

Enhancing Student Engagement and Motivation in Virtual English as a Second Language Classrooms During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Strategies

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a paradigm shift in education, accelerating the transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to virtual learning environments. This shift presented unique challenges for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, primarily due to reduced direct interaction and limited engagement between instructors and students. The inherent difficulties of ESL learning were further intensified in virtual settings, potentially leading to decreased student interest, motivation, and participation, particularly among learners accustomed to conventional classroom dynamics. A lack of social interaction in online environments often resulted in feelings of isolation and diminished motivation among ESL students. Nevertheless, when effectively designed, virtual learning environments enhanced teaching methodologies, enriched learning materials, and fostered students' analytical skills, curiosity, creativity, and motivation. This study explored the strategies employed by three ESL lecturers to enhance and sustain student motivation in virtual learning contexts. The findings provided practical insights for universities adapting to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and offered valuable implications for managing future educational disruptions.

KEYWORDS: Virtual learning environment; ESL students; motivation; interaction; ESL teaching experiences; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 led to the widespread suspension of in-person learning across educational institutions worldwide, threatening the academic progress of millions of university students. This unprecedented crisis highlighted the urgent need to sustain educational activities during emergencies, particularly in institutions traditionally designed for face-to-face instruction [1]. To address prolonged campus closures, many countries adopted online learning as a viable alternative to ensure educational continuity. Online education offered flexibility and convenience, enabling students to learn at their own pace and from any location.

Online learning quickly emerged as a preferred solution in many nations facing school closures. For example, in March 2020, China's Ministry of Education introduced the "Suspending Classes Without Interrupting Learning" policy to maintain educational continuity nationwide [2]. Similarly, educational institutions across Australia transitioned from traditional classroom instruction to fully online learning environments in mid-March 2020, marking a rapid transformation in teaching and learning practices.

In Vietnam, the COVID-19 pandemic also necessitated the closure of universities, posing significant challenges for the higher education sector. These challenges included limited technological infrastructure, insufficient experience with online teaching and learning, and a lack of standardized e-learning materials. As a result, the role of online learning became increasingly critical in ensuring the continuity and quality of higher education in the Vietnamese context.

Given the complexity and prolonged nature of the pandemic, there was an urgent need for research focusing on enhancing student motivation and interaction in virtual learning environments. This study presented a case study conducted at a university in Ho Chi Minh City that utilized the Google Meet platform for online ESL instruction during the pandemic. The findings offered practical insights for universities transitioning from traditional to online learning during COVID-19 and contributed valuable knowledge for managing future educational emergencies. To address these concerns, this study examined the challenges and instructional responses associated with virtual ESL teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the major issues confronting ESL lecturers in virtual classrooms and to explore the actions that could be taken to enhance student interaction and motivation in online learning environments under the impact of COVID-19.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definitions of online learning.

The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction played a significant role in contemporary educational reform. In teacher-centered learning, instructors functioned as the primary source of knowledge, while students acted as passive recipients. In contrast, student-centered learning emphasized active student participation in the construction of knowledge. Within this approach, teachers assumed the role of facilitators who guided learners to explore alternative solutions, encouraged independent thinking, and provided constructive feedback. The integration of the internet and modern technological tools further enhanced student-centered learning by enabling effective communication, information sharing, and knowledge expansion [3].

The term "online learning" was first introduced in 1995 with the development of WebCT, the first web-based Learning Management System (LMS), which later evolved into Blackboard [4]. Initially, online learning was defined as the use of LMS platforms or the uploading of learning materials, such as text and PDF files, to the internet. Over time, online learning evolved into a more dynamic and interactive approach that supported student-centered, flexible, and adaptive learning experiences. It involved synchronous and asynchronous activities delivered through internet-enabled devices, allowing learners to study and interact with instructors and peers regardless of location [5].

2.2. Benefits and limitations of online learning during the covid-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in widespread quarantines and lockdowns across the globe, transforming cities into near-empty spaces and significantly disrupting educational systems. Schools, colleges, and universities were forced to suspend face-to-face instruction, prompting an urgent shift toward online teaching and learning. As a result, online learning emerged as a necessary solution rather than an optional alternative. Institutions that were previously reluctant to adopt digital technologies were compelled to embrace online platforms, reinforcing the notion that “online learning is no longer an option; it is a necessity” [6].

Several benefits of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted in the literature. According to [7], online learning enabled the continuity of education during crises, supported distance learning, and allowed teachers to monitor students’ engagement through audio and video features. Additionally, online platforms facilitated communication among students, particularly for those who lacked confidence in traditional classroom settings. Online lectures were often perceived as comfortable and accessible, and they encouraged students to become more independent and self-directed learners [7].

