Edmodo Yuk et.al (2019); Darma et al (2021), Digital Storytelling Rong & Noor (2019); Zakaria & Abdul Aziz (2019) and Go Pangea- PenPal (Lie & Yunus, 2018). Besides, learning platforms such as Google Classroom Shelvam & Bahari (2021); Nasri et.al (2022); Lim & Tan (2022) and Mindomo Vejayan & Yunus (2022) as well as social networking sites like WhatsApp Alouch et al (2021) has also been used as digital tools in the writing classroom.

In terms of the benefits brought about with the integration of digital tools in the ESL writing classroom, it was found that not only did it help improve students' writing competencies, it also improved their attitudes in terms of: motivation, engagement and collaborative skills. Based on Yunus et.al (2019); Arif et.al (2020) and Zakaria & Abdul Aziz (2019), students showed improvement in writing with regards to vocabulary, construction of sentences and grammar with the use of Digital storytelling, Kahoot and Padlet accordingly. On the other hand, students' motivation to partake in writing lessons are heightened whereby they are more intrinsically motivated. Their motivation stems from the features of digital tools such as the "visuals and artwork" on digital storytelling tool, "technique of digital mind-mapping" on Mindomo.

Students were noticed to participate actively and positively with the use of GoPangea- Penpal schools. Besides, the use of Kahoot and digital storytelling was able to sustain students' attention while also keeping them engaged in the writing activity conducted. Another commonly stated benefit found from past studies is the increase in collaboration. Students were able to learn from each other's posts on Padlet, while also leaving comments to help each other out. Similarly, the use of Edmodo also includes "peer-editing tasks" which heightens students' ability to reflect and correct themselves.

One of the challenges that would hinder the learning process is the technical issues faced with digital tools. Issues with Internet connectivity and limited availability of devices could interfere with the lesson. With the use of Google Classroom, insecure and unstable network

connection is a challenge outlined. Meanwhile, students' having devices that support the use of writing-based digital tools such as Padlet is limited. Besides, students' may not be entirely on board with the idea of digital tools as it may take a toll on their confidence. This stems from students being wary of the corrections and comments posted by the teacher as it is viewed by all classmates. This may negatively impact their ease of learning.

Past studies on the use of digital tools in ESL speaking classrooms

A number of digital tools suitable for use in an ESL speaking classroom has come to light. There were two categories of tools that emerged: content creation and sharing, and educational technology. The usage of content creation and sharing tools is more prevalent. Within the frame of content creation and sharing tools, the most preferred digital tool was *TikTok* (Dewi, 2023; Lin et.al, 2022; Chuah and Ch'ng, 2023). This was closely followed by the digital tools; *Instagram* Azlan et.al (2019); Ishak & Yaacob (2022) and *TED Talks* (Choirunnisa & Sari, 2021). The second category of digital tools prevalent in an ESL speaking classroom are educational technology tools such as *Digital storytelling* Nair & Yunus (2022), *Blendspace* Santhanasamy & Yunus (2022) and *Board games* (Ng et.al, 2021).

Similar to the use of digital tools in the ESL writing classroom, one benefit discovered from the use in the speaking classroom is the increase in motivation among students. The use of Instagram, Ted Talks and TikTok gives students a positive change of pace in learning as they seem to be more enthusiastic, therefore being willingful to participate in speaking activities. Apart from this, students' communicative abilities also showed an improvement whereby the use of the online board game aided students to score better in communicative aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. TED Talks helped students convey their ideas clearly during speaking tasks. The final benefit posed as per the past studies is the positive learning environment students are able to learn in. With regards to speaking, students seem to find it less threatening as they commented on feeling "less anxious to speak". Students are of the opinion that they are able to convey ideas comfortably and with the use of digital tools.

Two challenges noted from the past studies in an ESL speaking classroom are the distraction while using digital tools and inadequate teacher support. Students being digital natives, are bound to be "used to the online environment". This in turn could lead to them being less focused and lacking attention in the learning process. To exemplify, with the use of TikTok, students tend to wander and go through videos that appear on their 'For You' page. On the other hand, students tend to feel that they lack support or help from teachers if only digital tools are used in the classroom. The teacher-student interaction seems to be lessened as students only have basic learning materials that do not provide them with a comprehensive explanation.

Methodology

Research Design This study aimed to elaborate on the views of ESL secondary teachers on the benefits and challenges in using digital tools to support productive ESL skills post COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed a qualitative research design to ensure descriptive and detailed data is acquired from the participants. Researchers make use of qualitative design to better understand the views of participants in the particular research setting on the topic at hand.

Sampling and Participants

This study employed a purposive sampling technique. This technique is non-probability which allows the researcher to select and include participants that are easily accessible (Stratton, 2021). One of the rather important detail for a qualitative-based inquiry is selecting participants who are able to assist towards reaching the aim of the study. They should be able to provide meaningful and relevant information on the study.

