Challenges Encountered by ABEL Students in Online Learning: A Narrative

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Abstract – *The purpose of the narrative study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of five Bachelor of Arts in English Language students who are enrolled in Pangasinan State University - Bayambang Campus, Bayambang, Pangasinan, Academic Year 2021 - 2022 in the online learning system.*

The difficulties were summed up by the researchers based on what the respondents narrated. Findings revealed that the five respondents experienced difficulties in online learning internet connection, technical problem, distractions/background noises, financial problem, mental stability, and time management.

In response to the result of the study, the following recommendations were offered, (1&2) Students may be encouraged to make the most of the free internet access given by the University and the Local Government Unit. Students are also advised to use their available internet data wisely and to purchase devices that are compatible with learning apps to optimize the benefits of using free and downloaded learning applications; (3) Students should try to find a distraction-free environment in which to concentrate and focus. Students must pay complete attention and adjust to their environment to properly acquire the knowledge that they desired; (4) The students may strive to improve their economic condition and maximize the use of their mobile phones in learning; and (5&6) The university should make a program or a webinar that could help raise awareness of mental health and teach students about time management.

Keywords – *asynchronous learning, e-learning, flexible learning, learning environment, synchronous learning,*

INTRODUCTION

The start of the pandemic caused hundreds and thousands of Filipinos infected which forced the country to implement lock downs in cities and provinces. Businesses, roads, and tourists' spots were closed to prevent the virus from multiplying. Even public works and education were in the tight spot as nobody was allowed to go out of their homes. Everything turned black that time. The number of cases and deaths due to the virus called SARS corona-virus tremendously grew.

Under the CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 4, series 2020 also called the "Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning" where the Pangasinan State University Campuses choose to provide an online course as a breakthrough in the students' ability to learn at their own pace. Despite the lack of in-person connection, hundreds of students signed up for their respective courses.

In order to determine the difficulties faced by ABEL students during the pandemic when online classes were adopted, one in-depth open interview with ABEL students from Pangasinan State University - Bayambang Campus was conducted as part of this research.

Online class is one of those flexible learning suggested by the UNESCO. When schools are closed due to COVID-19, UNESCO advises using distance learning programs and free educational apps to continue teaching students and limit the disruption to their education. As a result, many institutions choose to offer online courses (Shehzadi et al., 2020). As a result, Philippines complied to its suggestion to avoid higher cases of COVID-19. [1]

Flexible learning is not only just about the use of gadgets and internet. It means to use learning tools and study without going to school. Physical interactions are not allowed. Various modes of distance learning have been made to address the COVID-19 situations. In the Philippines, schools may use various learning modalities in implementing flexible learning strategies such as printed modules, audiotapes, videotapes, CDs, storage devices etc. They may also utilize television or broadcasting networks in areas with poor or no internet connectivity, (Casiple et al., 2020). The government has resorted into these modes of flexible learning to choose from. [2]

However, Pangasinan State University has chosen the mode of synchronous learning. Synchronous learning is a generic phrase used to describe types of education, training, and learning that take place at the same time but not in the same location, according to edglossary.org. In which, the best option about occurring at the same time but not in the same place is by the use of technology. As the years passed by, technology has upgraded tremendously. There are online learning apps that helps students and teachers in creating their virtual classroom.

E-learning is a new paradigm for online education based on information technology (Moore et al., 2011). E-learning or online learning is the new style of learning because of the current situations. Although, online classes are not new, at these times it is highly recommended for usage. Online classes require a stable WiFi connection and an android gadget. [3]

(Anderson, 2008) points out that online learning has a number of benefits and advantages. They could access the online course anytime they had free time and from any place with Internet connectivity. Students can also access up-to-date and appropriate learning materials via the Internet. Furthermore, strong online learning programs allow students to join in debates or participate in discussions. [4]

Despite these advantages and benefits, students still run across the same challenges and troubles that they would in a traditional classroom (Tsai, 2009). In an online learning environment, students may experience learning challenges, thus it is important to think about how to help them get through these challenges. [5] Studies on online learning have examined the relationship between students' academic achievement and their preference for self-directed (online) or teacher-directed (face-to-face) classroom environments. None of them, however, have concentrated on the application of online learning approaches or the seriousness of the problems that occur in online learning.

This study was conducted in order to ascertain the challenges and issues faced by Bachelor of Arts in English Language students when learning online.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges ABEL students encountered in online learning.

