

Challenges faced by ESL in-service teachers enrolled in a teacher education programme via open distance learning in Malaysia

Challenges by
ESL in-service
teachers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges experienced by in-service English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in an open distance learning (ODL) institution of higher learning in Malaysia. Many in-service ESL teachers who do not have the necessary teaching qualifications are seeking to obtain their teaching qualifications via the ODL mode of studies as it allows them to work as teachers while obtaining their teaching qualifications at the same time. They face multiple challenges which lead to high attrition rates, a concern for ODL institutions of higher learning worldwide.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research design using a case study approach was used in this study where in-depth interviews were conducted with four in-service ESL teachers who are currently enrolled in an undergraduate Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme conducted via ODL.

Findings – The research is exploratory in nature. Findings highlighted four major challenges by these in-service ESL teachers: (1) financial difficulties, (2) work commitments, (3) family sacrifices and (4) emotional stress. However, technological use was not considered a challenge as mentioned by literature.

Practical implications – Findings from the study may be useful to ODL institutions to provide relevant support to ODL students to improve student retention rates in ODL institutions.

Originality/value – This study may be considered as a baseline analysis on the challenges experienced by in-service ESL teachers in ODL institution of higher learning in Malaysia. Further in-depth studies are needed to understand how ODL institutions can better support their education programme students to complete their teacher education programmes.

Keywords Challenges, ESL, In-service teachers, Teacher education, Open distance learning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Student retention in open distance learning (ODL) institutions of higher learning have long been a widely discussed topic (Zuhairi *et al.*, 2020). Low student retention rates affect ODL institutions in many aspects, especially in their financial and academic planning. Hence, it is critical to ODL institutions to carry out the appropriate strategies and plans to address these issues. In order to do so, the challenges faced by these students need to be identified. These challenges need to be highlighted as most ODL students are working adults and they have



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worked hard to obtain their degrees but have been unsuccessful. A growing Malaysian population of 32 million and counting brought an increase in demand for trained teachers in both primary and secondary schools, including subjects like English as a Second Language (ESL). The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) established many teacher training institutes all around the country as well as faculties of education in public universities to provide training for teachers to meet the demand. Despite this, public education institutions and universities were still unable to meet the demand for trained teachers in government schools. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) emphasised the teaching profession to enhance teacher quality and elevate the status of teachers as the profession of choice. Since then, many opportunities were given to in-service teachers, including ESL teachers, to seek the qualifications they need to be properly certified. However, according to Malaysian Educational Statistics 2021 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2021), which collects data from schools under the Malaysian MOE, out of 412,294 MOE primary and secondary teachers in Malaysia, 38,732 or around 10% of the teachers are still teaching without proper teaching qualifications or training, including ESL teachers. This has yet to include the unaccounted number of teachers in international and private schools which were not part of the statistics.

The ODL mode of study was introduced to allow Malaysians to develop themselves professionally while working to contribute to the development of the economy. It was created with the aim of upgrading and expanding the pool of Malaysia's human resources. ODL in language teacher education incorporates a blended form of face-to-face and online learning as a mode of delivery. The ODL method of teaching and learning provides in-service ESL teachers with an opportunity to work and study at the same time, and it has emerged as the preferred mode of study for teachers to pursue their much-needed qualifications (Bhandigadi *et al.*, 2021). With the rapid development of technology globally, the ODL method of language teacher education has significantly impacted the professional, intellectual and economic practices of the English Language Teaching profession. New approaches and technologies used in online and distance education has increased the roles of ODL universities in increasing access into higher education. It is also one of the more economically efficient ways to offer language teachers in-service education and training and has many advantages (Kwon, 2020).

Literature review

There are still many challenges that these in-service ESL teachers face while undergoing their studies. While they work and study, they must play dual roles as both a teacher and a student, among others. They work in the school environment while at the same time mingling with fellow student teachers online and offline during their part-time studies. Many research studies (Bawa, 2016; Bhandigadi *et al.*, 2021; Ilonga *et al.*, 2020; Kara *et al.*, 2019; Ouma, 2019; Yaw Koi-Akrofi *et al.*, 2020) reveal that among the many challenges faced by working adult learners enrolled in ODL programmes are a lack of financial assistance, struggling to balance family and work commitments, health issues and a lack of motivation. Many find it difficult to find the time to complete their assignments and revise for exams whilst maintaining full-time employment and fulfilling family commitments. Multiple international research studies (Bawa, 2016; Musingafi *et al.*, 2015; Ouma, 2019; Yaw Koi-Akrofi *et al.*, 2020) also listed the challenges faced by working adults undertaking ODL studies to include personal issues, administrative issues and programme related issues. Personal issues listed include lack of motivation, social and family factors, inability to adapt to ODL and misconceptions about cognitive load. Administrative issues include weak induction and orientation, insufficient library support, lack of support from the university management and limited representation in leadership and governance for distance learners. Finally, programme-related issues include poor assignment design, course length, a lack of understanding of online learners by instructors and technology

