




# Online remote ESL education challenges, opportunities and readiness among high school students during school closure

Lois Gwyn Peter , Adelina Asmawi

*Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education,  
Universiti Malaya, MALAYSIA  
50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b> Received: Mar 8, 2023 Revised: Mar 18, 2023 &amp; May 11, 2023 Accepted: June 10, 2023</p>	<p>The COVID-19 outbreak caused mass school closure, pushing teachers and students into online remote education and forcing them to adapt to unfamiliar pedagogical norms. Drawing on Koole’s (2009) Framework for the Rational Analysis of Mobile Education (FRAME) model, this study explored the challenges and opportunities of online remote ESL learning as experienced by four selected high school students from urban and rural Sarawak, Malaysia. It also explored the extent of their readiness for online remote ESL education one year into school closure. This study employed a multiple case study approach which included observations, document analysis and in-depth interviews of participants from multiple demographic categories. Findings discovered challenges that affected the students’ online remote ESL learning experience included the teacher’s physical absence, lack of engagement during lessons and unfavourable learning conditions. Online remote ESL learning also presented students with educational opportunities, particularly independent learning, online social learning and skills development. Findings suggested that urban students were ready, capable and equipped for online remote ESL learning whereas rural students were not as urban students had better digital resources, higher digital competency, sturdier support system, robust modes of instruction for online remote English lessons and higher language proficiency. This study concluded that individual characteristics of students, digital resources, language proficiency and appropriate learning environments play essential roles in supporting online remote ESL learning. Therefore, this study holds a significant implication for ESL education and the construct of Koole’s FRAME as it validates that when aspects related to the learner, device and social interactions in online remote learning are fulfilled, it can result in an ideal online remote learning experience.</p>
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<p><b>Correspondence:</b> Lois Gwyn Peter, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, MALAYSIA <a href="mailto:loisgwynpeter96@gmail.com">loisgwynpeter96@gmail.com</a></p>	

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**English** education had taken a huge hit after the pandemic struck and forced mass school shutdowns. Hassan et al. (2021) stated that students must focus on learning basic skills of language acquisition, as well as digital skills as ESL education shifted to web-based learning due to safety concerns. Despite various challenges faced during the abrupt switch to virtual modes of learning, it was found that online learning was able to encourage collaborative, independent and flexible learning, and develop ICT competence (Hassan et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, the COVID-19 pandemic caused mass quandary as the Ministry of Education made back-and-forth decisions to close and reopen schools throughout 2020 and 2021 due to spikes in cases. Students had experienced major setbacks as a result of school closure especially when English, a mandatory subject for school students, could not be taught in its previous instructional normalcy.

In the state of Sarawak, telecommunications coverage is present throughout most of the region. However, internet coverage is still very limited and some regions are not equipped with access to basic infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. During the nationwide lockdown, news of students from the rural district of Lubok Antu went viral when they had to take 3-hour hikes to gain Internet access following school closure. A university student who camped atop a tree in the Bornean rainforest just to access the Internet and download assignments also made headlines across the country. This sadly reflects the plights of underprivileged students in Malaysia who could not cope with online learning. Hence, this study investigates the challenges and opportunities faced by high school students as well as perceived readiness for online remote ESL learning a year into school closure.

Online remote learning had not been previously practised in Malaysian schools. However, the pandemic forced Malaysia to implement this method as an alternative to physical classes during nationwide closure of schools. That said, online remote education should be acknowledged as a feasible solution for whenever physical classes are impossible (Joshi, et. al, 2020). This becomes more crucial as past studies have proven influenza-related pandemics occur every 1 to 3 decades (Morganstein, et. al, 2017). Although we have become better-prepared for pandemics over the years, we cannot always prevent them from happening and may only anticipate, detect and respond as they occur (Marín-Hernandez, et. al, 2021). In response to the outbreak, countries saw online remote education as the best solution to school closure, despite its many difficulties of execution (Hosseini-Mohand, et. al, 2021; Lau & Lee, 2020; Teymori & Fardin, 2020). Thus, the pandemic highlighted that there is a need to find sustainable educational solutions for times of crises.

ESL education had shown a significant progress in innovative pedagogical practices due to school closure (Mahapatra, 2021). Many countries were able to move their education online through numerous online platforms, thus restoring some form of normality among students. Despite that, the world and our education systems were still unprepared to handle crises of this scale (Nomura et. al, 2021; Lai & Widmar, 2020). Worse, school closure during the pandemic further aggravated the digital gap between learners of low-income and high-income households. Therefore, students of varying backgrounds, geographical locations and socioeconomic statuses suffered different challenges from online remote education. As the crisis brought on negative and positive implications to Malaysian education sectors and the teaching and learning process in schools, the study of such a topic may help schools and educational institutions become better prepared for management, primarily of teaching and learning, during times of crises in the future.

The significance of this study emerged from the educational issues we face today stemming from the pandemic. Jin et. al (2021) found despite online learning methods increasing in practice during COVID-19, its actual effectiveness and potential had not been reached. There are few studies exploring how online remote ESL education has been adapted since COVID-19 forced school closure worldwide. In order to equip ourselves with relevant knowledge to embrace similar situations in the future, we must first understand and look closely into issues in ESL education experienced during school closure amidst COVID-19. Thus, this study explores the different challenges and opportunities presented by online remote language learning for ESL students of various backgrounds. It may help the Education Ministry and policymakers to explore complexities of online remote ESL education in a time of crisis, assess their preparedness for it and implement appropriate strategies to improve issues related to online remote ESL education during school closure.