The challenges ABEL students have with online learning are the overall issue the study is addressing. It specifically aimed to respond to the question:

1. What are the main problems and challenges with online learning in terms of the following aspects?
   1.1 Internet Connection
   1.2 Technical Problem
   1.3 Distractions/Background Noises
   1.4 Financial Problem
   1.5 Mental Stability
   1.6 Time Management

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study is a qualitative research study employing narrative research method and approach. It is considered as a narrative research design as for the researchers aimed to write narratives about experiences of individuals, particularly the ABEL students regarding the challenges they have encountered in online learning.

Furthermore, as eloquently stated by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives. Thus, narrative research is the study of how people perceive the world. Narrative researchers gather these accounts and create narratives about their experiences (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). [6]

Sources of Data

The participants in this study were purposely chosen from among Pangasinan State University - Bayambang Campus Bachelor of Arts in English Language students in various year levels enrolled in the academic year 2021–2022.

This study used purposive sampling to select five (5) participants from different year levels enrolled in ABEL course. The specific strategy employed was criteria sampling, (Miles & Huberman,

1994). Each participant met five criteria: (a) three girls and two boys (b) enrolled in ABEL course (c) one representative each from different year levels, first year; second year; third year and fourth year (d) social class they belong in, and (e) came from their previous senior high, public and private school. [7]

Data Gathering Instrument

The researchers had general questions for an open interview that were asked to the selected respondents from ABEL students to gather necessary data for the study. The researchers pursued to ask questions referring to the challenges and factors that the interviewees had encountered in online learning such as Internet Connection, Technical Problems, Distractions or Background Noises, Financial Problem, Mental Stability and Time Management.

Eventually, after all the individual interviews were conducted, the researchers transcribed, analyzed, interpreted and presented the data gathered. The process of turning recorded audio (often spoken word) into a written form that can be utilized to investigate a specific occurrence or event is known as transcription (Duranti, 2006). Video transcription is the specific type of transcription used by the researchers. It is the process of converting a video or film audio track into text. [8]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's key findings regarding the following factors and the coping mechanisms they employed to deal with these challenges are as follows:

Internet Connection

Online learning is highly dependent on an internet connection. Unfortunately, a bad internet connection is bound to happen in an online-only environment. When a student is frustrated, it might be difficult for them to keep up with their virtual classmates and the learning environment.

All the respondents had problems with the internet connection. Poor internet connection quality makes them turn their activities, quizzes, and examinations in late.

Due to the recent nature of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, few empirical studies examine the impact of broadband coverage on access to online education at any level of education One significant

exception is the research conducted by (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021) under the title "Inequality in household adaptation to schooling shocks: COVID - Induced Online Learning Engagement in Real Time" which provides stark evidence of the digital education divide in the US during the COVID-19 lockdown period. [9]

The interviewees have experienced difficulties in learning after their primary source of online classes gets unavailable temporarily. There were some days that even the internet provider itself needed a repair. There would be some unforeseeable circumstances that make the internet provider shut their service temporarily, such a storm. In that sense, internet connections are interrupted, and this makes it the student challenging to attend an online class. These students may or may not have low signal on their individual phones, thus they chose WiFi as their connecting method. "Syempre maraming factors po yung naging challenge sakin. Pero unang-una ang pinakanahirapan ako is to have a stable internet connection. Kasi syempre ayun yung pinakakailangan natin sa online learning." (Matthew Kent Pacheco, interviewee)

That's why using data connection in their area is useless too. No WiFi connection means no attendance in online classes. The same with unscheduled power interruption. No power outage means no Wi-Fi connection too. In as much as Wi-Fi connections needs electrical power. One interviewee had experienced about this, "Mas gusto ko yung face to face. Kasi mas madali yung pagdedeliver ng mga lessons and mas madali tayong makikipag interact with our teachers. And also, the environment is different. You are with your fellow students na kung saan sabay sabay kayo matututo at walang naiiwan. Unlike sa online learning, yung iba nagkakaron ng internet interruption, power interruption and other factors that might distract them. Dahil sa mga bagay na yan is naiiwan sila sa mga lessons". (Matthew Kent Pacheco, interviewee)

With this, several complaints from the students were heard. They said they could not participate in online discussions and activities. They experience difficulties in passing activity or exam on that same day as they have no means of a good connection to pass or do their task. Apart from this, they find it hard to study on their own. They may not understand some texts or lesson fully and requires a teacher's perspective or a class group discussion. Although a recorded group discussion or video chat is possible, not all subject teachers do not

permit the recording of their classes. (Elyzelle Flores, interviewee) "Okay naman pero mas preferred pa rin talaga yung face-to-face. Ang hirap din kasi dito sa online class eh. Diba syempre, kapag exam ganyan lalo na kapag kay Sir R*****, ang hirap hirap time pressure ganyan. Tapos ano kapag pasahan na ng quiz, activities and exams ganon. Ang hina minsan ng net kaya minsan late ganon minsan naman hindi."