With regards to this study, the participants had to fulfil the following criteria's where (a) they are currently teaching at a secondary school, (b) they employ digital tools in the ESL classroom. Therefore, the participants of this study were seven ESL teachers currently teaching at Malaysian secondary schools in Northern region of Malaysia namely: Pulau Pinang (3 teachers), Kedah (2 teachers) and Perlis (2 teachers). The participants consisted of five female and two male teachers with a Bachelor's Degree in TESL/English Education being their highest educational qualification. These teachers' use of digital tools in the ESL classroom ranged between two to five years. All seven teachers perceived themselves as intermediate users of technology in the ESL classrooms.

Instrument(s)

The following study utilised an open-ended survey that was conducted with secondary ESL teachers. Open-ended questions do not only assist the researcher to elicit useful perceptions from the participants, but it also helps the participants to comprehend the researcher's questions before reaching the final answers (Singer & Couper, 2017).

The open-ended survey consisted of fourteen detailed questions that allowed for the researchers to collect the necessary information. The survey consisted of two parts: where the demographic information of the participants was collected, and questions related to the focus of the study: benefits and challenges. The said instrument, open-ended survey questions, were reviewed and validated by three academics in the field of ESL from universities in Malaysia. Some of the comments given such as to correct the grammar aspects and to ask regarding 'benefits and challenges' from the perspective of preparation for teaching were rectified.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was thoroughly analysed using thematic analysis which emphasises on searching themes that encompasses the "narratives retrieved from data" (Dawadi, 2021). Thematic analysis aims to identify themes that are properly interpreted and can then be used to address the aim of the research. The six stages of thematic analysis consist of data familiarisation, initial codes generation, themes search, potential themes review, themes defining and naming process and lastly report production (Clarke & Braun, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Based on the open-ended survey questions distributed, these secondary ESL teachers' views on the benefits and challenges of using digital tools to support productive ESL skills were coded and analysed below. The benefits of using digital tools to support the productive skills in ESL classrooms can be discussed from two domains: namely the cognitive and affective domain. The cognitive domain relates to "development of intellectual skills" (Krathwohl et al., 1973). On the other hand, the affective domain relates to "emotional response" while learning (Krathwohl et al., 1973).

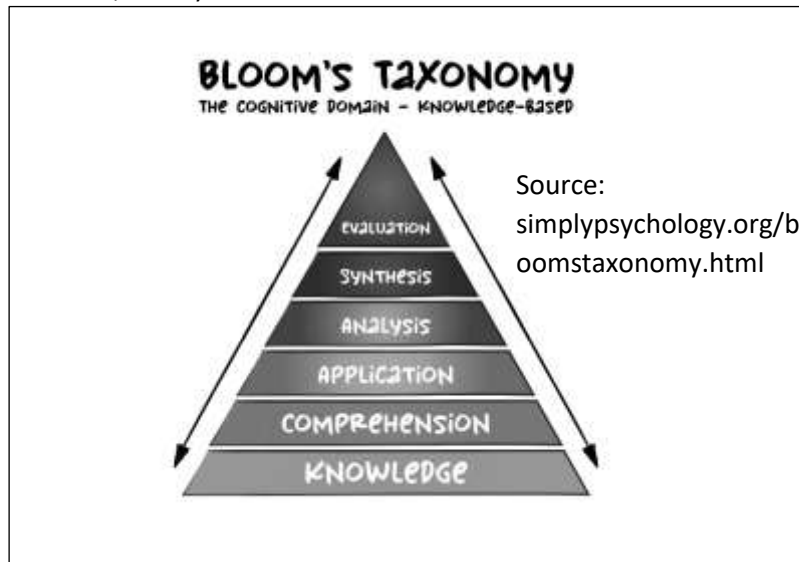


Figure 1 The cognitive domain

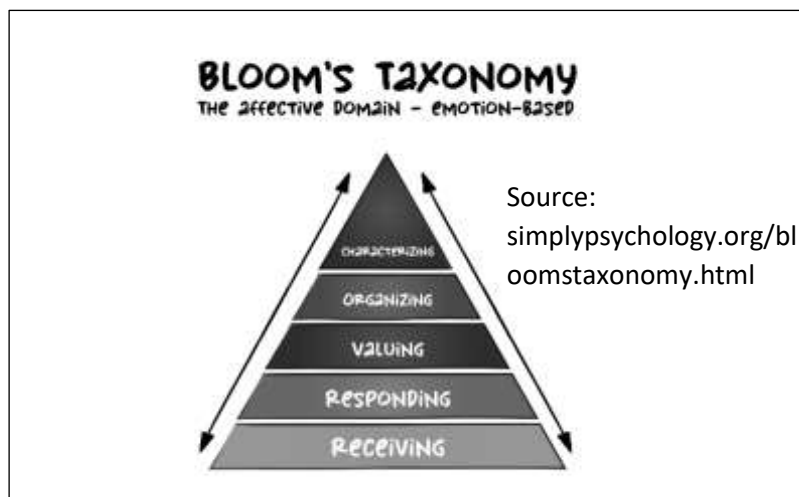


Figure 2 The affective domain

Benefits of using digital tools in ESL writing classroom

Figure 3 shows the themes created from the thematic analysis of the open-ended surveys on benefits of digital tools in ESL writing classroom which are: improvement in teaching pedagogy, increase in collaboration, corrective feedback and increased motivation and engagement.

