

Benefits and Challenges of Online Teaching and Learning among Upper Primary ESL Students: The Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of technology has revolutionised education, reshaping the way teaching and learning are conducted. Online teaching and learning have become increasingly popular, offering new possibilities in education delivery. This qualitative study identifies the benefits and challenges that ESL English teachers at school face during online teaching and learning process among upper primary students. This study also identifies the interventional strategies that could be applied in order to overcome the obstacles. Interviews were used to collect data from four experienced teachers. The findings show that online teaching provides numerous benefits for students, parents and teachers. It provides better access which is not only more flexible but also more convenient. Moreover, it enhances personalised learning environment where each student takes a different route to achieve their goals. Regarding the challenges, this study identifies technical problems such as internet connection and the access of hardware as major barriers. Additionally, the motivation from students is also an important key. The study identified the intervention strategy to be applied to solve any potential problem such as technical support, troubleshooting and guidelines from parents. Moreover, clear communication, displays of activities and engaging learning materials were

discovered to ensure students remain engaged in online education. The findings of the study provide a comprehensive solution by implementing intervention strategies to ensure smooth online teaching and learning among upper primary students in ESL class.

Keywords: Benefits and Challenges, ESL Teachers, Intervention Strategies, Online Teaching and Learning, Technology In Education.

Introduction

Technology plays a crucial role in the lives of individuals in the present era, and it is considered an essential skill that must be mastered due to its progressive impact on every nation (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018). Furthermore, the globalisation of technology has brought about significant positive changes and developments, particularly in the field of education (Skare & Riberio Soriano, 2021). The shift in the learning paradigm, transitioning from traditional face-to-face classrooms to virtual online learning environments has expanded students' learning opportunities beyond the confines of physical classrooms, enabling extensive learning through online platforms. Martin et al (2020), emphasise that the number of students utilising the internet for educational purposes has been steadily increasing over the years, indicating a global trend towards a shift away from classroom-centric learning.

Virtual learning has become the new norm for students since the onset of the global pandemic, prompting teachers to incorporate various technological elements such as educational games, quiz applications, and interactive platforms into their lessons to enhance students' engagement and interest. Han (2020), defines computer-assisted and online learning as having a positive impact on students, facilitating better comprehension through the use of video-sharing and interactive media. However, the penetration of internet and technology in the classroom also poses a demand for teachers to acquire sufficient knowledge and skills to effectively utilise these tools (Saepullah et al., 2021). Raffone (2022), asserts that integrating technology and web-based learning into the teaching process enhances students' learning experiences.

However, Juneja (2021) explains that the transition from the traditional teaching to the online teaching poses numerous challenges for students and teachers, including technological issues, students' learning etiquette, and students' motivation and enthusiasm towards online learning. Consequently, conducting lessons online becomes a formidable task for teachers. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the benefits and challenges encountered by teachers during online teaching, as well as to propose effective intervention strategies to mitigate the identified challenges. Specifically, the study seeks to address three research questions: (1) What are the benefits when conducting online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils?, (2) What are the challenges when conducting online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils?, and (3) What are the possible effective intervention strategies to mitigate the challenges when conducting online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils?

Literature Review

Online Learning

Over the years, the learning style of students has undergone significant changes (Rahim & Ahmadi, 2021). Online learning, which integrates digital technologies, has emerged

as a new approach to education (Bower, 2019). Unlike those days, learning now is no longer oriented in the classroom but it has been shifted to the online platform. The online learning method is being developed globally worldwide and it is now known to be the new norm of learning. According to Yacob et al. (2022), online and digital learning are increasingly stressed to cater to the digitally literate learning needs of today's students, who prefer modern learning tools over traditional methods.

Teachers can make use of pictures, videos, PDFs and interactive media to help the process of teaching in online learning as the use of interactive media could improve students' understanding of the lesson (Guppy et al., 2022). Flores et al (2021), mentioned that some visuals and audios could help to increase students' motivation. Vargas-Macias (2020), recommends applying quizzes and games to make online teaching and learning more interactive. These demonstrate that online teaching and learning increases student engagement and motivation.