According to these findings (Casillano, 2019) suggested that a small percentage of students have access to the internet, which prevents them from using the e-learning platform. Millions of students around the world are impacted, and some have already renounced their position as students. Additionally, the accessibility of technology devices and internet connectivity presents one of the main challenges in solving the problem of learning. [10]

Online learners encounter a variety of challenges. However, they are compelled to deal with them by employing a variety of coping mechanisms. Since having a reliable internet connection is crucial yet challenging to get in rural locations, students get it by looking out for good space and time. Finding a better location for the wireless router, according to Cook (2019, as cited in Cahapay & Rotas, 2021), will help you get a better broadband connection. It is especially important to note that using WiFi at night can reduce WiFi traffic because fewer people are vying for network bandwidth. These are some of the methods students use to improve their internet access and carry on with their online education. Some people might even need to leave their homes to live somewhere with better internet access. According to (Matswetu et al., 2020), who discovered that students who do not have access to the internet will search for every imaginable option to satisfy their demands.[11]

Technical Problem

Although students are often tech-savvy and, thus capable of managing computers and other gadgets adequately, there are considerable obstacles and difficulties when using them. Since they were unfamiliar with the program used in online learning, the respondents encountered everyday issues as well as technological difficulties. One more thing is the sudden lagging of the devices they are using made them drop the meeting unwillingly.

Technical problems are inevitable. There may be errors in an app, and it seriously needs an improvement to make the whole app experience more satisfying. However, interviewees said that they experienced technical problems with the app solely. They said that such problems could result in them not passing an activity or exam on time. Thus, in an online group call discussion, they could not open their mics and camera when asked. They cannot participate in the class discussions due to that. "Mahirap kasi ano diba online class kasi ano eh kailangan natin ng load tapos yung iba naman hindi kayang ma-afford yung load para gumamit ng MS Teams tapos marami pang struggles kapag ginagamit natin 'to. Yung nagdadrop yung call, walang signal, tapos hindi mapindot yung mute-unmute, mga ganon." (Elyzelle Flores, interviewee)

The respondents have shared their coping strategies upon muddling through such technical issues. Studying the app that you will use for online learning ahead of time can help you become acquainted with the buttons and icons. While device slowness and lagging are unavoidable, freeing up phone storage space is preferable.

As the world battles to prevent the virus' relentless spread, schools and other learning environments were compelled to move in complete online learning. Online learning refers to a learning environment that uses the Internet and other technological devices and tools for synchronous and asynchronous instructional delivery and management of academic programs (Usher & Barak, 2020); (Huang, 2019). [12]

This finding is under much research (Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001) and (Song et al., 2004) that identified technological issues as the most difficult hurdles for online learners, which could lead to discontent. Similarly, (Tsai, 2009) noted that unfamiliarity and a lack of computer skills might cause anxiety in an online learning setting. [13]

Distractions/Background Noises

Due to the new norm in education that online learning has established, which allows students to enroll in new courses and learn essentially from anywhere and at any time. Mostly, students were learning in their respective homes, and unnecessary background noises, and sounds were inevitable. As a result, the respondents have said that it causes them to have difficulty concentrating in their classes. The

information they receive is kind of vague whenever they recite, discuss their reports, take quizzes, and listen to the lectures.

Among the respondents, all agree that background noises or distraction tops as one of the challenges encountered during an online class. There may be situations that emit loud noise such as loud blaring of music from their neighbors, the sound of vehicles outside, storm, etc. This makes them not to stay focused on their respective online classes. Hence, this results in low outcomes for the students. "No, I'm not comfortable. Kase maraming distraction sa paligid at hindi naman maiiwasan yun kaya minsan di ako nakakapagfocus because of distraction." (Arvi Lamsen, interviewee)

Results from the study by (B. Diaco, 2014) Effects of Noise Pollution in the Learning Environment on Cognitive Performances" suggests that noises contribute to unhealthy learning environments and expose students to cognitive, academic, and professional dangers. These intense background noises are burdensome for students in many schools and homes. [14]

Noise pollutes the learning environments that students normally have access to at home, which has an influence on students' learning. Choosing a quiet place of your house and reminding your family that you are taking online classes will help as a coping strategy for dealing with distraction in online learning.

Financial Problem

In line with online learning, it entails using technological devices to connect with virtual classes and meetings. Of course, without these gadgets such as computers, cellphones, earphones, loads, and fast internet connectivity, it cannot link with the online classes. So, it is imperative to have these devices. Unfortunately, some students have encountered this factor, financial stability. As a result, they are compelled to discontinue their studies. Matthew Pacheco, one of the respondents, has said that one of his major problems is finding a suitable device for online learning. Pacheco said that not every phone can accommodate online learning as it is.