Findings are confined to a four case study sample of two students from urban high schools and two students from rural high schools. Their participations were selected based on their individual backgrounds, socioeconomic status and geolocation. In any type of case study, findings can never be generalised to a population (Verleye, 2019). In fact, Polit and Beck (2010) believed that extrapolation in qualitative case studies are always rooted within a context. Therefore, valuable findings of this study are not for the purpose of generalizing to the entire population of high school students in Sarawak, Malaysia. Research boundaries were set by exploring online remote ESL learning experiences of the students throughout the Malaysian school closure period in the final quarter of 2021, over a year since the pandemic mandated school closure. Thus, findings reflect the online remote English

learning challenges, opportunities and perceived readiness of four selected students during school closure within that specific time period.

Drawing on the construct of Koole's (2009) Framework for the Rational Analysis of Mobile Education (FRAME) model, the study aims address these questions:

- 1) What are the online remote ESL learning challenges faced by selected high school students of urban and rural Sarawak while engaging in online remote ESL learning during school closure?
- 2) How does online remote ESL learn present educational opportunities to the students? and
- 3) To what extent are Sarawakian high school students prepared for online remote ESL learning after a year of school closure?

FRAME posits effective mobile learning (m-learning) allows learners to move within physical and virtual locations to interact with other people, information or systems, and is not hindered by time and space (Koole, 2009). The ideal m-learning experienced is shaped by individual and converging aspects, including device (D), learner (L) and social (S).

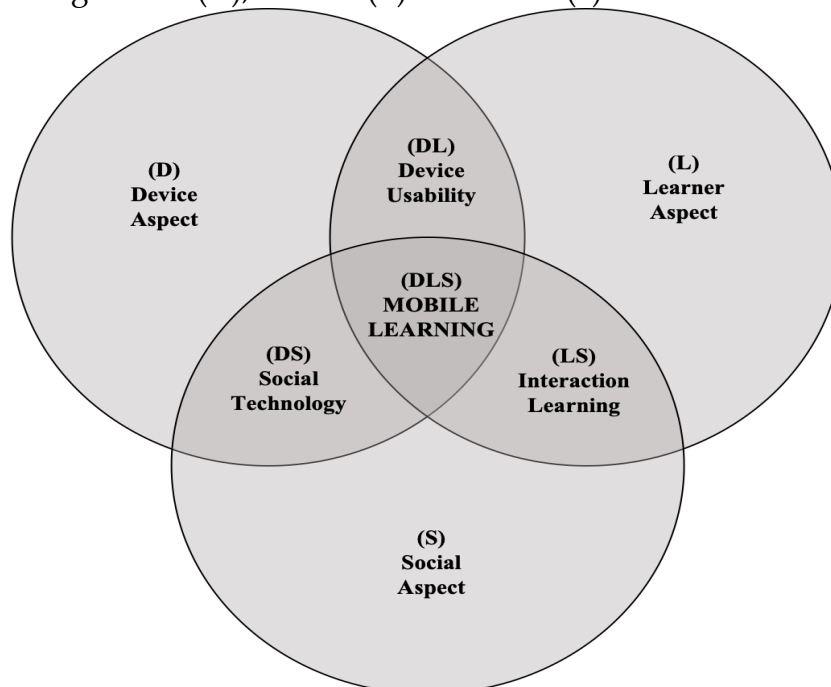


Figure 1. The FRAME Model as Conceptual Framework of this study

The device (D) aspect of the model comprises physical components, technical and functional attributes of a mobile device (Koole et. Al, 2018). In the context of this study, D encompasses all technological tools used by the students for their online remote ESL classes. The learner (L) aspect pertains to users' cognitive capacity, previous knowledge, memory, individual values,

emotions and motivations (Koole et. Al, 2010). Device intersects with Learner to form device usability (DL). For this study, DL comprises mobility of a learning tool, accessibility and availability of information, psychological comforts while using the device and users' satisfaction towards the device. The social (S) aspect encompasses the users' social interactions and cooperation during ESL learning. Social combines with Device to create social technology (DS). In this study, it involves device networking, system connectivity and digital platforms used for collaboration. Meanwhile, Social and Learner integrate to form interaction learning (LS). In this context, LS covers student-teacher and student-student communication, support within their community and authenticity of class activities. The Mobile Learning Process (DLS) is the backbone of the FRAME model. It integrates all three aspects, device (D), learner (L) and social (S), and includes all characteristics of all intersected aspects.