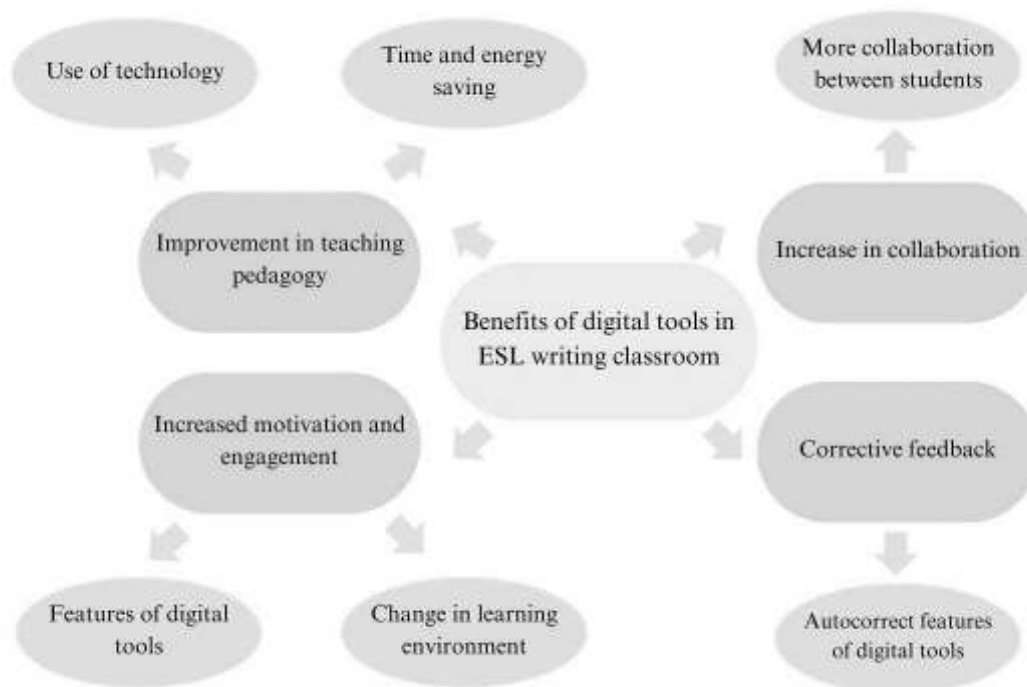


Figure 3 Benefits of using digital tools in ESL writing classrooms

Receiving Corrective Feedback

From the participants' responses, one theme emerged that would relate to the cognitive domain, namely, receipt of corrective feedback. Receiving corrective feedback on digital tools is owed to the autocorrect feature of digital tools. This feature is a program that detects grammatical and spelling errors, then ascertains "words most likely intended", and finally amends the errors. This program is vastly used on most messaging platforms and word processors such as Microsoft (Word) and Google (Document) products (Ismael et.al., 2022). Participants' comments that relate to receiving corrective feedback via the autocorrect feature of digital tools are as follows:

"The digital tools I've used like Google Doc allows students to immediately identify mistakes in spelling or sentence construction. They can use the correction given as guide to learn." (P1)

"Apps like Grammarly, Thesaurus and some online games are able to correct students' writing mistakes immediately. So, they'll be more attentive and alert with those mistakes. Through repetitive corrections, I believe they will be able to get it right one day." (P4)

This comment is in line with results from a study by Dizon and Gayed (2021). They found that this autocorrect feature was able to aid students in reducing the number of common grammatical errors over time. This was evident through their more accurate texts produced via Grammarly. Similarly, in a study by Nguyen & Nguyen (2022), most students agreed that Google Documents helped them focus on their writing while double-checking their grammar and spelling. Based on Yunus et.al (2019); Arif et.al (2020); Zakaria & Abdul Aziz (2019), students showed improvement in writing with regards to vocabulary, construction of sentences and grammar meaning the use of digital tools could also improve their writing competencies. This could be owed to the fact that students are more aware of the errors made in writing and are able to learn and correct them with the help of autocorrection provided.

Increase in Collaboration

Meanwhile, two benefits could be further classified under the affective domain which relates to “emotional response” while learning (Krathwohl et al., 1973). One of these benefits is the increase in collaboration among students owing to more interaction that occurs between them. Effective collaboration occurs when students are able to engage in planning and working together, engaging in discussions that require them to consider varied perspectives (Moonma & Kaweera, 2021). Collaboration in a writing classroom is where students share responsibility and contribute to the construction of written text. This is rather beneficial for lower performing students as they are supported by their group mates (Zhang, 2019). Four participants commented on this benefit as follows:

“Students are eager to work together to explore, search for information and publish their work on digital tools.” (P1)

“Students can collaborate in real time on the same document with each other using digital platforms like Google Docs. Students can communicate and interact instantly through this synchronous collaboration, which promotes teamwork and collaboration skills.” (P2)