Furthermore, he resorted to using load as his mode of connection when taking online classes. He loads his number weekly since his class schedule is every day

without the weekend. Along with Ms. Elyzelle Flores, she used to load one hundred pesos weekly. Two of them attend online classes from home. His brother loads one hundred pesos weekly, and they ask their mother to load each of them two hundred pesos. Collectively, they spend eight hundred pesos in a month just with load alone. "Nagpapaload ako kay Mama ng 100 pesos para matagal sya gamitin. Yung prepaid na nasa card siya. Magastos nga eh kasi 'di ba minsan wala tayong klase. Edi Sayang Yung load." Nevertheless, Ms. Elyzelle has said that they now switched to using a WiFi connection.

Moreover, this includes experiences that Mr. Alvic De Vera encountered with his classmates. He said that he has classmates who have stopped studying and are just focused on her part-time work. Also, one of his classmates experienced working while attending online classes. It is challenging to support oneself and earn for the expenses to cover the costs of online learning. (Alvic De Vera, interviewee) "Meron din ako naencounter na. Meron din kaming classmate ngayon na, hindi na siya pumapasok kasi nga, hindi niya raw kayang pagsabayin yung online class tsaka yung work niya."

According to (Halupa, 2016), technological advances have exacerbated inequality and widened the gap between "have" and "have not" youth. Many low-income households cannot purchase the educational and informational technology that has spread today. Furthermore, many families are unable to offer academic support and help outside of the classroom. This may harm the youth who are expected by their teachers and peers to have these technological devices as well as internet connections at home. This can lower a student's self-esteem and perceived importance, as well as generate undue stress. [15]

Additionally, according to (Peneul, 2006), computers and other teaching aids may have a negative impact on student involvement. Some students, for financial reasons, could not pay attention in class; rather they would be thinking of how to get money to buy their valuable materials and handouts. [16]

The students deal with fervor self-motivation, as they said in their respective interviews. The need to pursue and focus on their own goals is an ample reason they cope up until their education ends. In addition, most students cope with the thinking of passing their subjects.

Mental Stability

One of the aspects impacted by online learning is resilience. The mental stability of the students is their challenge during online learning. There may be times when respondents feel distressed and frustrated, mainly when they express disappointment in such a situational thing happening during their online classes. With this, they could overthink things and feel unmotivated. They are resulting in low-class performance and self-esteem also. The respondents say that they cannot help but feel these feelings. Moreover, It is a significant factor in a student's barrier or obstacle is none other than oneself.

As what Ms. Elyzelle answered to the Researchers, she said that her anxiety aggravated. It is because of the struggles she's facing and she's being anxious towards the responsibilities she have in the family. "Mas nag-ano yung anxiety ko. Syempre alam mo 'yon, andaming struggles. Andami mong iniisip like nag-iisip ka kung ano pa dahilan kung bakit ka nag aaral. Pressure. Andami mong responsibility sa family, sa school, naghalo-halo na kaya parang iniisip mo na bakit ka pa nag-aaral kaya lumalala yung anxiety ko. Mas nakaapekto talaga yung online learning kasi kahit hindi face-to-face na voice lang, nakakakaba pa din kahit nasa bahay ka lang."

(Alvic De Vera, interviewee) "Medyo naaapektuhan din kase parang lately, mas nagfofocus ako sa magpass kesa sa learning which yung deadline yung iniisip ko, hindi yung ano, information na magegain ko. Parang ganun." Besides, Mr. Alvic had mentioned that he's more distressed on passing his activities on time rather than the knowledge he'll be gaining in online learning.

On the other hand, as with Mr. Matthew, he has felt minimal frustrations whenever he thought that he did not present his reports well and when he doesn't understand what the teachers are discussing. "Siguro yung sakin po is minimal frustrations lang. Kapag may time na kasi ako I consider myself as a responsible student. I am trying and doing my best to adjust in this new normal. However, yung mga bagay na yun anxiety, opo pero depression hindi pa naman po. Kapag hindi maganda yung report ko, hindi mo mapakinggan si teacher ng maayos nafufrustrate ako. Parang nafefeel mo na napag-iiwanan ka." (Matthew Kent Pacheco, interviewee)

The challenges of online learning in medical education were looked at in the study "Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners" conducted by (Rajab, Mohammad, Gazal, & Alkattan, 2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the study, the challenges were time management, anxiety, coronavirus disease stress, communications, assessment, online education, and technology use. Rajab, Mohammad, Gazal, and Alkattan investigated the difficulties of online learning, as this study reveals since the subject of the current investigation is also significant. [17]