Although FRAME model is a construct for ideal m-learning, differences between m-learning and online remote learning will not affect the viewpoint of this model in this study. Ozdamli and Cavus (2011) defined m-learning as an educational process whereby learners acquire learning materials via mobile technology and Internet network, regardless of time and place. Meanwhile, Firdoussi et. al (2020) describe remote learning as the use of alternative educational methods outside the traditional classroom. Ozmaden and Yildiz (2020) further explain that remote education occurs regardless of the time and place and generally assisted by electronic communication tools. Hence, remote learning during COVID-19 is correlated with m-learning.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study utilised a multiple case study since research questions rely on the experience and perceptions of participants. As they came from different backgrounds, the online remote ESL learning experiences during school closure were unique to each individual. Employing a case study approach allowed in-depth investigation of participants' individual experiences. This could not be considered a case without the context: online remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As summarized by Griffiee (2012), case studies are beneficial for education-related research as they are particularly good at answering "why", "how" and "what" questions, explore realities, recognize complexities in social truths and form descriptive materials for interpretation. A multiple case study approach was able to accommodate the need for this present study, which was to inform policymakers, educators and major stakeholders in education about the various challenges, opportunities

and readiness of selected students from Sarawak for online remote ESL education.

For this study, the online remote ESL learning experiences from the perspective of high school students of distinctly different backgrounds in rural and urban Sarawak were investigated from November 2021 to February 2022. The selection of participants was based on criterion sampling, which is a type of purposive sampling. This process involved selecting different participants who share at least one predetermined criterion of significance (Suri, 2011). Participants were high school students who underwent online remote ESL learning during the pandemic, but differed in geolocation, school and socioeconomic backgrounds. Since the participants were students and unemployed, the researchers took into consideration their parents' education status and occupation as markers for their socioeconomic status. Participants' household incomes were not included as a measurement of their socioeconomic status as they were private information undisclosed by their parents. All four participants were lower high school students aged between 13 to 15 years. The locality of their schools, where they lived (either rural or urban) and their socioeconomic background, ranging from low-, middle- and high-income households were criteria for their selection. Details of selected participants are summarised in the following table.

**Table 1. Details of Selected Participants**

Case No.	Community	School	Socioeconomic background	Pseudonym
1	Urban	Urban	Affluent	Diana
2	Urban	Urban	Middle class	Ezra
3	Rural	Rural	Poor	Robin
4	Rural	Rural	Middle class	Noah

### **Instruments and Procedures**

Observation, document analysis and focus-group interview were methods to collect data. The researchers first carried out observation of the online classes as participant observers by attending the classes as they were conducted. Private documents, such as homework or tasks given during or after their online remote classes were used as supporting evidence to the observation field notes and statements made by participants. Focus group interviews were conducted among participants to establish their respective backgrounds, personal experience with online remote ESL learning throughout the pandemic, general views on the issue and their perceived readiness for online remote ESL learning during school closure. Two separate focus-group

interviews were conducted: one with urban participants and one with rural participants. These were conducted to produce a comfortable and less intimidating environment for the young participants, allow them to speak more freely, and reduce their shyness when answering questions. In another attempt to ensure trustworthiness of data through statements made by the participants, the researcher collected additional or corroborating information from sources close to the participants, such as their parents, family members or teachers.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

After data from observations, documentation and interviews were collected, the researchers referred to the FRAME model to analyse and compare information, and draw conclusions.

In identifying information that could be used as data, the researchers looked closely into the way students struggled with online remote ESL learning and the skills they exhibited during their online remote ESL lessons. From the raw data, the researchers formed three categories which included their issues, educational opportunities, and perceived readiness for online remote ESL learning. After immersing in the data, the researchers were able to identify themes for each category before coding the data.

**Table 2. Coding of the Online Remote ESL Education Challenges, Opportunities and Readiness among High School Students in Sarawak**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
<b>Category 1: Online remote ESL learning challenges</b>	
<b>Teacher's physical absence</b>	Students' negligence due to teacher's physical absence, difficulty maintaining focus, lack of guidance, lack of supervision.
<b>Lack of engagement in class</b>	Boredom from teacher-centric and repetitive approach in class, unenthusiasm, lack of interest to engage
<b>Unfavourable learning conditions</b>	Teacher's poor digital literacy and home environment, poor digital resources and lack of support, weak Internet network.
<b>Category 2: Education opportunities presented by online remote ESL learning</b>	
<b>Independent Learning</b>	Student responsibility, self-reliance.
<b>Online social learning</b>	Online discussions, active discussion among peers, online interactions for learning purposes.

Themes	Subthemes
Skills development	Sharpen ICT skills, improved digital literacy, using the Internet to aid learning.
<b>Category 3: Readiness for online remote ESL learning</b>	
Student readiness	Capable and equipped, less capable and ill-equipped

## FINDINGS

### Case 1: Diana (Urban, Affluent)

#### ESL Education Challenges

There were two challenges established from Diana's online remote ESL learning experience. First of all, Diana struggled with the physical absence of her teacher during her online remote classes. The physical separation between teacher and students became an obstacle for Diana's teacher to properly exercise classroom management and control, which in turn caused her to lack concentration in class. Apart from that, she also grew negligent of online remote English classes as the lack of engaging activities failed to pique her interest. As a result, two aspects of the FRAME model, such as interaction learning (LS) and learner (L) were not fully met.