“I can teach my pupils to peer review their friends’ writing and also I can show them the common mistakes of their peers.” (P3)

“At times I would give a title and divide the students into groups. Each group will be in charged to expand a point. They are able to collaborate and discuss their answers well.” (P4)

These comments are similar to a study by Rashid et.al (2019) who discussed the use of Padlet for collaborative writing. In this study, the researchers found that most students favoured working in groups more as compared to working alone. Besides, students were encouraged to interact amongst each other whilst completing the assigned group tasks. On the other hand, with the use of Google Docs, students did only participate in the writing activities, they also actively communicated with their friends to complete tasks. Students also used this collaborative writing opportunity to share ideas and opinions with groupmates (Metilia & Fitrawati, 2018). In addition, Yuk et.al (2019) stated that collaborative tasks such as peer-editing for writing tasks were actively implemented using digital tools. This in turn, promotes scaffolding and self-reflection among students, also making them more autonomous learners.

Increased Motivation and Engagement

With the use of digital tools in the ESL writing classroom, increased motivation, and engagement among students in the writing classroom was also a benefit frequented by the participants. One reason leading to this benefit is related to the features of the digital tools itself. Digital tools come with a variety of features that can capture students’ interest in the writing classroom. Besides, the tendency to employ such digital tools repeatedly in the classroom comes with the familiarity among teachers and students. The following is as stated by the participants:

“Students tend to be motivated with the use of colours, music, and movements on the screen. This enables them to be more attentive in class and remember the lesson better.” (P1)

“On Padlet, I can post picture and some supporting words so that my pupils can follow the words to finish the writing.” (P3)

“... Especially when I use social media. For example, I used to ask them to look for their favourite English quotes on Instagram and twitter, they got really excited because it’s their thing nowadays.” (P5)

In the study by Rashid et.al (2019), they identified that students were motivated and participated actively in class writing activities owing to the features of the Padlet application.

Students not only post on Padlet regularly, but they would also post responses to feedback provided by the teacher and their classmates. Students actively posted questions, links, pictures, and videos to be viewed by all, and this in turn, made the “class wall” on Padlet more accessible for knowledge gaining and sharing. Moreover, this finding is also in line with Rong and Noor (2019)’s study where they found students to participate more actively in writing activities carried out using a digital tool as compared to a ‘normal classroom activity’.

Additionally, the change in learning environment is attributed to how teachers feel that the use of digital tools keeps students engaged and tend to participate more actively in the learning process. Their comments are as stated below:

“In my classroom, my pupils show more interest in answering and are willing to write when I use the digital tool.” (P3)

“I think there’s some improvement in terms of engagement compared to traditional textbook method. Because students love using the computers as some of them do not own any at home. They have phones, but not tablets or laptop computers. So when I ask them to do a task using the computer, they seem more engrossed in it as compared to using books or newspapers.” (P5)

“Using technology seems to be able to improve students’ engagement especially if it’s like auditory and visual learners.” (P7)

The following comments are similar to a finding by Kee et.al (2021) that states students are more likely to remain engaged in the lesson when technology is inculcated in the instructional activity. In addition, the use of technology significantly assists students in maintaining focus and attention as the learning environment allows them to explore different options without “the fear of failure” (Portela, 2020).

Improvement of teaching pedagogy

The final benefit was discussed from these ESL teachers’ point of view on the benefit gained as a teacher while preparing for the writing lesson itself. The theme emerged from this question is the improvement of teaching pedagogy. This is attributed to the use of technology in the ESL writing classroom. Teachers are inspired by technological development to continue exploring resources that promote the quality of learning. Besides, preparation of lessons using technology that makes use of images, videos, and learning platforms tends to encourage students to participate in learning activities (Nguyen, 2021). The participants of this study commented on the following benefit as follows:

“Using digital tools in the classroom helps teachers to come up with creative ways to teach the lesson. The teacher doesn’t have to go out to look for resources and materials, instead can prepare interesting lessons using technology and media to capture students’ attention.” (P1)

“... to prepare and present the teaching material in a better and organised way.” (P7)

In a study by Kee et. al (2021), they stated that Malaysian ESL teachers have positive perception towards the use of technology as a teaching aid when teaching writing skills because it could gain students’ attention in the classroom and make the lesson more interesting. This shows that teachers find technology useful in helping them in creating classroom materials and promoting student engagement during lessons.