The interviewed students who experience mental instability during online learning need social support (Logel, Oreopoulos & Petroniijevic, 2021). Being socially connection is vital for social support. While social support makes the mentally unstable student cheered on or make them feel they were; it is best if she/he has someone to hold or talk to when she/he needed. [18]

Time Management

Time management is a challenge for e-Learners since online courses need a significant amount of time and effort. It is hard to manage our time because we are stuck and only learning at home. Unlike in face-to-face situations, there is a defined location for us to learn and study. There will be no additional work other than studying. However, at home, we have a lot to do. We have tasks to make and fulfill.

To boot, as what Mr. Alvic suggested, it is best to manage your time. So, the difficulties you will encounter lessen. He said in an interview, "Kunwari diba sa bahay… diba sa bahay ano, kung ano yung gagawin natin, kahit pwede tayong makinig or habang ginagawa yung mga gusto nating gawin. Parang ganun. Hindi masyadong nakakapagfocus."

The same answer with the interviewee, Ms. Mica Flores, she said that doing your household chores at home would make it beneficial. In the sense that your time will not be wasted by sitting or lying idly. She quoted, "gagawin ko po muna iyong lahat ng household course ko po sa bahay para po pag mag-oonline class na po ako hindi po sagabal yong gawain ko po, sa possibility of distraction po siguro po pupunta po ako sa place na hindi po ako nadidistract, na wala pong maingay na tao, wala pong distraction ng mga sasakyan ganun po, sa internet connection hahanap po ako ng place na malakas po yong connection para po hindi po naglalag po yong signal when I'm learning po."

Managing own time makes whole life better, too according to Ms. Arvi Lamsen. She strongly agrees too that being flexible and adjusting in these trying times making her clear-headed and not stressed. Doing assignments and tasks on time makes the online class easier and more flexible, according to Mr. Mathew Kent. He answered, "just like being responsible and doing things right away. Kapag binigay na yung task dapat gawin agad. And besides from that you should be adjusting and having contingency plans sa mga bagay na maaaring maghinder para magawa mo yung isang bagay. For example, sa reporting or exam ganyan po."

When asked what their coping technique is, they all said that they strongly think that to accomplish their duty as a child and a student, they must divide their responsibilities in half. And for someone like them who has dreams, their best strategy is to be on time always in terms of studying and household chores.

According to Britton & Tesser (2001), "Effects of Time-Management Practices on College Grades," time management is a significant academic and administrative difference between conventional and web-based education. In formal education, there was the sort of learning opportunities that incorporated clarification of everything. Because the teacher is in front of the students in this system, they can ask questions without hesitation. Nevertheless, in contrast to formal students, remote learning students do not have this type of academic environment. In online learning, there is a physical separation between the students and the teachers. As a result, managing time and achieving excellent grades in distant education is more challenging. Web-based students learn and discover online that only includes superficial material, and the rest is up to them to think about and research more. [19]

Furthermore, a study by Ahmad (Batool, Hussain Ch, 2019) entitled "Path Relationship of Time Management and Academic Achievement of Students in Distance Learning Institutions," the primary achievement of distance and regular students is managing time effectively. Mismanagement disturbs the academic achievements of learners. Time administration plays a significant role in improving learners' performance and accomplishments. Time management is a skill that every student must be familiar with and command of to get better results. A student can only survive if he or she can manage time effectively. [20]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1&2. Technological issues are the most difficult hurdles for online learners, which could lead to discontent.

3. Students could not create a quiet learning environment free of visual and auditory distraction.

4. Respondents believe that accessing devices and the internet connection required for online learning is costly.

5&6. Distress, anxiety, and frustrations result from the respondents' lack of time management. They had much tasks in their plate; hence, the feeling of not attaining or achieving (in the presence of late passing of tasks/requirements, etc.) they wanted to attain or achieve gives them mental breakdown.0

The following recommendations are provided considering the findings and conclusions:

(1&2) Students may be encouraged to make the most of the free internet access given by the University and the Local Government Unit. Students are also advised to use their available internet data wisely and to purchase devices that are compatible with learning apps to optimize the benefits of using free and downloaded learning applications.

(3) Students should try to find a distraction-free environment in which to concentrate and focus. Students must pay complete attention and adjust to their environment to properly acquire the knowledge that they desired.

(4) The students may strive to improve their economic condition and maximize the use of their mobile phones in learning.

(5&6) The university should make a program or a webinar that could help raise awareness of mental health and teach students about time management.

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