#### ESL Education Opportunities

Online remote ESL learning has also presented Diana with several educational opportunities. Among them were independent learning habits, where she completed class work assigned to her and carried out revision independently. Despite the lack of concentration during class, her responsibility in completing class work was consistent to the learner (L) aspect. Additionally, online remote ESL learning enabled her to participate in online discussions among friends. This allowed her to socially interact and exchange ideas and information simultaneously. This indicated that the interaction learning (LS) aspect was enabled during her online remote ESL learning experience. Her ability to use tools such as Whatsapp, Google Meet and Discord to discuss answers with peers implied that the social technology (DS) aspect was also met. Simultaneously, she was able to improve her ICT skills from frequently attending online remote ESL classes. In other words, she was able to navigate online websites and applications appropriately, develop information management skills and hone critical thinking skills when searching for information online. This highlighted that the device usability (DL) aspect, which encompassed Diana's learnability to use learning tools, was fulfilled. Although Diana's educational opportunities presented by online remote ESL learning showed certain features of interaction learning



(LS) and device usability (DL) aspects being met, these aspects were only partially met, as she still struggled with the physical absence of her teacher and a lack of interest in the lessons, which are also characteristics that fall under those aspects.

### **ESL Education Readiness**

Diana's case indicated that she was ready and equipped for online remote learning. Firstly, she possessed positive traits that would enable her to cope with online remote learning long-term. She was disciplined and independent, and was aware of her student responsibility by completing the homework assigned to her despite her lack of concentration. Furthermore, she was equipped with digital devices that could aid her online remote ESL education, such as a laptop, computers, tablet and smartphone. She also possessed a strong Internet connection. Thirdly, Diana was immersed in a community that supported and aided her learning experience, as she had peers to actively discuss answers with, a teacher who answered students' queries online and in class, and a mother who provided assistance when needed. These factors indicated that several aspects of the FRAME Model had been met in order for Diana to be perceived as ready, competent and equipped for online remote ESL learning, which included the learner (L), device (D), social technology (DS) and interaction learning (LS) aspects.

### **Case 2: Ezra (Urban, Middle Class)**

#### **ESL Education Challenges**

Ezra faced three challenges throughout his online remote English learning, including the lack of his teacher's authoritative presence in class, poor engagement in class activities and disruptive learning conditions. First of all, he struggled with the physical absence of his teacher during the online remote English lessons. The lack of supervision from his teacher caused difficulty in focusing his attention on his online remote lessons, which eventually led him to procrastinate in completing his English exercises. As the interaction learning (LS) aspect encompasses student-teacher interaction and how it affects students' learning in the classroom, his teacher's inability to monitor him during lessons demonstrates how this aspect was affected. Secondly, Ezra grappled with engaging more in class, as the topics did not kindle his interest, the class activities were recurrent and the attendance among his classmates was generally poor. This indicated that the device usability (DL) and social (S) aspects in his online remote ESL learning were unfulfilled, as Ezra grew bored of lessons and struggled to participate in class activities. Ezra also faced disruptive learning conditions such as his teacher's poor digital literacy and the occasional network and audio disruptions during online class, which impacted his online remote English lessons. This shows both device usability

(DL) and social technology (DS) aspects during online classes were not achieved because the means of teaching and psychological comforts of the student were affected by these inconveniences.

### **ESL Education Opportunities**

Online remote ESL learning presented Ezra with several educational opportunities. For instance, he developed student independence as a result of online remote English classes. Although his attention was not fully invested in ongoing online remote classes, he still practiced student responsibility in completing all the class tasks assigned to him by his teacher. Consequently, he always submitted his assignments on time and had no disciplinary issues in that regard. This shows that the learner (L) aspect of his online remote learning experience was at least partially reached, because although he was frequently inattentive during online remote English classes, he still fulfilled his duties as a student. Another benefit of online remote ESL learning for Ezra was social learning. For Ezra's case, the social learning mainly occurred beyond online remote English classes. He regularly used Discord after class to discuss answers and class tasks with his classmates, and communicated with his teacher using Whatsapp and Google Meet. These interactions between Ezra and his peers occurred beyond their English classes as they enjoyed discussing and exchanging ideas to complete their online remote class tasks. This showed that both the interaction learning (LS) and social technology (DS) aspects had been achieved. Other than that, Ezra was able to refine his digital skills thanks to online remote English learning. Within a year, he was able to grasp various functions of Google Meet and Google Classroom, and used different online resources to complete his online exercises. His ability to navigate different online platforms to aid his learning process showed the learnability characteristic in his device usability (DL) aspect had been met. Despite struggling with his teacher's lack of digital literacy, which also falls under the device usability (DL) category, his own digital competence aided him in learning through online discussions with friends and information-searching using online resources.

### **ESL Education Readiness**

Ezra's case implied that he was capable and equipped for online remote ESL learning. To begin with, Ezra already possessed several digital devices that could support his online remote English learning, which included three computers, a laptop, smartphone and good Wi-Fi connection. Furthermore, he was digitally literate before the pandemic struck, which allowed him to navigate different online platforms for education purposes with ease. At the same time, Ezra had extensive support from his peers when it came to discussing his online class tasks. Despite his lack of interest in the lessons,

Ezra was well-aware of his duties as a student. This, in turn, helped him to complete and submit class tasks assigned by his teacher within the specified deadline. In short, these factors indicate that five aspects of the FRAME model were present in his online remote ESL learning experience, which are device (D), learner (L), device usability (DL), social technology (DS) and interaction learning (LS).