Challenges of using digital tools in ESL writing classroom

Figure 4 shows the themes created from the thematic analysis of the open-ended surveys on challenges of digital tools in ESL writing classroom which are: **low exposure to digital tools, technical issues, and difficulty in classroom management.**

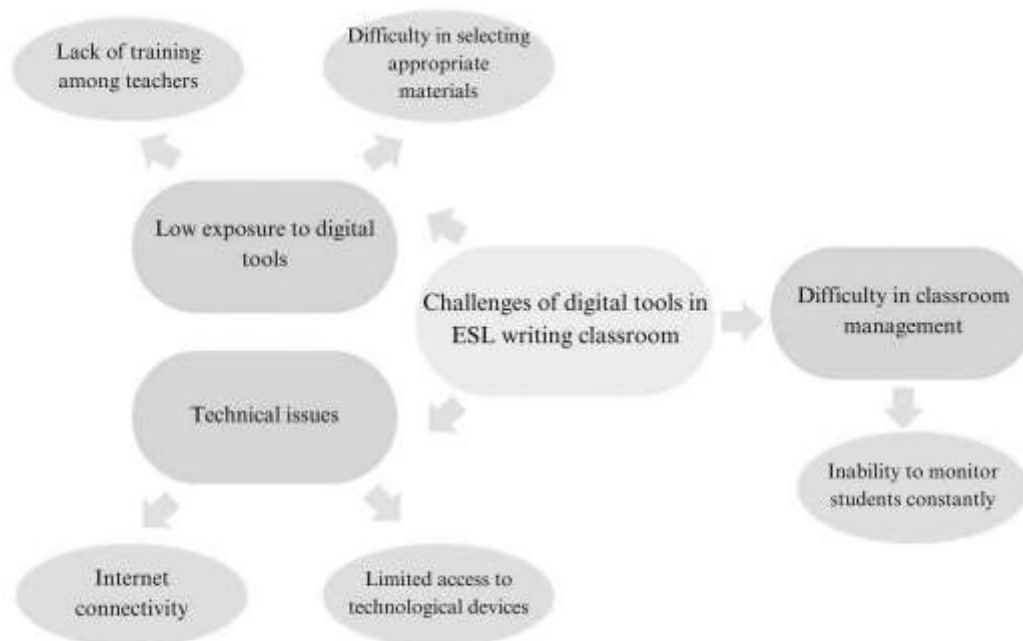


Figure 4 Challenges of using digital tools in ESL writing classrooms

Low Exposure to Digital Tools

With regards to preparation for writing classes using digital tools, one of the challenges that cropped up from the teacher's perspective was the low exposure to digital tools among teachers. This stemmed from the same opinion that they lack training in order to select appropriate digital tools for teaching writing. Technologically skilled teachers are an issue faced by most countries around the world (Buabeng-Andoh, 2019). These teachers seem to inculcate the use of technology less, while also operating it with low confidence. Similarly, the participants of this study were quoted as saying the following:

"Most teachers are not exposed to various digital tools as not many courses are conducted on them." (P1)

"I also am not exposed to various digital tools suitable for writing, so I always fall back to the ones I know like Padlet." (P3)

"I think teachers lack digital literacy skills because they don't have the supportive access... there is no proper training for teachers to be exposed to all these." (P7)

To concur, from their interview with Malaysian primary ESL teachers, Lukas and Yunus (2021) found that one of the challenges highlighted was teachers' lack of readiness with regards to technological competence and experience. However, these teachers understood that the skills were necessary for the "new normal" teaching approach. To up-skill themselves, teachers are suggested to attend professional development workshops that focus on utilisation of technology and online curriculum resources (Dai & Xia, 2020).

Technical Issues

Moving on, it goes without saying that the use of digital tools heavily relies on stable Internet connections and without it, the tools are as good as no use. Another challenge commonly

stated by the participants was the technical issues faced with the use of digital tools. Several issues hamper the “e-learning adoption” such as technological accessibility, availability, and connectivity (Eltahir, 2019). The following comments made by the participants support this statement:

“Schools are not equipped with fast internet connection and not all staff are allowed to use the WIFI.” (P1)

“If the internet connection is slow, unreliable, or unavailable, it can impede students' ability to access online writing resources.” (P2)

“Lack of network access makes it difficult to conduct lessons.” (P7).

In addition, limited access to technological resources is another challenge faced by the participants with the implementation of digital tools in the classroom. Muslem et.al (2018) commented that certain schools only provide limited technological resources for teachers. Teachers are required to wait for their turn to use these tools, which may resort to them falling back on traditional teaching approaches. Two teachers commented on this similar challenge stating that:

“Limited devices so I have to end up sharing with other teachers, cannot plan for extensive use of digital tools in case others want to use it as well” (P5)

“I think in my school, there are only a few working computers which are insufficient for my number of students... difficult to carry out my lesson” (P6)

This shows that despite teachers being motivated to inculcate the use of educational technology in their ESL lessons, this lack of resources and technological infrastructure may force them to abandon their idea of doing so (Razak et.al, 2018).

Difficulty in classroom management

On the other hand, teachers also commented on the difficulty in classroom management as a challenge whereby they are unable to monitor students constantly. The “online world” is full of endless possibilities, and teachers are required to ensure their students are always “on the same page”. Two participants commented on the following challenge owing to their students’ requiring help during the use of digital tools or being distracted while using digital tools. Their comments are as follows:

“Yes, sometimes when they get too excited, it is hard for them to stop and listen to my commands. They are rather distracted by the device in front of them...” (P5)

“High chances for students to be distracted or lose interest when they lose track of teacher’s instructions.” (P6)

Yaacob and Yunus (2019) found that students who are unclear with rules of online games become easily distracted. Besides, Hashim (2018) stated that Gen-Z possess short attention spans, as they seem to be easily bored and distracted in the classroom while also needing to move on to the following activity.