Despite these advantages, online learning presented notable limitations. Students often reported feelings of boredom and disengagement due to the lack of human interaction and real-time feedback. The absence of two-way communication, technical difficulties, and the predominantly theoretical nature of online materials hindered effective learning. Students also perceived the lack of community and unclear instructional objectives as major challenges in online environments [6]. Furthermore, [7] noted that lecturers experienced frustration due to limited feedback, reduced student attention, and disciplinary issues during online sessions.

2.3. Students’ motivation in online learning.

Research indicated that students generally viewed online learning as a complementary approach rather than a replacement for traditional face-to-face instruction. According to [8], students found prolonged screen time physically and mentally exhausting, which reduced their preference for fully online learning. Limited access to stable internet connections and adequate data plans also served as major external factors affecting students’ motivation and participation in virtual classrooms. Further studies suggested that face-to-face learning was perceived as more motivating than online education due to stronger interpersonal interactions. According to [9], students’ motivation in virtual learning environments was influenced by both external factors—such as teacher presence, peer interaction, learning organization, and course design—and internal factors, including satisfaction with course materials, communication needs, and self-determination. Similarly, [10] emphasized that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation played critical roles in online learning, with many students reporting self-motivation driven by curiosity, enjoyment, and the desire to acquire new knowledge. Interestingly, [10] also found that students’ motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic was influenced by external regulations, such as attendance requirements, and environmental factors, including access to learning facilities. These findings suggested that motivation in online learning was shaped by a complex interaction of personal and contextual elements.

2.4. Students’ interaction in online learning.

A lack of interaction between students and lecturers in online learning environments was identified as a major factor contributing to low academic performance [12]. Students frequently expressed dissatisfaction with limited lecturer–student and student–student interactions, which

negatively affected their learning outcomes and personal development. The absence of meaningful social interaction in virtual classrooms reduced students' engagement and sense of belonging. Studies by [12] further demonstrated a strong relationship between students' learning challenges, self-regulation difficulties, and the lack of academic social interaction in online learning environments. Students who lacked conventional academic relationships tended to experience greater difficulty in managing their learning processes and maintaining motivation in virtual settings.

2.5. Underlying Theories

2.5.1. Self-determination theory.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a well-established framework for understanding human motivation and personality in social contexts. It distinguishes between autonomous and controlled motivation and is grounded in research examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. According to [13], SDT explains motivation, well-being, and human needs within social environments. The theory posits three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals experience greater well-being, engagement, and motivation.

2.5.2. Motivation to learn.

Motivated learners are more capable of completing challenging learning tasks, demonstrating persistence, creativity, and active engagement in the learning process [14, 15]. Ryan and Deci [10] define intrinsic motivation as engaging in activities for inherent satisfaction, driven by interest, enjoyment, or personal challenge. In contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to performing activities to achieve external outcomes, such as rewards or compliance with requirements. Both forms of motivation play a crucial role in shaping students' learning behaviors.

2.5.3. Social presence theory.

Social Presence Theory (SPT) was developed by [16] to explain interpersonal communication and relationship development through telecommunications technology. Social presence is defined as the degree to which individuals perceive others as real and present during interactions. This concept has been widely applied in online education to explain students' satisfaction and engagement in virtual learning environments. [17] was among the first to apply SPT in online distance education, demonstrating its relevance in explaining student satisfaction with group learning. Social presence is not merely perceived but can be intentionally cultivated through instructional design and communication strategies. It consists of three key components: cognitive presence, social presence, and affective presence [18]. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluates students' competencies in reading, mathematics, science, and global competence, emphasizing higher-order thinking skills such as critical analysis and reflection [13]. Reading literacy, a major focus of PISA assessments, requires not only comprehension but also evaluation of information credibility and accuracy [3, 14]. High-performing students demonstrate advanced cognitive abilities, underscoring the importance of fostering critical thinking and reflective skills to prepare learners for global competitiveness [15–18].

3. Methodology

The present study employed a descriptive case study methodology to provide a comprehensive and contextualized examination of strategies used to enhance student motivation and interaction in virtual ESL classrooms. A descriptive case study is designed to offer an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon within its real-life context. In this study, the approach was used to accurately portray how ESL lecturers improved student motivation and interaction in online learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic [19].