### **Case 3: Robin (Rural, Poor) ESL Education Challenges**

Robin's challenges with online remote ESL learning can be divided into three: teacher's physical absence, lack of engagement, and unfavourable learning conditions. Firstly, the physical absence of his teacher made it difficult for him to cope with lessons without her guidance, since he had poor English proficiency. As his teacher was only available through messages sent via Whatsapp, and not through synchronous conversation carried out on virtual classroom platforms, this further aggravated his struggles. Furthermore, since the teacher was unable to maintain physical control of her students, Robin often slept through his online remote English classes and procrastinated doing his homework. Secondly, Robin struggled with a lack of engagement in his lessons. The asynchronous nature of his online remote ESL classes rendered it difficult for him to engage with his classmates as they did not attend classes at the same time. Consequently, Robin did not respond much to his teacher's prompts or actively participate in the class Whatsapp group. This indicated that the social (S) and interaction learning (LS) aspects of Robin's online remote ESL learning were unfulfilled, as there was a lack of interaction between Robin and his teacher as well as Robin and his peers. Additionally, Robin struggled with online remote English learning due to unfavourable learning conditions, which included limited digital resources to support his online remote English learning and insufficient support from the environment where he lives. The poor Internet network and the sole use of one phone to support his online remote English lessons showed flaws in the device (D) aspect. Although using mobile phones for online education allows ubiquitous computing, it is ultimately inferior to computers in terms of technological functionality and ergonomics (Ferri et al., 2020). Meanwhile, his parents' inability to assist him due to their similarly poor English proficiency and the lack of support from his community highlighted flaws in the interaction learning (LS) aspect of his online remote learning.

### **ESL Education Opportunities**

Robin was exposed to several opportunities thanks to online remote English learning during school closure. For one, he developed independent learning habits. Although he often procrastinated regularly completing his English

homework, he adapted to his asynchronous online remote ESL classes by searching up information on the Internet independently and reaching out for help whenever necessary in order to complete his class tasks within the deadline. Consequently, he was able to grow as a responsible and independent learner. Despite his lack of enthusiasm in his English lessons, his responsibility and independence at completing tasks assigned by his teacher indicated his learner (L) aspect was achieved. Next, Robin participated in online interactions for learning as a result of online remote ESL classes. Robin learned to use communication tools to aid his learning by asking for assistance from his teacher, family or friends when completing the class tasks assigned to him. His ability to communicate with others to assist him using Whatsapp showed that characteristics in the FRAME Model such as peer interaction in interaction learning (LS) and access to digital tools that enable collaboration in social technology (DS) were fulfilled. Apart from that, Robin developed basic ICT skills for learning from online remote English learning. Even though he had no prior experience using digital tools for learning, or even online English lessons, Robin had quickly adapted and sharpened his ICT skills for his online remote English classes. He was able to use Google Translate to aid his limited vocabulary, navigate English websites to complete online English quizzes and record himself for a speaking class activity. This highlighted that the device usability (DL) aspect of his online remote learning experience was met.

### **ESL Education Readiness**

Robin's case suggested that he was not fully capable and equipped for online remote ESL learning. Although Robin exhibited responsibility when it came to completing class tasks within the deadline, his procrastinating attitude and poor proficiency in the English language limited his learning process. This affected his engagement and interest in the online remote English lessons. At the same time, he lacked awareness on the importance of English language learning as he believed the community where he lived had no need for the language. Furthermore, he did not receive sufficient guidance or assistance from his teacher and parents to understand what was being taught or complete class exercises. Aside from that, he did not possess adequate digital materials to support his online remote ESL learning. He only relied on his handphone and limited Internet network to attend online remote classes and complete classwork. Although he was able to access Google Translate and Google Search to help him search for information, he frequently faced difficulty with the Internet connection at home. Therefore, these factors implied that four aspects of Robin's online remote English learning had not been met, which were learner (L), interaction learning (LS), device (D), and social technology (DS). To clarify, Robin's ability to use Whatsapp to attend

his online remote ESL lessons partially fulfilled the social technology (DS) aspect as it showed he possessed a digital tool that enabled collaboration. However, the poor Internet connection he experienced throughout his online remote ESL learning suggested that the device network and system connectivity characteristics from that same aspect were flawed. Therefore, Robin faced multiple obstacles which hindered his readiness for online remote ESL learning. This included his poor discipline, lack of interest in the English subject and awareness on its importance, inadequate support and guidance from teacher and parents as well as limited digital resources at home to support his online remote ESL learning.

