

University Students' Physical Well-being in Online English Language Learning: A Systematic Literature Review

Muhammad Nazif Aimaan Othman^{1*}, Nur Farhinaa Othman¹, Faten Khalida Khalid¹,
Nazifah Hamidun¹

¹ Faculty of Business and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis UniMAP, Jalan Alor Setar – Kangar ,
01000 Kangar, Perlis, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: nazifaimaan@unimap.edu.my

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Abstract: *With the increasing dominance of online education, the physical well-being of university students engaged in online English language learning has gained significant attention. This systematic literature review examines existing studies to explore the physical health implications of online English language learning in higher education. The review integrates research findings related to physical health challenges faced by university students, focusing on issues such as posture-related problems, eye strain, sedentary behaviour, sleep disturbances, and musculoskeletal discomfort. A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and other scholarly sources was conducted across multiple databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, and ERIC, to identify relevant studies published between 2010 and 2025. The review highlights key factors contributing to these physical health issues, such as prolonged screen time, improper ergonomic setups, and limited physical activity during online learning. Additionally, it examines the role of institutional support and intervention strategies aimed at toning down these health concerns. The findings suggest that while online English language learning offers flexibility and accessibility, it also poses significant physical health risks that require attention from educators, healthcare professionals, and university administrators. This review provides insights for improving student well-being in the digital learning environment.*

Keywords: physical well-being, online English language learning, university students

1. Introduction

The global shift toward online education has revolutionized the delivery of higher education, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawan, 2020). As institutions increasingly adopt digital platforms for language instruction, online English language learning has gained prominence due to its accessibility, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). However, alongside its pedagogical advantages, online learning environments have introduced a range of physical health challenges for students, many of which remain underexplored in the academic discourse.

University students engaged in online English language learning often experience extended periods of screen exposure, poor posture, and limited physical movement, which are factors that contribute to a growing concern over their physical well-being (Chang et al., 2021). Studies

have reported various physical issues, including eye strain, musculoskeletal discomfort, sleep disturbances, and the negative effects of sedentary lifestyles (Kemp & Grieve, 2014; Peper, Harvey, & Tylova, 2020). These health issues not only affect students' academic performance but may also lead to long-term consequences if not addressed adequately.

Despite the increasing recognition of the physical health implications associated with online learning, research specifically focused on online English language learners in higher education remains limited. The physical demands of language learning, particularly involving reading, writing, and speaking through digital media demand special consideration. Furthermore, ergonomic inadequacies, insufficient institutional support, and a lack of awareness regarding healthy online study habits exacerbate these issues (Li & Wang, 2022).

In view of these concerns, the purpose of this systematic literature review is to compile the body of empirical data regarding the physical health issues that university students enrolled in online English language courses encounter. This review aims to educate educators, university policymakers, and healthcare experts on ways to improve student well-being in digital learning environments by identifying frequent problems and looking at possible institutional responses.

2. Methodology

This review gathered and examined research on the effects of online English language instruction on university students' physical health that was published between 2010 and 2025. Keywords including "online learning," "English language learning," "physical health," "posture," "eye strain," and "sedentary behavior" were used to locate relevant studies using databases like PubMed, ERIC, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect. Only English-language research that addressed physical health problems brought on by online learning and had to do with higher education were considered. Articles that had nothing to do with learning English or that were solely about mental health were not included. In order to determine common health issues, potential causes, and recommended remedies, the chosen papers were examined.

3. Literature Review

Online education has become a central part of university life, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This transition has made learning more accessible and flexible, particularly for English language learners who can now study from anywhere (Dhawan, 2020). However, this shift has also introduced new challenges, especially concerning students' physical health.

One of the most frequently reported issues is eye strain, often called computer vision syndrome. It includes symptoms like dry eyes, blurred vision, and headaches, caused by long hours of screen exposure. Reddy et al. (2020) explain that improper lighting, screen glare, and poor blinking habits worsen these symptoms, which are common among students who attend virtual English lessons and spend hours reading and writing online.

Posture-related discomfort is another widespread problem. Many students do not have proper desks or chairs at home, leading them to study in beds, on floors, or couches. This can cause neck, back, and shoulder pain. Mohana and Kandukuri (2021) note that prolonged poor posture during online learning leads to musculoskeletal issues, particularly in the lower back and neck area.

Studies also highlight the increase in sedentary behaviour among online learners. In face-to-face classes, students often move between rooms or buildings. Online learners, however, may sit in the same position for hours, sometimes without breaks. Chang et al. (2021) and Kim, Park, and Choi (2020) found that this physical inactivity contributes to fatigue, muscle stiffness, and even long-term health concerns like obesity.