Three experienced ESL lecturers from a private university in Vietnam were purposively selected as participants. These lecturers possessed extensive experience in teaching English courses, which contributed to the depth and richness of the data collected. Their demographic characteristics, including gender, age, nationality, educational background, and teaching experience, are summarized in Table 1. The participants' diverse backgrounds and teaching experiences provided valuable perspectives on virtual ESL instruction.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Nationality	Educational Background	Teaching English Experience
Lecturer 1	Female	35	Philippine	Master's in Applied Linguistics	Over ten years
Lecturer 2	Female	34	Philippine	Master's in Applied Linguistics	Over ten years
Lecturer 3	Male	29	Vietnamese	Master's in Applied Linguistics	Six years

This methodological approach enabled a thorough exploration of instructional strategies employed by the lecturers to enhance student engagement and motivation in online learning environments. The case study design allowed for an in-depth analysis of real teaching practices, offering practical insights relevant to ESL educators and researchers. To systematically collect data, a combination of observation, interviews, and documentation was employed. The researchers conducted observations of the three ESL lecturers' instructional activities in Google Meet virtual classrooms. Although the researchers were present during the teaching and learning sessions, their role was limited to observation and the recording of detailed field notes. Documentation, including teaching materials and instructional records, was also collected to support and contextualize the observational data.

Following the observation and documentation phases, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating lecturers via Google Meet. These interviews aimed to explore the lecturers' experiences with online teaching and to gain deeper insights into the strategies they used to foster student motivation and interaction in virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study applied the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba. The use of multiple data collection methods and sources, observations, documentation, and interviews, served as a form of triangulation and helped reduce potential threats to credibility [20].

Confirmability was addressed by minimizing researcher bias through continuous data comparison, consultation with relevant literature to identify similar phenomena, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives [21]. In addition, rigorous cross-checking of data was conducted throughout the analysis process [22]. This systematic and reflective approach ensured that the findings were robust, reliable, and grounded in the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of how ESL lecturers foster student engagement and motivation in virtual learning environments.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings in relation to the two research questions, focusing on the challenges faced by ESL lecturers in virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies adopted to enhance student interaction and motivation. With regard to the first research question, teaching ESL in an online environment was perceived as particularly challenging by all three participating lecturers. English language teaching requires close attention to multiple language skills, which becomes more complex in virtual settings. The major challenges identified through interviews and classroom observations included interrupted internet connections, students' lack of self-motivation and increased distraction, limited teaching activities, and the need for extended student support. These challenges are summarized in Figure 1, which illustrates the main difficulties encountered by ESL lecturers in virtual classrooms.

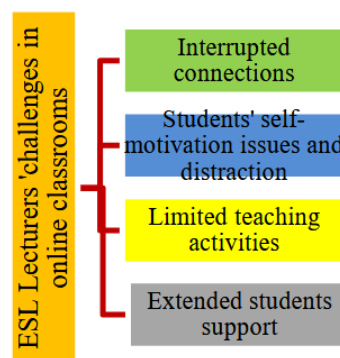


Figure 1. Major challenges to ESL lecturers in the virtual classroom.

Interrupted internet connectivity emerged as one of the most significant barriers to effective online teaching. All three lecturers reported frequent disruptions due to unstable internet connections, which affected both instructors and students. During observations, students were often seen using the Google Meet chat box to communicate when they could not hear instructions clearly. Such disruptions negatively influenced lecturer–student interaction and sometimes resulted in students missing important instructions. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting connectivity issues as a major obstacle to online learning [12, 13].

Another major challenge reported by the lecturers was students' lack of motivation and increased distraction during online classes. Although attendance was compulsory, students often disengaged after checking in, particularly when attending classes from home. Lecturer 2 explained that some students attended classes from their beds, leading to reduced attentiveness. Observations of Lecturer 3's classes further revealed that some students failed to respond when called upon, indicating passive participation. These findings align with earlier studies suggesting that students are often reluctant to actively participate in online learning environments, especially on public platforms [23, 24]. Moreover, the absence of visual presence, such as students turning off their cameras or not attending sessions at all, hindered the development of social and affective connections in virtual classrooms.

Limited teaching activities also posed a substantial challenge. Despite their extensive teaching experience, the lecturers found it difficult to implement interactive activities that were effective in face-to-face classrooms. Lecturer 1, for instance, explained that many activities she

had successfully used over her years of teaching had to be adapted or abandoned in the online setting. Although online tools such as Kahoot and Bamboozle were used to engage students, their effectiveness diminished over time as students became familiar with the formats. Similarly, Lecturer 3 noted that although he was enthusiastic about incorporating gamification, the impact of such activities was reduced in virtual classes.

The final challenge identified was the increased demand for student support beyond scheduled class hours. Lecturers reported that students, particularly first-year learners, required substantial additional guidance due to difficulties understanding course content in online settings. As a result, lecturers spent considerable time responding to students' questions outside class hours, which increased their workload and added pressure. Overall, despite their professional experience, the lecturers found virtual ESL teaching more demanding than traditional classroom instruction due to student disengagement, limited activity options, and increased instructional responsibilities.

In response to the second research question, the findings revealed several strategies employed by the lecturers to improve student interaction and motivation in virtual ESL classrooms. One key strategy emphasized by all three lecturers was providing clear and explicit instructions. Lecturer 2 highlighted the importance of checking students' understanding by asking follow-up questions and demonstrating tasks before beginning activities. Written instructions were also included in presentation slides to support verbal explanations. Similarly, Lecturer 1 shared that she distributed screenshots of instructions via Facebook Messenger to ensure students fully understood the tasks.