#### **Case 4: Noah (Rural, Middle Class) ESL Education Challenges**

Noah's struggles with online remote ESL learning can be divided into three: teacher's physical absence, lack of engagement, and unfavourable learning conditions. Firstly, the physical absence of his teacher made it difficult for him to cope with online remote English lessons. Since there was nobody to monitor him at home as his parents worked during the pandemic, Noah was left to his own devices throughout his online remote English classes, which were conducted exclusively via Whatsapp. This caused him to become distracted, procrastinate and carry out class tasks cursorily, indicating that the learner (L) and interaction learning (LS) aspects had not been met. Secondly, Noah found difficulty engaging in lessons due to the asynchronous nature of his online remote English lessons which did not require him to attend the classes simultaneously or have live conversations with his teacher and classmates. The repetitive pattern of class activities also led him to lose interest in the lessons conducted by his teacher. This disengagement from lessons reflected that the social (S) and interaction learning (LS) aspects were not fulfilled, as his interactions between peers and with his teacher was affected. Thirdly, Noah struggled to cope with his online remote English lessons due to the limited digital devices available to him. He only depended on his smartphone and unstable Wi-Fi connection to attend his online remote English lessons. This affected the submission of his class work, restricted his ICT literacy and made him prone to distraction and procrastination, which showed that the device (D) and social technology (DS) aspects of his online remote ESL learning were compromised.

#### **ESL Education Opportunities**

Online remote ESL learning also provided Noah with several opportunities. For one, he developed independent learning skills throughout his online remote English learning. Despite his struggles, he completed class tasks within the given timeframe and exhibited awareness of his responsibilities as

a student. Despite the lack of discipline in completing class tasks immediately, his attitude in independently completing all the work within the deadline set by his teacher indicated that his learner (L) aspect was at least partially fulfilled. In addition to that, Noah's lessons also allowed him to participate in online interactions for learning. As his lessons were conducted completely via Whatsapp, it became the platform for teacher-student and student-student interactions. Noah used Whatsapp to share ideas with his friends about class work when asked. The collaborative learning effort between Noah and his friends highlighted the interaction learning (LS) aspect of his online remote learning experience. Despite the intermittent Internet connection, his online interactions carried out with friends showed that the social technology (DS) aspect was also met. Thirdly, online remote ESL learning enabled Noah to acquire basic digital skills for English learning and revision. Since his online remote lessons relied on Whatsapp, Noah learned to use different features in the application to aid his learning. He also carried out English revision by going through documents, audio, links and media on Whatsapp, as well as Youtube and educational television programmes. Noah's learnability using different online, digital applications for English learning demonstrated his device usability (DL) aspect was achieved.

### **ESL Education Readiness**

Ultimately, Noah's case suggested that he was not prepared for online remote ESL learning. Even though he was independent and responsible in completing class exercises on time, he exhibited a lack of interest and possessed limited digital resources to cope with online remote ESL learning. He often procrastinated doing the English exercises and rushed through his work so he could have more time to play mobile games instead. He also hardly participated in their Whatsapp class group and often got away with the procrastination due to the asynchronous nature of their online remote ESL lessons. Additionally, he depended only on his handphone and unstable Wi-Fi connection to attend his online remote English classes, which frequently disrupted his ability to attend lessons and submit class work. Despite advancements in mobile technology, Rouadi and Anouti (2020) found that students and teachers prefer to have access to more than one digital tool to support online remote ESL education as they feel it is more convenient for them. In interviews, Noah, his father and his teacher agreed that it was difficult for him to cope with online remote ESL learning without proper access to digital tools necessary for online remote learning to occur. This indicated that the learner (L), device (D) and social technology (DS) aspects were compromised.