Sleep disturbances have been commonly reported in online learning settings. Students often attend classes across time zones or use devices late into the night, affecting their sleep cycles. Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021) found that irregular schedules and high screen exposure before bed contributed to reduced sleep quality and tiredness among university learners.

English language learners suffer hazards, even though physical health issues have been researched in general online learning. This is because language learning involves reading assignments, writing exercises, viewing videos, and interacting with people in real time, and it frequently necessitates extra screen time. Bhandari and Chopra (2021) highlight that this extra workload puts additional strain on the eyes, hands, and posture of language students.

Ergonomics plays a key role in preventing these issues. Students with access to adjustable chairs, supportive desks, and properly placed screens report fewer physical complaints. Li and Wang (2022) showed that ergonomic awareness is linked to reduced pain and improved comfort during online classes. However, not all students know how to set up an ergonomic workspace, and not all can afford the necessary equipment.

Institutions can also help by offering health-related guidance and support. Some universities provide videos or workshops on sitting posture, taking screen breaks, or setting up home workstations. Kemp and Grieve (2014) suggest that institutions should not only deliver content but also ensure that learners have the tools and knowledge to stay healthy while studying online.

The concept of “Zoom fatigue”, introduced by Peper, Harvey, and Tylova (2020), explains how constant video calls drain energy and affect both mental and physical health. Maintaining eye contact, focusing on multiple faces, and staying still for long periods all contribute to this exhaustion. English language learners, who often rely on verbal interaction, may face this more than others.

Even though these health problems are becoming more well recognized, additional research is required to concentrate on online English language learners. Few studies evaluate the effects of language acquisition tasks on physical well-being, even though many studies focus on general university students. Universities can create more focused solutions for this group with a deeper understanding.

In summary, the current literature shows that online English language learning, while flexible and efficient, brings several physical health risks. These include eye strain, posture problems, sedentary behaviour, and sleep issues. With proper ergonomics, institutional support, and better research, these challenges can be addressed to improve student well-being.

4. Findings and Discussion

The review of literature reveals that while online English language education offers significant flexibility and accessibility, it also introduces a range of physical health concerns for learners. Several key findings emerge from the current body of research:

4.1 Eye Strain and Visual Discomfort

Eye strain, which is sometimes categorized as computer vision syndrome, is one of the most frequently reported problems. Students taking online English courses frequently experience symptoms like headaches, blurred vision, and dry eyes. This is especially important for language learners who read, write, and watch videos on screens for extended periods of time. The causes, including screen glare, poor lighting, and inadequate blinking, were emphasized by Reddy et al. (2020), suggesting that English learners may be at a higher risk due to the nature of their tasks.

4.2 Poor Posture and Musculoskeletal Discomfort

The discomfort brought on by bad posture is another frequent observation. Many students study in positions that put pressure on their necks, shoulders, and backs because they lack ergonomically sound workplaces at home. As Mohana and Kandukuri (2021) argue, long hours of sitting without proper support can lead to musculoskeletal problems, particularly in the lower back and neck. These issues are likely intensified for language learners who spend prolonged periods seated while reading and typing.

4.3 Sedentary Lifestyle and Physical Inactivity

Sedentary behaviour has also increased because of the move to online learning. Online learners frequently stay still for long stretches of time, in contrast to traditional classrooms where students roam around. Studies by Chang et al. (2021) and Kim, Park, and Choi (2020) associate this inactivity with muscle stiffness, fatigue, and long-term health issues like obesity. This is a significant concern for English language learners who may need to engage in hours of focused, screen-based study sessions.

4.4 Sleep Disruptions and Irregular Schedules

Sleep disturbances have been noted among online learners due to irregular schedules and extended screen exposure, particularly late at night. Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021) found that such habits interfere with sleep quality. Language learners may be especially prone to sleep-related issues if they participate in international online programs or view lectures that have been taped at unusual hours.

4.5 Additional Screen Time for Language Learners

All online learners experience physical health issues, however as English language learners are required to listen, speak, and write on digital platforms, they seem to be more exposed than other language learners. Bhandari and Chopra (2021) highlight that this group endures a higher cognitive and physical workload, amplifying issues like eye strain and hand fatigue.

4.6 Role of Ergonomics in Mitigating Health Risks

Access to ergonomic equipment significantly reduces physical discomfort. As Li and Wang (2022) note, students with adjustable chairs and properly positioned screens experience fewer complaints. However, not every learner benefits equally due to differences in resources and knowledge. A lot of students might not know how to organize a healthy study area, and some might not have the money to do so.