related issues like utilising multimedia platforms for studies. However, very few studies are conducted from the Malaysian front. A study from [Norazlan *et al.* \(2020\)](#) on 120 public university undergraduate students studying in a conventional university and [Muda and Yee \(2019\)](#) on 81 nursing students studying via ODL both listed financial difficulties as the main challenge in their studies. [Bhandigadi *et al.* \(2021\)](#) summarised the four main reasons challenges that lead ODL students to drop out of their studies are financial difficulty, family responsibility, health complications and work commitments.

These challenges often lead to high attrition rates in ODL institutions, which are detrimental to institutions as they lose both revenue and student numbers that are needed to sustain a programme and the institution. Therefore, student attrition rates have always been a concerning factor for ODL institutions of higher learning. Studies have found that early interventions from institutions, family support, individual personalities and students' learning satisfaction are able to influence students' decision to dropout or persist in their learning journey ([Aldowah *et al.*, 2020](#); [Li and Carroll, 2020](#); [Pusztai *et al.*, 2022](#)). Although these studies focus on working adult learners, there is a lack of attention given to the challenges of ESL teachers. Therefore, it would be beneficial to institutions of higher learning in Malaysia and other relevant stakeholders to know if the challenges faced by these in-service ESL teachers, who are also ODL learners, are consistent with the same challenges mentioned by these studies presented above in order to prevent them from dropping out of the programme. This article seeks to fill in the gaps in the literature on these in-service ESL teachers' experience, focussing on ODL within the Malaysian context, on the challenges faced by ESL teachers obtaining their certifications through teacher education programmes delivered in ODL mode while teaching in schools in Malaysia. This leads to the research question of "What are the challenges faced by in-service ESL teachers enrolled in teacher education studies via open distance learning?"

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative interpretative research design using a case study approach was used to gather data to answer the research question. The design was selected as it allows for a deeper understanding of the in-service ESL teachers' quest to obtain their certification through teacher education conducted via ODL. The qualitative interpretative research design is best suited for this study as "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things" ([Creswell and Creswell, 2018](#), p. 7). The realities constructed for this research are based on the realities of the in-service ESL teachers as no one knows the realities faced by them better than themselves. The epistemological understanding of this study is that knowledge is subjective and is constructed based on evidence provided by the participants. The interpretive paradigm holds to the belief that reality can only be fully understood through the interpretation of the lived experience and social phenomenon created through individual experiences ([Merriam, 2009](#); [Pring, 2015](#)).

The case study approach provides an in-depth perspective on an issue by examining individual cases by comparing through the collection of multiple data sources ([Creswell, 2013](#)). Therefore, four in-service ESL teachers undergoing teacher education via ODL were selected and interviewed to provide a more general explanation and comparison with regard to the learning experiences of these in-service teachers and presented as findings for this study. The research design in this study allows a thick description of a phenomenon required to gain deep insights into the reasons behind the actions taken by the participants who are teachers themselves. It is the interest of this study to understand the meanings which people have experienced and constructed about their reality based on their own experiences instead of what may happen in the future ([Merriam, 2009](#)). This study is directed towards interpreting

the realities experienced by in-service ESL teachers and provides a detailed account of the challenges in their learning experience undergoing teacher education via ODL in order to obtain an authentic, yet comprehensive view faced by them. The study is essentially phenomenological in orientation, taking as its starting point the lived experiences of the individual participants.