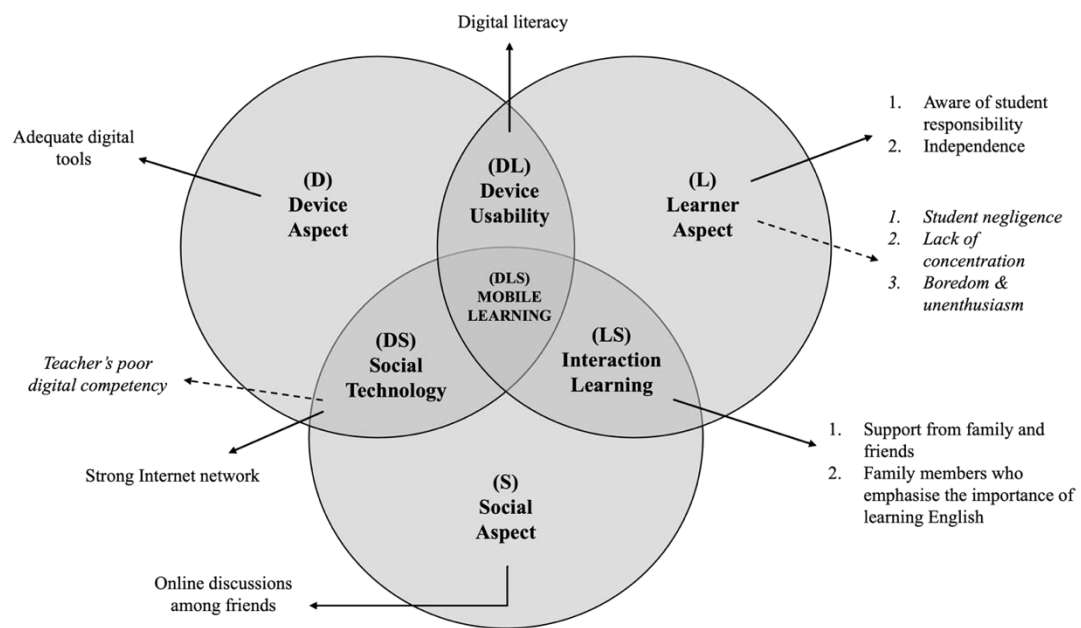
## **DISCUSSION**

The study found that the students encountered several challenges throughout their online remote ESL education. These challenges are divided into three themes. First, both rural and urban students struggled with the physical absence of their English teachers during their online remote ESL classes. When a teacher cannot exercise physical control of student behaviour, it can lead to their neglect of responsibilities (Gurung, 2021). In addition to that, the students also struggled with the lack of engagement in the online remote ESL lessons. Student engagement may decline significantly when language lessons lack attention-grabbing and communicative elements which they are supposed to contain (Manolescu, 2021). On top of that, students were affected by unfavourable learning conditions such as teacher's poor digital literacy and home environment, limited digital resources and lack of support. Moral, technical, material and financial support are essential for the success of learning from home (Chand et al., 2021). This showed that several characteristics within the FRAME model aspects such as interaction learning (LS), device usability (DL), social (S), device (D) and social technology (DS) were compromised.

However, findings also indicated that online remote ESL learning had presented students with educational opportunities, which are split into three themes. The first opportunity brought upon by online remote ESL learning during school closure was the independent learning habits of students. The flexible nature of online remote learning allows students to perform independently since they are not constrained by place and time (Rahman, 2020). Next, online remote ESL learning encouraged online social learning among students. Online messaging applications are advantageous for online remote learning because they help students develop feelings of connectedness to learning (Mulyano et al., 2021). Finally, online remote ESL learning presented both urban and rural students with the opportunity to develop digital skills. The user-friendly and readily-accessible features of online platforms enabled students to participate, interact in scholastic discussions and acquire learning-related information (Mulyano, et al., 2021; Elly & Abd Karim, 2022). It is revealed that some characteristics of the learner (L), interaction learning (LS), social technology (DS) and device usability (DL) aspects of the FRAME model were fulfilled.

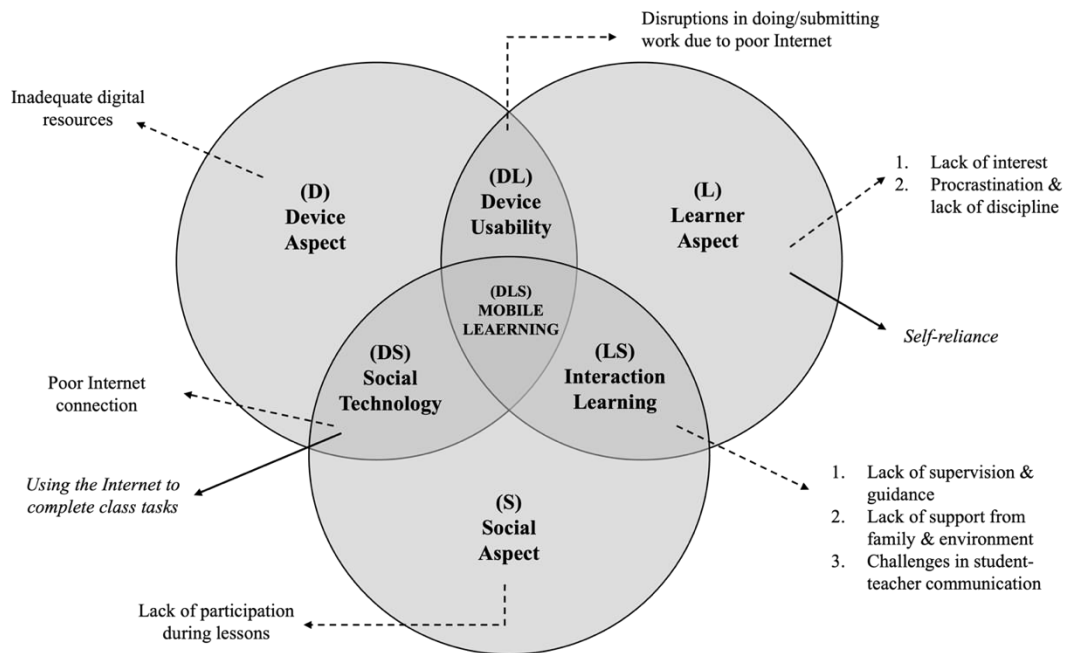
Last but not least, the study revealed that student readiness for online remote ESL learning varied between urban and rural students. By taking account of the resources available to each participant as suggested by Lau and Lee (2020) and the statements given by participants during interviews, the selected urban students from high and middle-income backgrounds were capable, competent and equipped for online remote ESL learning after a year into school closure. They had several advantages over their rural peers such

as more digital resources, a supportive learning environment, digital competence, better English proficiency and real-time virtual interactions that ultimately helped them better cope with online remote ESL education. Meanwhile, findings implied that the selected rural students from middle and low-income households were not fully capable or equipped for online remote ESL learning, even though over a year passed since school closure. They needed assistance in respect to stable Internet connectivity, digital devices, teacher guidance and supervision to exercise discipline, motivation and support to cope with online remote ESL education in the long run. Figures 2 and 3 break down the fulfilled and unfulfilled aspects in the FRAME Model which suggest the urban and rural participants' extent of readiness for online remote ESL education.