Benefits of using digital tools in ESL speaking classroom

Figure 5 shows the themes created from the thematic analysis of the open-ended surveys on benefits of digital tools in ESL speaking classroom which are: **improvement in communicative abilities, increase in motivation and strengthen collaborative skills.**

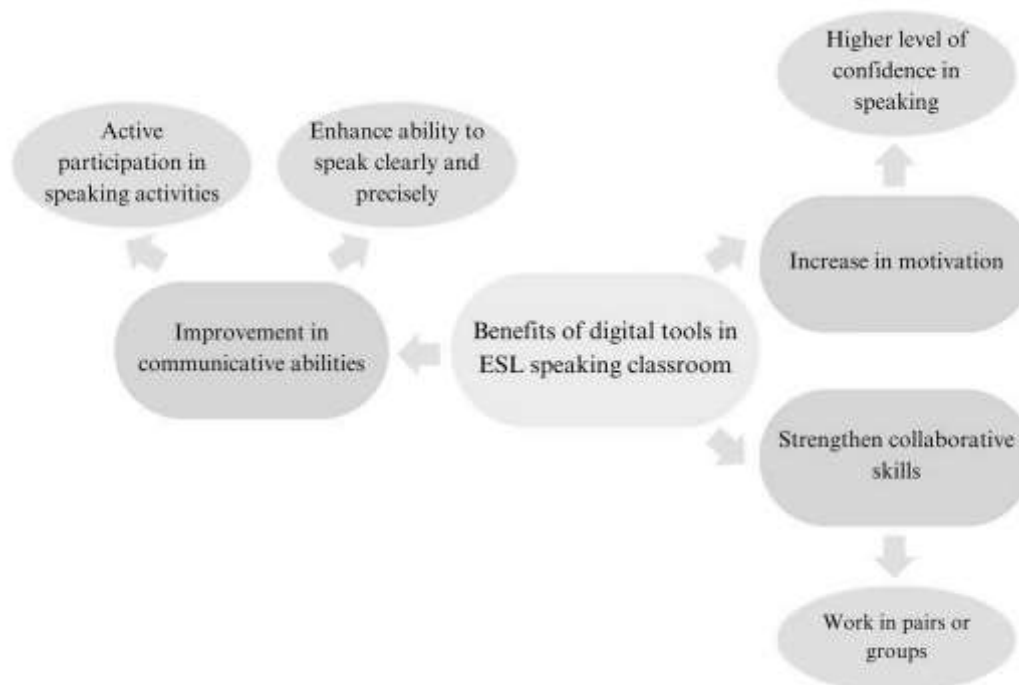


Figure 5 Benefits of using digital tools in ESL speaking classroom

Improvement in communicative abilities

The benefits of using digital tools to support the speaking skill in ESL classrooms can be discussed from two domains: namely the cognitive and affective domain. The cognitive domain relates to “development of intellectual skills”. From the participants’ responses, one theme emerged that would relate to the cognitive domain, namely, improvement in communicative abilities. Van et.al (2021) commented that the use of technology to teach speaking has had a positive impact on students’ speaking skills: in terms of articulation and accuracy. Besides, it lessens their issues while communicating. Similarly, the participants also commented on this benefit as follows:

“Using Google Voice typing allows me to assess how students speak as it transcribes spoken data into text... can analyse their speaking proficiency and patterns. Use it to give them feedback on pronunciation.” (P2)

“The students are able to learn correct pronunciation and intonation in pronouncing a word, and they seem to show improvement when they speak too since they imitate. (P4)”

“From doing the speaking tasks using technology, they picked up new vocabularies or phrases... soon they start using it accurately in their speaking, and they definitely show progress. (P5)”

Asratie et.al (2023) conducted a study on the use of educational technology tools to enhance students’ speaking performance. In their study, notes from the teacher’s log showed that the use of technology based speaking lessons during the intervention enhanced the experimental group’s speaking performance. They had improved in terms of grammatical accuracy, fluency, coherence, and pronunciation skills. Along the same line, students are able to practise

accurate usage of words and phrases by imitating Native speakers of English with the use of short and concise TikTok videos. This in turn helps them improve their speaking ability (Chuah and Ch'ng, 2023).

Increase in Motivation

Moving on, two other benefits could be further classified under the affective domain which relates to "emotional response' while learning". One of these benefits is the increase in motivation which is a result of higher level of confidence in speaking among students. Rajendran and Yunus (2021) stated that the inculcation of technology allows students to have fun learning opportunities with the various educational technologies. Therefore, a stress-free environment is created in the classroom which enables students to practise speaking without feeling anxious or pressured. The participants commented on the higher motivation among students by saying that:

"I think some shy students have become more confident to speak English in their TikTok videos because they do not have to face anyone when speaking, as compared to speaking in class" (P5)

"Students tend to more confident to speak as they imitate the sentences and phrases from the YouTube videos" (P7)

Students' exposure to duet challenges on TikTok has significantly reduced their hesitation and fear in speaking the second language (Aranego, 2020). Similarly, in a study by Chuah and Ch'ng (2023), they found that the target participants, ESL undergraduates, commented on the friendly environment within TikTok that seems to be the main factor that motivates learners to complete the voice-over challenges. On the other hand, Susanti et.al (2022) observed that the YouTube application being used in the speaking classroom increased the confidence and motivation of research participants.