Selection of participants

The in-service ESL teachers in this study were selected based on criterion sampling which is a form of purposive sampling. The goal of purposive sampling is to select specific studies that will yield a generous amount of relevant data for the research (Yin, 2011). Criterion sampling is used when all cases sampled from a particular population are selected based on some set criteria that originate in the population (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Creswell, 2013). This study took place while the participants were still undergoing their ODL teacher education studies as the basis of this study is to understand the challenges that these participants encountered during their ODL teacher education learning experience. These teachers were enrolled in the undergraduate TESL programme from the same ODL institution. By completing the programme, these teachers aim to acquire their certification to become qualified English teachers. The teachers will also be able to gain pedagogical knowledge and develop resources which in turn can improve their classroom practices so that they can provide their students with better learning experiences.

Demographics of participants

Schoch (2020) suggests that case study research should not have more than four cases, as this is probably the most a researcher can realistically handle for a study. Creswell (2013) also proposed that four participants would be sufficient to identify the emerging themes between the cases. Therefore, based on the case study design and criterion sampling, four in-service ESL teachers were selected as participants based on the criteria that they are from a population of ESL teachers currently teaching in a private institution, are enrolled in an ODL programme related to TESL education as well as being willing to participate and share voluntarily. All participants are fluent in the English Language, but English was not their native language. All four participants selected were in-service English language teachers currently teaching in private or international schools and are actively enrolled in their respective ODL undergraduate studies. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and the Microsoft Teams's interviews were recorded with permission. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to keep their identity anonymous. Table 1 below shows the demographics of the four participants. It contains details

Pseudonym	Age	ODL studies qualification pursuing	ODL study experience duration	School	Classes teaching	Years of in-service teaching experience
Dawn	37	BA TESL	3 years	International	Lower Primary	5 years
Meryl	48	BEEd (Primary English)	4 years	International	Upper Primary	4 years
Sunny	44	BA TESL	5 years	Private	Upper Primary	12 years
Vicky	45	BEEd (Primary English)	6 years	Private	Lower Primary	23 years

Table 1.
Participants demographics

Source(s): Table by authors

of each participant with regards to their age, ODL studies qualification that they were pursuing, the duration of their ODL study experience, school and class they are teaching in and the years of in-service teaching experience these in-service teachers.

Data collection

An in-depth interview was the research instrument used to collect data for this study as the research investigates in-service ESL teachers' learning experience in their ODL teacher education studies. According to [Cohen et al. \(2018, p. 306\)](#), interviews allow the participants "discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view." This is helpful in this study as it showed the "how" and "why" elements of the phenomenon of teacher learning which [Yin \(2011\)](#) advocates in the case study approach. Interviews with the participants enhanced the study with in-depth descriptions of the participants' learning experience by describing their feelings, perceptions and experiences in their own words. An in-depth interview with each of the four participants was conducted to collect the lived experiences of each participant. Prior to the interviews, all participants consented to be audio-recorded. Each interview was conducted through Microsoft Teams, a multimedia platform that is automatically recorded by the researcher-host, transcribed and kept safely in his custody. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. A list of interview questions was given to the participants before the interview known as the interview protocol for semi-structured interviews. These interview questions were developed based on the conceptual framework and literature review to allow participants to evaluate their personal learning experiences and to describe them thoroughly from their perspectives. The interview protocol was adapted and modified from a study conducted by [Senom \(2016\)](#). The interview schedule was piloted with 2 contingent ODL TESL alumni to ensure its trustworthiness before the individual interviews were conducted. The interview questions were modified accordingly during the interview as new developments arose during the interview process. The interview questions included the in-service ESL teachers' background information (teaching experience, academic background), their perspective on the ODL continuous teacher education studies and the challenges faced by these in-service ESL teachers as they juggle work, studies, family commitments, health, finance, etc.

Data analysis

All four interviews were then transcribed with aim of identifying challenges faced by the participants as a general guide when analysing the transcripts for answers. Although the transcriptions were done automatically through the Microsoft Teams transcription tool, the researcher manually moderated each transcript to ensure that each transcription reflected the actual recordings. Member checks were then performed where each participant received a transcript of her interview for their review and correction to ensure its accuracy. The Data Analysis Spiral proposed by [Creswell \(2013\)](#) was used for data analysis in this study where the data were read and coded according to themes. All four cases were treated as comprehensive cases themselves and analysed individually before they were analysed across each other by the researcher in an attempt to construct a general explanation that represents and encompasses the individual cases to reflect a shared reality among the participants of the study.