Challenges in online Teaching and Learning

Online learning might pose significant challenges and demands for both teachers and learners. The effective use of technology in online teaching requires teachers to possess strong skills in utilising technology to meet students' learning needs. Teachers with poor digital literacy face a real challenge and burden in using technology effectively (Lucas & Vicente, 2022). Insufficient training and preparation for online teaching further compound these challenges, as teachers have not been adequately prepared for conducting lessons online (Lucas & Vicente, 2022). Similarly, Wyatt et al (2023), highlight that online teaching increases the workload for teachers, as it requires additional time for preparing teaching materials compared to traditional classroom teaching. Dhawan (2020) supports this, emphasising that teaching online demands extra time and preparation compared to face-to-face instruction, regardless of class size. As Wyatt et al. (2023) described, there is an extra burden added for teachers to teach students online. For a class of around 25 students, teachers need to invest nearly two hours to prepare teaching materials which is a little longer than traditional classroom teaching.

Also, it is hard for teachers to measure the engagement level of the students, especially when cameras or microphones are turned off (Skare & Soriano, 2021). Teachers can only view the students' faces, rather than their whole gestures and facial reactions. Once the screens are off, visual direct contact for teachers becomes quite difficult, thus making it difficult to measure the involvement of the students. Teachers would often talk to a room with a group of passive listeners, who might check their devices for other purposes during the lessons, which results in lacking responses and feedback in the teaching and learning process. The challenges discussed above prove that teachers have to face difficulties during the online teaching process.

Students' Participation

The interaction with teachers is important as teachers are able to track students' learning process more precisely. It also makes them better understand how effective the process becomes. Hodges et al (2020), suggest that students' participation in online

classrooms could boost the efficiency for the learning process. In addition, they point out that while many students coming from the urban area are not facing any problems with accessing the web, there are still groups who are reluctant to engage in online discussions while they think the silent reading would be a better option (Hodges et al., 2020). It was also recognised by Dhawan (2020) that students are more likely to decline attending the online lessons if they find the style or content of lessons not interesting enough. Thus, teachers ought to demonstrate how well they are in understanding students' needs and interests and attempt to create lessons that will stimulate their creativity and motivation. Furthermore, a low level of interaction by students during online learning does not mean that students do not understand or perform well in the lesson. Although students who are more active tend to do well, it does not mean that passive students are weak or do not understand the lesson (Picciano, 2020). Studies have shown that there are bright learners among passive participants as well (Picciano, 2020). Therefore, teachers should not make false predictions about students' understanding or performance solely based on their level of interaction and participation during online learning.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is a theoretical model, which helps to understand users' attitude towards using technology, such as the online teaching and learning approach, from users' perspective (Cheok et al, 2017). In this study, the TAM model was adopted to investigate teachers' behaviour of adopting and using the online teaching and learning approach in the ESL classroom.

The TAM model suggests that user motivation can be explained by three major factors: perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEOU) and attitude towards the system (Figure 1). To find out how teachers feel about online teaching and learning methods in the ESL classroom, these factors are used as guides. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions determine the effective use of online teaching and learning approaches. Based on the TAM model, the teachers' attitudes are significantly determined by two factors, PU and PEOU.

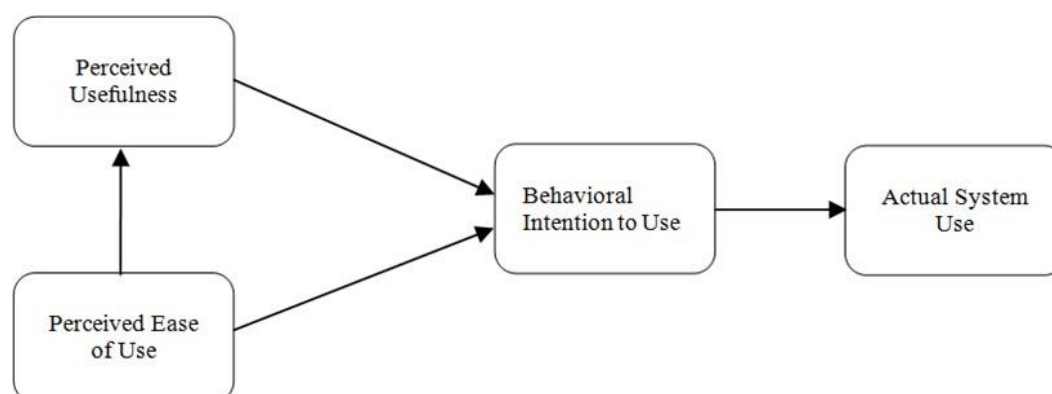


Figure 1. Modified Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

If Teachers perceive a technology or teaching and learning platform to be easy, they show overall positive attitude towards it (attitude). This positive perception of ease of use leads them to believe that a technology could potentially enhance their ability to teach and benefit students through promoting their learning (perceived usefulness). As a consequence, teachers are more likely to act on their positive perception in terms of

