

Students' and Teachers' Perceptions about E- Learning of English Courses amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

With unprecedented problems, the year 2020 has challenged the, social, political, national and economic landscapes all over the world. Covid-19 pandemic has demanded globally the education system to adapt to new challenging situations by giving up conventional learning and emphasizing the possibilities of exploiting e-learning. Covid-19 made it imperative to enhance the learning to prevent any delays in education due to unforeseeable pandemic and e-learning permeated into the academia as a mainstream. The perception of students and teachers about e-learning and their readiness regarding this shift in education was investigated in the context of Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). One hundred students and fifty teachers from five universities participated in the present study. Two semi structured interviews were used as research instruments to investigate their respective perceptions. The findings of the study show that some subjects like novel and phonetics and phonology were considered as difficult to learn their content and students perceived e-learning to be a failure as they faced technical, computer literacy and awareness problems and were resistant to change to a new mode of education. However the teachers perceived e-learning to be an effective tool for pedagogy reshaping the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge throughout the society.

Keywords: E-learning, Covid-19, Digital pedagogy, information technology, Pandemic.

Introduction

In these perilous times, the entire race of humans is in state of war against a lethal, invisible and implacable enemy. Health systems are overwhelmed and there is no cure yet. The toll of mortality and infection are rising exponentially. The pandemic has not only jeopardized our lives and health but as Kissinger (2020) calls it has "society-dissolving effects". Our production, distribution, supply lines are cut and locked down, academia closed and the response to crisis compromised. The task of reversing the viral spread is temporary but the societal impacts that it will have, will last for generations. It is a battle where at first people have to isolate so to halt the spread of virus and on the other side they have to reassemble and reemerge as soon as possible to make the stalled systems restart. This dilemma is reflected in the educational institutions as well.

Universities bring hundreds of people together making them vulnerable to spread the disease. Closing and suspending educational activities is important but they can't be kept closed for a longer period of time. To minimize the academic disruption and loss, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and the federal Government are at work. There is uncertainty regarding the uplift of the lockdown and the crisis lasting. The current pandemic will lead to restructuring of global economy. It is not possible to portray or draw the exact shape of economy in future however the virtual education will play a central role in it. The paradigm shift from traditional to e-learning is in the mainstream to minimize the effects of Covid-19 in long term effect.

The digital knowledge age has changed the world inexplicably and the educational sector is not immune to it. The robust outgrowth in Information technology is a potential source for making the learning processes agile. Meeting new challenges and issues requires acquiring knowledge and skills efficiently to manage the resources. E-learning is an innovative transfer of learning and knowledge influenced greatly with internet and information technologies communications.

The most recent trend observed in the educational sector is the introduction of e-learning to provide access to learning contents online. The major forces driving this trend are innovation in technology, the changing conditions of education delivery, demographics and ecological factors (Concannon, Flynn, & Campbell, 2009). To enhance the learning processes, Information and communication technologies are integrated in learning and teaching process. The assemblage of knowledge and skills for information, education and training is e-learning (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2010). It evolved from distance education which allows learning and knowledge sharing without time or place constraints. E-learning is an enriching teaching and learning tool which facilitates the communications among students and the instructors thus involving content delivery and work submissions (Cysewski, 2010). Technology and Learning go hand in hand in e-learning.

Education being an inalienable right to every human is a vehicle of social and economic development. After Second World War, investment in human capital i.e., education and health remained a priority of governments. When education is limited, interrupted or dropped out negative and permanent social and economic impacts are clearly visible. Information technology has permeated into the academia and because of recent pandemic covid-19, the academia all over the world is incorporating e-learning. Due to pandemic, corona virus (covid-19) widespread and its impact on the society as pervasive, is threatening the academia of the country. Almost all the schools, universities across the country have suspended their educational activities to mitigate the viral transmission. The timings of this disruption can have profound consequences so to minimize it; online classes have been started across the globe and the same is implemented within Pakistan.

The tertiary level i.e., the universities in Pakistan have opted for the usage of online classes. Teleschool is launched by government of Pakistan to impart the education to students across the country with special emphasis on remote residents/ students of the country. The channel is not a perfect substitute for the regular classrooms nonetheless it contributes to taking knowledge to homes during the prevalent lockdown. As Pakistan has a poor literacy rate, the channel contributes in imparting education. The effectiveness of content and quality is debatable but such a feat is admirable in country like Pakistan. Teleteaching i.e., via online platforms the delivery of live lectures are taking place. Within the context of curriculum, the students are helped by the teachers.