Strengthen Collaborative Skills

The final benefit from the affective domain is the use of digital tools strengthening collaborative skills among students as they work in groups to complete the speaking tasks. Maran and Hashim (2022) mentioned that, especially in speaking classes, technology is useful in creating a collaborative environment. The students communicate with each other using technology while working in groups. Besides, students are able to build their confidence by interacting with groupmates (Yusof et.al., 2023). Similarly, this study's participants commented on the following benefit with the views such as:

"I think they collaborate better with their team members because they are excited to complete the task using TikTok. But this only applies to students with good learning attitudes." (P5)

"When pupils collaborate with their peers during speaking tasks and activities, they are able to engage in the conversation and learn new terms or vocabulary from their peers." (P6)

With the use of digital tools in ESL speaking classroom, students employ these tools to 'share, learn and connect' with others. This is exemplified when students upload videos of themselves speaking, their classmates would watch it and can learn from their pronunciation and delivery (Azlan et.al, 2019; Choirunnisa & Sari, 2021). On the other hand, an increased amount of interaction is noticed among group members when speaking task is conducted, and this in turn is able to foster collaboration. Similarly, in a study where the ESL teacher employed the use of digital storytelling as a digital tool, questionnaire responses showed that students were in favour of collaborative learning (Nair & Yunus, 2022). The collaborative

speaking tasks allowed students to “interact actively in a technological and natural environment”. This collaborative effort leads to skill and knowledge development (Ishak & Yaacob, 2022).

Challenges of using digital tools in ESL speaking classroom

Figure 6 shows the themes created from the thematic analysis of the open-ended surveys on challenges of digital tools in ESL speaking classroom which are: **longer preparation time**, **student attitudes** and **disruption of lesson flow**.

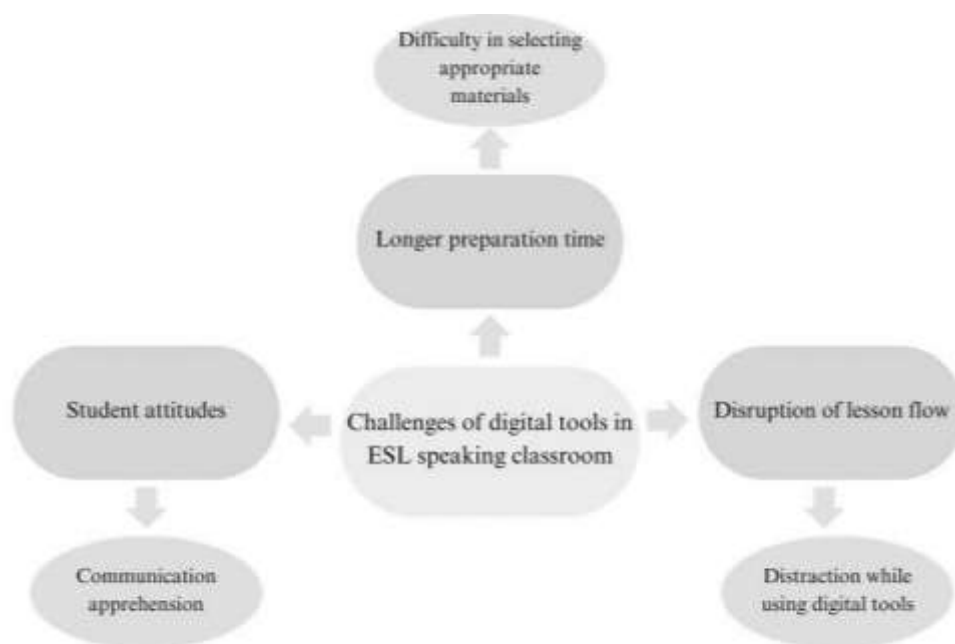


Figure 6 Challenges of using digital tools in ESL speaking classroom

Disruption of lesson flow

With the online learning environment, one major challenge faced by teachers is the online-related distractions. Students may easily be distracted by the entertainment technology is able to offer. Students being digital natives know their way around technology and social media very well. Therefore, with the easy access to surf the Internet, students may be distracted from their task at hand (Pazilah et.al, 2019). To concur, the teachers commented on this challenge as well:

“I am dealing with a big class and it’s not easy to monitor all of them when the digital tools are used... even if it’s on Youtube, they can immediately switch tabs or do something else.” (P1)

“Sometimes instead of using the apps to complete the tasks given, some students divert to checking out music videos or checking the celebrities’ profiles on social media.” (P5)

“There are times... their attention will be diverted into social media, Tik Tok and noneducational websites.” (P6)

To add on, Lin et.al (2022) found that one of the challenges students commented on with the use of TikTok is how other videos that appear on their “For You” page serves as a distraction. Due to TikTok not filtering videos based on its content, it is rather easy for students to be occupied while scrolling past videos.