In addition, lecturers utilized various features of the Google Meet platform to monitor student engagement. For example, asking students to use the "raise hand" function helped lecturers identify inattentive or absent students. Lecturer 3 further enhanced communication by creating a Zalo group, which allowed him to quickly relay instructions and updates to students who experienced connectivity issues. These alternative communication channels helped maintain continuity in learning and improved lecturer–student interaction. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that expanding communication beyond formal online platforms can enhance student engagement [25].

Collaborative learning activities were another important strategy identified in this study. Lecturer 2 organized students into fixed groups and required them to create their own Google Meet links for group work. This approach enabled closer monitoring and facilitated interaction during collaborative tasks. Lecturer 1, on the other hand, emphasized the effectiveness of breakout rooms and open-pair discussions when appropriately managed. Observations confirmed that students appeared more comfortable and engaged when working in smaller groups, whether in breakout rooms or separate online meeting spaces. These findings support earlier studies emphasizing the value of collaboration in fostering engagement, trust, and peer support in online learning environments [26].

However, the lecturers also acknowledged that not all students preferred collaborative learning. Lecturer 3 noted that some students favored independent learning styles, relying more on reading and reflection. Consequently, lecturers stressed the importance of accommodating diverse learning preferences by providing clear instructions, structured timelines, progress monitoring, and individual accountability within group tasks. These practices align with recommendations from previous studies on effective online collaboration [27, 28].

Gamification and physical activities were also widely used to enhance motivation. Lecturer 1 frequently incorporated online games such as Kahoot, Bamboozle, Blooket, and Wordwall to energize her classes and encourage participation. She also implemented participation rules, such as calling students' names and awarding or deducting points, to maintain engagement. Lecturer 3 integrated games and competitions throughout his lessons, using activities like Word Chain and Hidden Objects to sustain student interest. In contrast, Lecturer 2 preferred incorporating physical movements, such as standing or jumping, to regain students' attention without requiring verbal participation. Despite differences in approach, all lecturers agreed that varying activities and maintaining an interactive pace were essential for sustaining motivation in virtual classes.

Overall, the findings indicate that clear instructional guidance, effective use of collaborative tasks, and creative engagement strategies such as gamification played a critical role in enhancing student interaction and motivation in virtual ESL classrooms. These strategies are summarized in Figure 2.

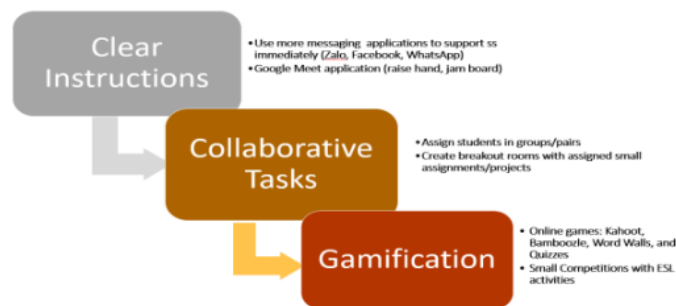


Figure 2. Suggested Strategies to Enhance ESL Students' Motivation and Interaction.

5. Conclusions

In light of the numerous obstacles ESL lecturers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study provided a critical examination of the challenges and offered practical recommendations for enhancing ESL instruction in virtual classrooms. The research highlighted the major difficulties encountered, including connectivity issues, reduced student engagement, limited interactive activities, and the need for extended support outside class hours. Firstly, ESL teachers should provide students with transparent and explicit instructions. Clear guidance enhanced students' understanding of tasks and promoted active participation in class activities. Flexibility in instructional methods was also crucial; teachers were encouraged to utilize alternative communication channels, such as Facebook Messenger, Zalo, or WhatsApp, to maintain immediate interaction with students who experienced connectivity issues during online sessions. Secondly, teachers effectively incorporated collaborative tasks that allowed small groups of students to discuss and share ideas comfortably. This approach fostered a more interactive and engaging learning environment, encouraged peer support, and built students' confidence in expressing their thoughts. Finally, designing teaching activities as games or competitions made lessons more enjoyable and appealing, thereby increasing student participation and motivation. Gamification and creative engagement strategies sustained attention, stimulated healthy competition, and created a dynamic learning experience. By improving students' positive attitudes, enthusiasm, and engagement, these strategies strengthened teacher–student relationships and promoted emotional involvement in the

learning process. Consequently, despite the inherent challenges of virtual classes, the teaching and learning experience became both more effective and rewarding.

Author Contribution

Le Ha Van conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. The author reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Le Ha Van, upon reasonable request.

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