Findings and discussions

From the four interviews, four main themes were gleaned as challenges faced by in-service ESL teachers who are working while studying. They were internal challenges such as financial difficulties, work commitments, family sacrifices and emotional stress.

Financial difficulty

An overarching challenge that all four participants reported were financial difficulties. Dawn, Sunny and Vicky had to depend on loans and their savings from their retirement fund to finance their studies. Dawn reported that she had to resort to using her money from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), the retirement fund mandated by the Malaysian government for employees from the private sector, to pay her studies fees in the first semester before managing the payment of the rest of the following semesters with her salary. She also had to scale back her family expenditure like holidays as explained in *"If we need to bring my kids for holiday is not gonna [sic] be anyway expensive. It's probably within Malaysia for now."* Likewise, Sunny is on loan from the National Higher Education Fund Corporation or better known as *Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional* (PTPTN) to finance her studies. The salary from her work, combined with her husband's salary, is used to pay for their household expenses. This is illustrated by her statement *"I myself I can't definitely support to pay this degree fees if I'm just working by myself without anyone support without any loan or something like that . . . we like every family have commitments, like paying their house rental, the car rental, tuitions, insurance, utilities etc."*

Meryl also lamented her financial situation saying *"all my all the money I make is going to [the university]"* as she was not able to contribute financially to her family even though she is working and the family expenses are supported by her husband. Lastly is Vicky who is a recently divorced single mother. Besides paying for her studies, she also supports her two young sons who are in primary school as well as her ageing parents. In order to make ends meet, she withdrew money from her savings and EPF, moved back to her parent's home and conducts tuition online to supplement her income. Finances for her are tight as *"raising 2 boys is not easy and the salary is not much . . . So I'm just waiting, yeah, for another better prospect, a better job, better position and a better salary."* This challenge was not a surprise as it is consistent with research studies done both internationally (Musingafi *et al.*, 2015; Ouma, 2019; Yaw Koi-Akrofi *et al.*, 2020) and in Malaysia (Bhandigadi *et al.*, 2021; Muda and Yee, 2019; Norazlan *et al.*, 2020) from various working adults, and it appears that in-service English teachers who are working while studying via ODL are also no exceptions.

Family sacrifices

The findings from this study found that only three participants, Dawn, Sunny and Vicky, reported sacrificing time with family as a challenge to in-service English teachers who are working while studying via ODL, with Meryl being the exception. Dawn reported having to sacrifice spending time with her extended family as *"sometimes they have gatherings and then, like, you know, during weekends, if I'm having classes and all that, I cannot [attend] as I will attend my classes. So I have to forgo that gathering or I might meet them up later where the time spent is very less compared to what we used to be."* She also admits to spending less time with her children stating that *"I feel that [I] spend very much less time with family and especially my children"* and has to manage her time spent with her children while studying. *"If I'm doing my uh assignments when I'm sitting and doing my studies, my children . . . I have to actually go and send them to my parent's place and then I will go back and fetch them,"* as explained by Dawn. Although she agrees that *"it does not affect the relationship in any way serious"* but *"the quality time had to be managed and most of the time is like it's lesser than what it used to be."* Sunny felt guilty for not being able to fully perform her wifely duties of preparing home-cooked meals daily for her family due to her work and study commitments saying, *"I am not able to fulfil this expectation by cooking and giving him some meals like lunch or dinner or whenever he's at home before he goes to work . . . due to my assignment deadlines and stuff."* Spending quality time with her son is also something she felt challenged about as she mentioned that the main one-to-one time with him is when she is checking his homework. *" . . . Spending time with him is lesser . . . when I check with the studies check is the homework that is not spending time. That is like coaching him."*

Vicky also reported struggling to fulfil her responsibility as a mother to her sons and as a daughter to her parents while working and studying. Like Dawn, Vicky also said that she gave up her time to spend with friends and her children. She lamented that *"before starting my studies, I usually used to have weekends with my friends and now I actually don't have that time even with my boys . . . cause I really need to catch up with my studies."* Upon returning from work daily, she ensures her children have both eaten and bathed before going through their school work and putting them to bed. Only after both her children are in bed then she can start her studies and assignments which is a struggle as she would already be tired. All three participants' reports were consistent with the literature (Bawa, 2016; Bhandigadi et al., 2021; Ouma, 2019). On the other hand, Meryl reported work and studying have brought her relationship with her daughters closer. As her elder daughter has recently started her tertiary education, they bonded over their shared work of assignments with Meryl being *"able to help her [daughter] with citations . . . when she's doing the assignments . . . She proofreads my work. I proofread her work . . . That's how we spend our time."* Meanwhile, with her younger daughter who is studying for her high school examination, she was able to spend time studying together, motivating each other. In her own words, *"it's really a positive time in our lives."* This notion was new as Meryl's positive outlook turned her challenge into motivation which was something new.