commitment, such as adopting the technology as a part of teaching and learning at school, and seeing benefits in engaging students in learning with and through inspiring teaching.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design utilised a qualitative approach to investigate the perceptions of teachers on the benefits and challenges of online teaching as well as the effective intervention to the challenges identified. The study employed semi-structured interviews comprising seven questions to address the research objectives. The qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for in-depth exploration and understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions related to online teaching and learning. Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers could gather rich and detailed data, enabling them to capture a deeper understanding of the teachers' experiences, perceptions and recommendations of the teachers on the topic.

Sampling Method

The study utilised purposive sampling to select a total of four ESL teachers who engage in online teaching with Year 4 to 6 students. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves deliberately selecting participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas, 2016). In this case, ESL teachers who have experience in online teaching with upper primary students were targeted as they could provide valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of online instruction in this specific context. The following table illustrates the selected ESL teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1

Table of Respondents

Respondent No.	Years Of Experience In Online Teaching	Students' Proficiency Level
Respondent 1	18	Mixed abilities
Respondent 2	24	Low to average
Respondent 3	2	Low to intermediate
Respondent 4	8	Low to intermediate

Table 1 above shows that 50% of the selected sample had less than 10 years of teaching experience and the other 50% are having more than ten years of teaching experience, 18 years and 24 years, respectively. By using purposive sampling, the researcher is able to form a sample group, whose individual interactions are relevant to the research aims, that can increase in-depth and quality of data.

Data Collection Method

The data for the study was collected through individual in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions. A self-developed semi-structured interview with seven fixed items was used to guide the interviews. The researchers tested the questionnaire among the respondents and included sub-questions and probing questions to gain deeper understandings based on the teachers' responses. The questions addressed the benefits and

challenges of online ESL teaching and learning, as well as strategies to overcome the identified challenges. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture and were subsequently transcribed for analysis. The researchers followed the guidelines of Creswell (2012) to ensure that the interview methods created pleasant situations for the participants, enhancing the quality of the findings.

In this study, face validity was conducted by an experienced colleague holding a Bachelor of Education degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. Face validity occurs when raters perceive the items of an instrument as suitable for the intended assessment objectives (Hardesty & Bearden, 2004). The semi-structured interview questions were reviewed to ensure their appropriateness, relevance, and adequacy for the study's purpose.

Data Analysis Method

The study applied inductive thematic analysis to fully analyse the teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning online, thematic units were built based on the transcript of the collected interviews focusing on the common clues, indicating the advantages, disadvantages and solutions of teaching and learning online. Finally, those thematic units were aggregated by larger themes giving a full and structured analysis. This enabled the researcher to identify common and emerging themes in the data, discovering similar patterns and essential aspects from the data collection, which in turn gave more dimension to the interpretations of the ESL teacher's perspectives (Nowell, 2017). The analysis shows many areas of online teaching and learning, especially to what extent it benefits or hinders learning, and suggestions for when needed. The outcomes of the thematic analysis allowed the researcher to present a more in-depth dimension of the participants' experiences and ideas to add value to the discourse of the online teaching and learning, and suggestions for online learning improvement in the ESL classroom. These outcomes also revealed new perspectives about online teaching and learning and how to potentially enhance it for upper primary students.

Findings and Discussion

The research conducted provided a comprehensive examination of online teaching and learning of Year 4 to 6 pupils. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with four ESL teachers who had considerable expertise in teaching online classes for upper primary students. By employing inductive thematic analysis to analyse the interview transcripts, a number of noteworthy findings emerged, offering a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the subject matter. These findings demonstrate the benefits, challenges, and potential intervention strategies in online education.