Longer Preparation Time

With regard to preparation for speaking lessons using digital tools, one of the challenges mentioned from the teacher's perspective is the longer preparation time for lessons. This stemmed from the similar opinion that they have difficulty in selecting appropriate materials for the lesson. Two teachers commented on the abovementioned challenge as well:

"I feel like it's even tougher to look for speaking related materials online... because the language used, the complexity might not suit our students." (P1)

"Quite a long time is needed to check the quality and suitability of the speaking lesson materials I gained online. For example, TikTok and YouTube videos... it might not fit the content and learning standards of KPM." (P5)

Using sources like TikTok and Youtube videos is a tad difficult as these videos may not be entirely educational based. Teachers are required to meticulously go through the videos to ensure they are not only culturally relevant but also with relevant content to fit the learning objectives (Atmojo, 2022).

Student Attitudes

Adapting to a change in the learning environment may not be easy on all students as they learn and respond differently. Some students may still feel apprehensive to communicate, more so with the integration of technology. This led to the challenge of student attitudes which stems from communicative apprehension faced by these students. The teachers commented on this challenge as follows:

"Getting rid of students' speaking anxiety is a work in progress... there are some students who are very reserved and don't speak or participate actively in speaking tasks. They dread it when I call them out or ask them to present." (P3)

There is a small minority group of students who refuse to speak or share out their ideas when they have to present alone... but if it is in a group, they seem to speak out more." (P4)

"There are still some passive students who fear being judged and don't speak as much." (P7)

Jomma and Jupri (2014) found that students were able to point towards an external factor that led towards their communicative apprehension: classroom anxiety. This form of anxiety occurs due to "differences in learning situations of students." Therefore, it is necessary that teachers are able to build an environment that encourages them to take communicative initiatives. With the use of digital tools, teachers can try creating breakout rooms or arranging for a diverse group in the speaking classroom (Namaziandost et.al., 2019)

Conclusion

Implementation of digital tools in the ESL classroom is a noteworthy pedagogical practice in the current generation. This study aimed to identify secondary ESL teachers' views on the benefits and challenges of using digital tools to support productive ESL skills post COVID-19 pandemic. In line with the pandemic, a high demand for the use of technology was expected of teachers and students alike. Teachers had to experience new highs and lows with the inculcation of technology via the use of learning management systems, video applications, digital tools and more. Now, post COVID-19 pandemic, it can be agreed upon that teachers are mostly able to point out more benefits as compared to challenges. Safe to say that the pandemic proved to be a learning curve for teachers to become more adept at using technology. In this study, the researcher zoned into the use of digital tools to support productive ESL skills: writing and speaking.

The perceived benefits of inculcating digital tools in the writing classroom are the improvement in teaching pedagogy, collaboration, corrective feedback and increased motivation and engagement. On the other hand, the perceived benefits of using digital tools in the speaking classroom are as follows: higher level of confidence, improvement in communicative abilities and strengthened collaborative skills.

With two sides of a coin, it is only fair to elaborate on the challenges of inculcating digital tools in the ESL classroom. As for writing, the challenges are low exposure to digital tools, technical issues, and difficulty in classroom management. Meanwhile, the challenges of using digital tools for speaking are longer preparation time, disruption of lesson flow and student attitudes. For both productive skills: writing and speaking, it is noticeable that the benefits of using digital tools outweigh the challenges. Therefore, it is vital that teachers try their hand at using digital tools to improve the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

This study gives an in-depth insight from secondary ESL teachers' point of views that could contribute to existing literature. With the ever-changing landscape of education, which is now mostly technology-integrated, it is vital to understand the use of digital tools and how it can contribute to learning English as a Second Language, particularly to support productive ESL skills such as writing and speaking. Understanding secondary teachers' points of view on the benefits and challenges prove to be useful as the use of such digital tools could then be properly assessed and decided in terms of suitability before being implemented in the learning classroom. This study fills a gap in literature with regards to the use of digital tools in ESL classrooms setting post COVID-19 pandemic. The list of benefits and challenges faced by teachers would be rather different as outlined in the findings, considering they are now more adapted to the use of technology in ESL classrooms. Therefore, the findings of this study provide in-service and upcoming teachers with an idea to further improve their teaching pedagogy with the implementation of digital tools while considering its benefits and challenges.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study only involved seven ESL secondary teachers, hence, the data yielded is only limited to this small number of participants. These findings may not be generalised to other population groups. In addition, only one instrument was employed to obtain the ESL teachers' views namely: open-ended survey. Making use of a single data collection instrument limits the amount of data gathered related to the topic. Future research can look into gaining insight from another major stakeholder in ESL classrooms: students themselves. Students may have different views as compared to the teachers. Besides, future research could also include strategies to overcome challenges faced in using digital tools as it would give readers a fully rounded understanding of the topic at hand and dealing with technology.

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