Work commitment

Work commitment is also another challenge reported by all four participants. All four in-service teachers found balancing between work and study to be difficult. Dawn reported that the workload from school together with the assignments and quizzes made it time-consuming. She said that *"because there's a lot of things to do at school . . . we also have training that we need to meet and then at the same time we have quizzes or survey forms where we have to fill up with certain dateline and then it takes up our time."* Dawn preferred face-to-face classes but since attending classes online for two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she has become comfortable with online classes as it was convenient and time-saving. She remarked *"I used to prefer face to face . . . but in due time as we were going through online and all the workload, time with family, I sort of like got the hang of having online because I don't have to . . . like get ready straight away, take a one hour of my time just to drive and go and come back. Whereby online. I just have to log in and the class is there ready and I can attend classes."* Like Dawn, Meryl reported that besides teaching, marking papers and covering relief classes, she has no time to complete her school work which may result in her taking them home to complete which eats into her study time, *"the limited time that I have in class most of the time because it's not just English that we're teaching because being a class teacher we teach maths, we teach other subjects as well. So then marking of books, you know, marking of assessment students' assessment and all that and then we have reports going on. So that takes up time . . . I can't do it at school during my free period, because during the free period we have to do reliefs as well . . . so if that has been taken off, you know, the workload that I have in school, I have to bring it back as well at times."*

Sunny went a bit further and commented that it is the sense of responsibility to teach her students that make her do more than she is required which leads to her feeling burnout. She remarked that *"sometimes you have to do overload work at in the school. It's not that the management is forcing you to work, but you're, as I said, the attitude you want to finish it you see, so you tend to overwork. Besides the time that they gave you know, 8 to 4, 8 to 4 is your working time . . . I did that so I find it very tiring in my it's like, It's like burnout."* She also commented that the added workload from school when a new teacher fails to join the school and/or resigns which the principal is aware of but is unable to redistribute due to short notice. This adds to her workload *"so everything will be on our current teachers' head and more work,*

more extra work. So that that will make us, you know, overload . . . you'll be, like, grumbling to yourself . . . even your principal will be, she can feel that 'I'm not doing the right thing but I have no choice.' Finally, Vicky explained that when she first started her ODL studies while working as a teacher in 2018, she resorted to completing her assignment in school during work hours even though she is aware that it is against the rules at her workplace. This was done in order to work around her heavy workload. She stated that *"once teaching is done, then I have some time which I could do my assignment in school . . . yeah, I've broken the rule."* However, as she progressed, she slowly learned to multitask and eventually by the end of 2018, she was able to balance her work and study properly and need not bring her assignments to work anymore but complete them at home. This reported challenge is consistent with research studies reported by [Bhandigadi et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Muda and Yee \(2019\)](#). This shows workplace commitments as reported by other working adults also appear that in-service English teachers who are working while studying via ODL.

Emotional stress

In the context of emotional stress, all four participants reported it as a challenge. Balancing between work as an in-service ESL teacher and studying via ODL is stressful as these teachers need to cope with the workload from their schools which includes lesson preparation, marking homework and examination papers and other administrative duties besides teaching as well as their studies. Dawn reported that she can feel stressed out but prioritises her workload to ensure she is not stressed out. She explained that *"at times it can be stressful in that way. I have so many things to do and then at one moment, I prioritize. I do note down what I need to do, and which one I need to accomplish first or complete first. But at times I get overwhelmed with it."* She also admitted to occasionally lashing out at her family members but tried to keep herself in check to prevent it from happening. *"I do lash out, but I tried to control myself because I know I'm going to do it to them, so I keep control of that. Yeah, so I tried,"* explained dawn. Meryl, on the other, channels her emotional stress to become a motivation to perform better in her studies. She illustrated that *"I'm drained, I'm stressed, but it did motivate me . . . to direct my stress or my energy to my actual work like, you know and do to obtain good results in the end as you know, always give my best."* Vicky reported her emotional stress as a working single parent taking care of both her boys. She reported that it was stressful to care for her parents and children while studying and working. She mentioned having to take unpaid leave so that she can still take her parents for their medical checkups while maintaining her work and studies. She illustrated that by saying *"when we need to take parents out for hospital checkups, of course, I still have to take no pay leave."*