Benefits of Conducting Online Teaching and Learning among Year 4 to 6 Pupils

The analysis of interview transcripts showed two main themes highlighting the advantages of online teaching and learning for Year 4 to 6 pupils: "enhanced accessibility" and "personalised learning".

Enhanced Accessibility

The first theme "enhanced accessibility" emphasises the flexibility and convenience associated with online teaching and learning. The respondents acknowledged that online

learning offers remarkable flexibility for both teachers and students, transcending geographical limitations. As one respondent stated, "Online learning is flexible and convenient..." (Respondent1), and another mentioned, "It allows me to reach students from different locations and overcome geographical barriers" (Respondent 2). These statements highlight how online education empowers teachers to connect with students from diverse locations, overcoming geographical barriers that may hinder traditional face-to-face instruction. Supporting this notion, Franklin (2022) further asserts that online teaching enables educators to instruct and engage with students located in different cities, countries, or continents. This flexibility not only broadens the reach of education but also fosters cultural exchange and diverse perspectives within the virtual classroom.

Also, the flexibility of time schedule was highlighted by the respondents, with one teacher saying, "We know that they can finish their classes and even watch their lectures anytime and anywhere that they want," (Respondent 3). This iterative process facilitates learning and allows students to pace themselves based on their individual needs (Dani, 2023 & Pragasam & Sulaiman, 2023). The flexibility of time to learn provides greater freedom for students to attend classes and access resource materials at any time that is suitable for them, thereby enabling them to organise their learning schedule to suit their needs as stated by Lim (2005). Students' life demands are diverse, and they do not necessarily have a specific time frame to devote to their studies, hence the need for a time schedule that suits their needs.

Besides, online teaching and learning is a recorded way of instruction that can help save education costs for users. The primary reason why online teaching and learning can save instruction costs is because it does not require any physical classrooms, which can help minimise or even eliminate the costs of renting or taking care of teaching places. Apart from that, online learning can also save the transportation costs for both students and teachers, since there is no need for them to travel to a specific physical location as one respondent mentioned, "It's not as expensive as face-to-face... We don't have transportation costs. And maybe renting a place. We don't have to rent a place as well," (Respondent 3). The research conducted by Al Rawashdeh et al (2021), also showcased how online education could help save costs for educational institutions, as it was stated that online education could provide a promising starting point in controlling institutional costs compared with face-to-face education.

Besides, online teaching saves the time of travelling, allowing students and teachers to spend the time more effectively. As stated by Respondent 3, "It is less time-consuming as well because students can access the class anytime and everywhere. For example, commuting, transportation." Time saving due to reduced commuting time implicates productivity and work-life balance for students. They can use the time saved from commuting to engage in additional learning activities, pursue interests or other ground responsibilities (Thanji & Shanmugam, 2018). Similarly, teachers can convert this time saving on travelling into devoting time into lesson planning, marking students's work, or other professional development (Van de Vord & Pogue, 2012). This would prompt the overall effectiveness of online teaching and learning success as an evolving teaching and learning approach that are flexibly used at a particular time and place.

Personalised Learning

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was "personalised learning". The teachers highlighted how online teaching platforms offer ample opportunities to effectively accommodate diverse learning styles. Employing authentic learning materials such as videos sourced from platforms like YouTube, can imbue the online teaching and learning experience with significance and purpose (Lukas & Yunus, 2021). Teachers who had prior experience and better familiarity with digital tools demonstrated a higher level of confidence in incorporating them into their teaching.

During the interviews, the respondents highlighted their ability to leverage a variety of digital tools and resources to enhance learning and cater to individual learning styles. One respondent stated, "I can also use a variety of digital tools and resources to enhance learning and cater to individual learning styles" (Respondent 2). This adaptability extends to instructional strategies, pacing, and content, allowing teachers to effectively address different learning styles and abilities (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

The flexibility to select and utilise teaching aids not only caters to students' diverse learning needs but also enhances the engagement and comprehension of lessons. The teachers emphasised that online teaching enables them to tailor lesson plans and materials to meet the unique requirements of individual students. Respondent 1 highlighted, saying, "We had a wide variety of teaching aids that can be selected and used. I used songs and videos to capture my students' attention during the lesson". These digital tools and resources accessible through online platforms empower educators to create engaging learners of different individual learning styles.