**Figure 2. Aspects of FRAME Model Suggesting the Extent of Readiness of Urban Participants**





**Figure 3. Aspects of FRAME Model Suggesting the Extent of Readiness of Rural Participants**

It was expected that each participant would demonstrate different ESL education challenges, opportunities and levels of readiness for online remote ESL education reflective of their socioeconomic backgrounds. While that was evident, findings also underlined some interesting points that embodied English language education during school closure. Despite the challenges students faced such as lack of interest, Internet connection, little guidance and support, limited digital resources, and language proficiency, they all developed self-reliant habits to complete the homework assigned to them. According to Shrestha et al. (2021), students lacking technological support for online learning often exhibited low attendance, motivations and academic performance. Yet, the rural student cases demonstrated independence and an awareness of their student responsibilities to complete and submit their classwork on time. Despite the apparent absence of interest and discipline, they carried out their duties by independently downloading lesson materials, doing online exercises and respecting the deadline. This highlights that students who do not display keenness for their ESL lessons may not be a lost cause, as they may still accomplish what is required of them. Although some students do not possess motivation to learn, they may still be able to make progress in learning (Bai et al., 2021). This implies that the learner (L) aspect is significant in producing a positive outcome for online remote ESL education and that individual student characteristics can affect their response towards online remote ESL learning. While the other aspects of the FRAME

model are also necessary, without the students' willingness to attend lessons or complete classwork as stated in the learner (L) aspect, the online remote ESL learning may not occur at all. Thus, teachers can do more to build on students' sense of responsibility and apply teaching approaches which can induce interest in ESL learning to boost the learning process.

To conclude, the findings highlighted that fulfilment and unfulfillment of aspects in the FRAME model play an essential role in the success of online remote ESL education. While the unfulfillment of several aspects may have negative consequences on the students' online remote ESL learning experience and vice versa, the extent of student readiness for online remote ESL education is still reliant on their individual experiences. The respective characteristics and values of each student can also affect their response towards online remote ESL learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined ESL education challenges, opportunities and student readiness for online remote ESL learning among selected rural and urban high school students in Sarawak during school closure. Findings showed that online remote ESL education was challenging for students due to teacher's physical absence, lack of engagement in lessons and unfavourable learning conditions. However, it also presented students with education opportunities such as independent learning habits, online social learning and skills development. Lastly, urban participants of this study were capable, competent and equipped for online remote ESL learning after a year into school closure. Meanwhile, the rural participants were less capable and ill-equipped for online remote ESL learning. The urban participants had better digital resources, supportive learning environment, digital competence, higher English proficiency and real-time virtual interactions which allowed them to cope with online remote ESL education long-term.

The fulfilment and unfulfillment of aspects in the FRAME model are vital in the success of online remote ESL education. Although the fulfilment of several aspects may have positive outcomes on the students' online remote ESL learning experience and vice versa, the extent of their readiness for online remote ESL education is still dependent on the learner's experiences combining all aspects relating to learners themselves, their learning device and social interactions.

For future studies on online remote ESL learning during a time of crisis, it is recommended that researchers observe participants for a more extensive period in order to fully comprehend the situation and individual experiences as faced by them. Researchers could also use a larger sample of participants in order to identify the challenges, opportunities and readiness of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to increase the generalizability of

the study. In addition, researchers may investigate the online remote ESL learning experiences of participants from an alternative age demographic, as this can lead to different challenges and opportunities that may reflect stark contrasts from the findings of this study. Apart from that, researchers may also consider investigating the challenges and opportunities of online remote ESL learning during other times of crisis, such as natural disasters or wars. Since past studies have proven that influenza-related pandemics occur every 10 to 30 years (Morganstein et al., 2017), research related to remote ESL education during times of crisis may be crucial for the development of ESL education. This may play an important role in our ability to anticipate, detect and respond effectively to ESL education issues brought upon by global crises (Marín-Hernandez, et. al, 2021).

As participants were high school students from urban and rural schools in Sarawak, it is hoped that this research may be beneficial to other schools and institutions in Malaysia in improving the quality of education, be it online remote learning or otherwise. This study is expected to provide a deeper understanding to students, educators, schools and future teachers on the challenges and opportunities of online remote ESL learning, as well as the extent of student readiness for it during school closure due to COVID-19. It also aims to shed light on the importance of access to education during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As a way to improve online remote ESL education experiences of students and teachers, especially during times of crisis such as a pandemic, the Ministry of Education and stakeholders should ensure that all schools are more prepared and equipped to provide students and teachers with accessible platforms and materials for teaching and learning regardless of time and place.

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#### **THE AUTHORS**

**Lois Gwyn Peter** obtained her Bachelor of Education (Hons.) in TESL from the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. She has taught English in several secondary and primary schools as well as private educational institutions around Malaysia between 2019 to 2022. She is now pursuing her Masters by Research degree at Universiti Malaya.

**Dr Adelina Asmawi** is a senior lecturer and former Head of Department (2018-2022) and Deputy Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya (2014-2017). As a researcher, she actively publishes in the areas of higher education, instructional technology, creative thinking, TESOL and professional development.