Another emotional stress that comes from work and study is trying to apply what they have studied to help their students, especially those with special needs. Sunny's sense of responsibility towards trying to help her students, especially her students with learning disabilities, stresses her emotionally as she tries to help them by applying what she has learned in her ODL studies and not giving up on them. She stated that *"you have prepared a lot of things, a lot of materials, a lot of preparation you have done to tackle that particular disabled student but in the end, it doesn't give any good result for the students and you as a teacher you will go back home sadly . . . you go back home sadly and you open your laptop but how are you going to do your assignment? [The issue with the student with learning difficulties] will be bugging you and then you doubt yourself."* Sunny also explained that *"I don't want to give up on this particular student because when all the other students can do well with my teaching, I want that this particular student also learns, at least something. By knowing what kind of approach or what kind of method or this method is not working for this disabled kid. We have to try another method so that method works. Then it will be a positive emotional kind of result."* She is motivated when her special needs student shows improvement and that emotional stress becomes motivation.

Technology use

No participant reported any challenges with regard to the use of technology. They were able to solve technological issues when they arose. Vicky faced technical difficulties when she first started her studies almost the same time she started teaching in her new school in 2018, but she eventually improved over time. She stated that “*we need to post everything in Google Docs. You need to prepare your exam papers, you need to upload everything into Google Drive and at the same time I got to do my assignment the same time, I got to prepare for my exam for my degree . . . but after one year, I managed to improve and it was less stressful.*” They also received technology training from their workplace as part of professional development. Meryl reported saying “*that’s why I say I’m lucky that I am working in a school . . . [the school] realized there was a gap as far as technology goes, with teachers so . . . we do a lot of CPD, continuous professional development.*” This helps in their technological knowledge which is transferable to both work and study. This finding is new, and it contradicts studies from [Bawa \(2016\)](#), [Ouma \(2019\)](#) and [Yaw Koi-Akrofi et al. \(2020\)](#) who all mentioned that working adults who are working and studying via ODL face technological issues. This could be because in-service ESL teachers are already familiar with technology as they frequently use them to facilitate their teaching and learning in the classroom.

Limitations of the study

While qualitative case studies can provide rich and detailed insights into a particular case, they also have several limitations. This case study was based on a rather small data set ($n = 4$), which is nevertheless typical of qualitative research. It has been noted that when examining qualitative data, the saturation point can be reached with relatively small data (e.g. [Marshall and Rossman, 2011](#)). In this study, saturation point was reached in all four cases. Based on a rather small sample and focussing on a specific context, the research design does not allow transferability and generalisability of the results. This means that the results of this case study may not be applicable to other contexts. Data during the pandemic period was not available to due technical issues. However, it provides some insights of the in-service ESL teachers’ challenges who are pursuing an ODL teacher education programme in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The findings of this study should help us better understand the challenges experienced by Malaysian in-service ESL teachers who are also pursuing their education through ODL. The challenges faced by these ODL students have several implications. First, the financial challenges they faced can increase their stress, and higher levels of burnout, leading to a higher attrition rate. Secondly, the emotional stress that they face can impact their overall well-being. Those who struggle to balance the demands of the programme with their other commitments may not be able to fully engage with the course content or participate in discussions. This can result in a lack of professional development and may ultimately impact their academic performance.

To address these challenges, it is essential to develop policies that support these ODL students, such as offering financial incentives, providing flexible work arrangements and promoting a culture of work–life balance. In addition, it is crucial to recognise and address the emotional impact of this work on teachers, including providing access to mental health resources and supportive work environments. Counselling services should be made available to students by the ODL institutions to enable students to seek assistance for their mental well-being. This would help them cope better mentally and emotionally. By providing the resources and support that the students need, ODL institutions can help to ensure that they can continue to provide high-quality education to their students.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges faced by ODL students requires a commitment to supporting their well-being and professional development. Policymakers and teacher educators need to recognise these challenges and work to address them in order to ensure that all students have access to flexible education pathway and that student retention rates can be further improved.

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