By personalising instruction based on students' learning styles, ESL teachers with previous exposure and a greater understanding of digital tools exhibited increased confidence when integrating these tools into their teaching methods (Sim & Ismail, 2023). They believe they could create a more individualised and impactful learning experience. This approach acknowledges the varied strengths and preferences of students, leading to a more effective learning environment where students feel supported and motivated to succeed. The ability to customise teaching methods and materials is a valuable advantage of online teaching, fostering a more personalised and beneficial educational journey for both teachers and learners.

Challenges when Conducting Online Teaching and Learning among Year 4 to 6 Pupils*Technical Issues*

The second research question aims to identify the challenges encountered in conducting online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils. The first prominent theme that emerged from the interviews with four ESL upper primary teachers was the presence of technical issues. According to Raw and Ismail (2021), unreliable internet connectivity and restricted access to computer facilities are some of the challenges faced. One respondent highlighted, "Connectivity problems, audio or video difficulties, and platform glitches can unexpectedly interrupt the flow of the online class." (Respondent 2). It was observed that not every student has access to secure internet connections or the required technological equipment, as Respondent 3 highlighted this challenge by stating, "...some locations have low internet coverage. This is very challenging for both teachers and students." Besides,

Respondent 1 also pointed out, "Not all students have the facilities to be equipped with technology. Some of them have a device but with a poor connection." These circumstances further compound the technical difficulties faced during online classes.

The frustrations caused by these technical issues were clearly evident, leading some teachers to express a preference for face-to-face classes, where one teacher shared, "Personally, I prefer face-to-face classes more because I found that in online classes, some students have connection issues." (Respondent 4). Another respondent expressed, "This usually impacts negatively on the students' engagement. These technical issues are quite frustrating sometimes because they disrupt the smooth delivery of the lesson." (Respondent 3).

It is indeed worth noting that the preference expressed by some teachers for face-to-face classes due to technical challenges in online teaching emphasises the significance of effectively addressing these issues. The success of online education hinges on the provision of a robust technological infrastructure and ongoing support systems to mitigate technical difficulties and ensure a seamless teaching and learning experience (Saminathan, 2020).

Students' Motivation

The second theme that emerged from the interviews focused on students' motivation in the online learning environment. One significant challenge highlighted by the teachers was the limited availability of non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, which makes it difficult for them to assess students' comprehension levels and address their concerns or confusion. Respondent 2 highlighted this difficulty, stating, "There are limited availability of non-verbal cues...it becomes more challenging to read students' body language and facial expressions...it can be difficult for me to assess students' comprehension levels and address any concerns or confusion they may have." This challenge makes it harder for teachers to gauge students' understanding and provide immediate feedback or clarification.

Another obstacle to student engagement and motivation in the online learning environment is the presence of distractions. The absence of face-to-face interaction combined with various distractions at home or in the surroundings can make it difficult for students to maintain focus during online classes. Respondent 2 acknowledged this challenge, stating, "Another challenge is the presence of distractions and the difficulty some students face in maintaining focus during online classes. This lack of focus can lead to reduced participation and ultimately impact students' learning outcomes."

In addition to distractions, some teachers noted that students' attitudes and lack of motivation towards learning contribute to the challenges faced in the online classroom. Respondent 3 said, "...it might be about the attitude problem of the students. They might be distracting for students to focus on class." Similarly, Respondent 1 expressed concern about students' lack of responsiveness and motivation, saying that, "Students are not motivated and eager towards learning. Most of them don't respond to any questions. Their cameras are never turned on." These factors contribute to a less dynamic and interactive online learning environment, which can affect student motivation and overall learning outcomes.

Overall, addressing challenges related to student motivation in the online learning environment requires strategies that foster active engagement, minimise distractions, and encourage a positive attitude towards learning.

Possible effective intervention strategies to mitigate the challenges when conducting online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils

This research question aimed to identify effective intervention strategies to mitigate the challenges when conducting online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils. The interviews conducted with four ESL upper primary teachers provided valuable insights into these strategies.