4.7 Institutional Responsibility and Support

Institutions play a crucial role in mitigating physical health issues by providing ergonomic education and health resources. According to Kemp and Grieve (2014), universities should not only focus on academic delivery but also equip students with knowledge and tools to maintain their well-being. Some institutions have already begun implementing posture training videos and workspace setup guides, but these efforts remain limited and inconsistent.

4.8 Zoom Fatigue and Communication-Related Exhaustion

Since language acquisition mostly depends on verbal engagement and real-time feedback, English learners are particularly affected by the phenomena of "Zoom fatigue." Exhaustion becomes even worse by continuous video interaction, multitasking during calls, and the work necessary to sustain communication in a second language. Peper, Harvey, and Tylova (2020) highlight that this can lead to both physical fatigue and mental burnout.

In conclusion, while online English education increases access and convenience, it introduces significant physical health risks. These include visual strain, poor posture, physical inactivity, sleep issues, and communication fatigue. The results highlight the need for more focused research, institutional direction, and improved ergonomic support to meet the unique demands of English language learners. By addressing these issues, online learning for this population can become more sustainable and effective generally.

5. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the growing body of research on the physical health impacts of online education, several important gaps remain, particularly in relation to English language learners. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing targeted strategies that support learner well-being in virtual environments.

5.1 Limited Focus on English Language Learners

Most existing studies on the physical effects of online learning focus on general university students. While these findings offer valuable insights, they often overlook the unique demands of language learning, such as increased screen time for reading, listening, writing, and participating in live interactions. There is a need for research that specifically investigates how these tasks affect the physical health of English language learners.

5.2 Insufficient Data on Ergonomic Practices Among Students

While some studies touch on the benefits of ergonomic setups, there is limited data on how many students are aware of or implement ergonomic practices at home. Furthermore, few studies explore the relationship between ergonomic training and health outcomes among language learners. Future research should assess the effectiveness of institutional interventions, such as ergonomic education or workspace improvement programs.

5.3 Underexplored Link Between Digital Fatigue and Language Learning

Despite being acknowledged as a condition, little is known about how "Zoom fatigue" affects English language learners, who depend more on verbal and visual clues. The cognitive and physical effects of extended virtual conversation in a second language, as well as how it might differ from general online learning weariness, require more research.

5.4 Gaps in Understanding Long-Term Physical Health Outcomes

Most studies focus on immediate or short-term symptoms like eye strain and muscle pain. There is limited longitudinal research tracking the long-term physical health consequences of extended online English language learning, particularly in terms of posture-related issues, vision degradation, and sleep disruption. Future research should adopt a long-term perspective to better understand these outcomes.

5.5 Lack of Socioeconomic Context in Physical Health Studies

Few studies account for the role of socioeconomic status in students' ability to maintain physical health during online learning. Factors such as the availability of ergonomic furniture, access to healthcare, and living conditions may influence students' risk levels. Research should consider how these factors affect physical health outcomes, especially for learners in low-resource settings.

5.6 Need for Cross-Cultural and Global Perspectives

Many studies are localized and do not reflect the diversity of online English learners worldwide. Since language learners often come from different cultural and geographic backgrounds, future research should explore how physical health issues vary across regions, particularly in terms of educational infrastructure, internet access, and cultural attitudes toward online learning.

By addressing these research gaps, future studies can provide deeper, more nuanced insights into the physical health challenges faced by online English language learners. Such research will be essential for informing institutional policies, ergonomic interventions, and learner support systems that promote a healthier, more sustainable digital learning environment.

6. Conclusion

The transition to online education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed the learning experience for university students, including those studying English as a second language. While this shift has increased flexibility and accessibility, it has also introduced several physical health challenges which deserve careful attention.

The literature highlights key concerns such as eye strain, posture-related discomfort, sedentary behaviour, sleep disturbances, and digital fatigue, which are intensified for English language learners due to the nature of language acquisition tasks. These students often engage in extended screen time for reading, writing, listening, and speaking, making them more vulnerable to physical strain and fatigue.

Although some preventive strategies such as ergonomic practices and institutional support have shown promise in reducing these health risks, not all students have the knowledge or resources to implement them. Moreover, universities are still in the early stages of integrating health-focused guidance into their online learning environments.

Importantly, significant research gaps remain. A few studies focus specifically on the physical health of online English language learners, and there is limited long-term and cross-cultural data. Addressing these gaps is critical to understanding the unique needs of this student group and developing targeted, adequate solutions.

In conclusion, while online English education offers many benefits, it also presents substantial physical health challenges. To ensure the sustainability of this learning mode, educators, institutions, and researchers must work together to prioritize student well-being through ergonomic support, informed policies, and continued investigation into the long-term impacts of virtual learning.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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