Technical Issues

The respondents in the study recognised the importance of providing technical support and troubleshooting assistance to students and their parents as a means to address technical issues effectively. Respondent 2 specifically mentioned that, "For technical issues...for example, I have prepared step-by-step instructions to the students to help resolve their connectivity issues, audio or video problems." This proactive approach demonstrates the teachers' commitment to helping students in overcoming technical challenges and empowering them to troubleshoot common issues independently. Studies have shown that prompt and efficient technical support contributes to a more positive learning experience, increases student satisfaction, and reduces frustrations related to technical issues (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). Offering technical support and troubleshooting assistance can significantly minimise disruptions as students become equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge to resolve technical issues they may encounter during online classes, ensuring a smoother learning experience for both teachers and students.

Additionally, involving parents in addressing technical challenges was identified as a valuable intervention strategy. Respondent 1 suggested that, "Maybe we can give a guide for the parents on how they can help their children in handling the devices." Studies have shown that engaged and informed parents can better support their children's educational journey in the online learning environment (Alharthi, 2023). Parental guidance can help students navigate their devices and overcome technical difficulties. Collaborating with parents establishes a supportive and collaborative approach to enhance the online learning experience. This partnership between teachers and parents strengthens the support system for students, as both parties work together to address and overcome technical challenges, contributing to a more effective and seamless online learning environment.

Students' Motivation

Strategies were identified from the interviews to improve the students' motivation in online teaching. Clear communication was seen as a crucial element to implement in order to overcome the lack of non-verbal cues available. Respondent 2 said that, "I think clear communication is important. By emphasising clear communication through verbal instructions, written guidelines and visual aids, we can compensate for the limited availability of non-verbal cues. We can use clear and concise language to convey instructions and expectations to the students." She indicated the need for clear communication to help her as a student regarding what to do.

Designing interactive and engaging activities is also another effective strategy to keep students focused during the learning and teaching process. “We can design interactive and engaging activities to maintain student focus during online classes. We can do that by incorporating multimedia resources, interactive quizzes, group discussions, and hands-on tasks.” (Respondent 2). Respondents 1 and 3 also stated, “We have to put in some games to attract as we are teaching upper primary students” and “...teachers could give some breaks, ask questions or play games to tighten the bond and make the class interesting. In that way, I guess all pupils will take initiative to take part in the lesson.” To keep the students attracted and engaged at all time, it is crucial for teachers to provide games and interactive activities during the online learning process. According to the findings of research in online learning context, activities designed to interact and attract students are found to positively impact student engagement and motivation (Muir et al., 2022). The interactive activities could create the atmosphere of active learning and this will bring in the excitement and eagerness in the mind of the students, and thus, the students will be more willing to listen and be attentive in the lesson.

Moreover, the use of technology-based tools, such as Quizizz and Kahoot, further enhances students' attention and motivation in online learning (Respondent 4). These tools offer a gamified approach to learning, creating a competitive and interactive learning environment that appeals to students. Martin and Bolliger (2018) conducted research on engagement strategies in online education and found that technology-based interactive tools positively influence student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. These tools create a competitive and interactive learning environment that appeals to students, fostering their motivation to actively participate in classes.

Conclusion

This study on online teaching and learning among Year 4 to 6 pupils holds significant implications for ESL education stakeholders. Firstly, it emphasises the crucial role of providing professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their online teaching skills. Investing in training programs enables teachers to navigate technical challenges, design interactive activities and cater to individual learning styles, ultimately benefiting student outcomes. Secondly, the study reveals the necessity of establishing a strong technology infrastructure and offering technical support to address connectivity issues during online classes. Ensuring students have reliable internet access and necessary technological equipment is vital for a positive learning experience. Additionally, understanding challenges related to student motivation in the online learning environment is crucial, and implementing strategies like clear communication, interactive activities and technology-based tools can enhance engagement and motivation, thereby improving overall learning outcomes.

As online education continues to play a significant role in ESL education, it contributes significantly to ongoing discussions and informs effective strategies for upper primary students. Addressing challenges, capitalising on benefits and continuously evaluating and improving online teaching methods are key components in creating a more inclusive and dynamic educational environment. This fosters academic success and empowers students to reach their full potential in their language learning journey, highlighting the importance of ongoing support, research and innovation in the field of online teaching and learning for upper primary ESL students.

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