A successful learning management system is the key factor to empower online learning which needs to be ensured within the country. Implementing e-learning requires human resources, technology, economics, infrastructure, content development, learning modalities and application ready to implement and perform. The usage of technology requires successful implementation and it requires user's perceptions in the context of technology. It must cater the needs of its users, otherwise it may lead to frustrations, resistance to learning.

The implementation of online classes has been through a lot of criticism in Pakistan. Quality, connectivity, anxiety to a new mode of learning are the frequent complaints. HEC is assisting in software's development, connectivity, trainings and content for online learning, building repository of data and adapting evaluation and monitoring systems; however, the implementation requires thorough radical changes.

The current study aims at exploring the perceptions of students and teachers about e-learning of English courses in the context of Pakistan. The perceptions of students and teachers of academia are recorded in this study. The challenges confronted by students in e-learning are explored. The teachers' experience and perceptions are also delved into, in the present study. The information and communication technology resources, learning and teaching techniques, information and communication technology skills along with teachers and students perceptions are explored. This study is a documentation and exploration of outcomes of e-learning in this emergency like situation in Pakistan which can help in future if such conditions arise again. In developing country like Pakistan, where the technology is not much advanced as compared to the developed ones, different research studies have been carried out with focus on integration of e-learning across the country. However, the current implementation of e-learning throughout the country amid this pandemic needs to be explored and this study is an attempt to explore it.

The present study explored the perceptions of teachers and students about using e-learning resources to teach and learn different English courses at university level. The study tries to find out answers of the following research questions.

- 1) What are the perceptions of the English teachers about e-learning amid covid-19 pandemic?
- 2) What are the perceptions of the students of English department about e-learning amid covid-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

The Covid-19 outbreak has been a game changer in the history of globalization. The traditional teaching and learning classrooms have failed to cope with the current situation. An advanced yet comprehensive e-learning design is needed with practical implementations to minimize the loss of education in this hour of sufferings.

E-learning is a tool to learn and communicate using the technology (Ecclesfield & Garnett, 2015). It is an emerging information technology tool that has been integrated in tertiary institutions thus following a transition from traditional to use of modern technology within classrooms. Sclater, (2012) opines that education involves acquiring knowledge, skills, facilitating beliefs, values and habits. The skills necessary to promote learning in e-environment must be instilled so to acquire knowledge and the values, beliefs can be updated.

Bozkurt and Hilbelink (2019) state that due to online and offline technologies being permeated in education, there must be a paradigm shift in the education arena and it must be understood for the betterment of our future generations. The technologies being indispensable have penetrated in our lives and we must welcome them and benefit from them to the fullest. Kassymova, Issaliyeva and Kosherbayeva (2019) carried out a study in Kazakhstan to study e-learning effects on students' cognition. A survey was conducted and it was found that e-learning should be implemented with open access for the benefit of the society.

Khan and Jumani (2012) carried out a research to know the effectiveness of traditional and e-learning in Pakistan. Questionnaires were administered and a comparative analysis was carried out. The results of the study showed that e-learning was proved to be more effective than traditional learning. In a similar vein, Nasir (2017) conducted a comparative study on e-learning i.e., MOOCS courses of Pakistan. The quantitative study was carried out by administering questionnaires within Pakistan. It was found that the

students were aware of e-learning; however, the access to these resources needed improvement in accordance with the findings of the study.

Sethi, Wajid and Khan (2019) carried out a study on dental colleges of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to assess the readiness of the dental colleges for e-learning. Good readiness for e-learning was found and the males were more inclined towards e-learning while the females needed training and skills to learn through e-learning. As Covid-19 has caused the educational sector to be shut, the need of e-learning to continue the process of learning and teaching is a must and during this exigency, all across the globe research studies are carried out to know the substitutes for education so that it can be continued. Mian and Khan (2020), published an article and proposed ways for teaching to be effective during the current pandemic in the field of medical sciences. They proposed Teleteaching as a method to be used during this pandemic for medical studies. Telemedicine was proposed to help the doctors to help and practice their work.

Crawford, et al., (2020) through desktop analysis recorded the higher education's digital responses towards pedagogy across 20 different countries during Covid-19. The diverse responses of the universities of the 20 countries were recorded and a plea was made for knowledge sharing, balanced learning and to learn from these universities responses to strengthen the response towards covid-19 disruption in educational sector. The relevant literature regarding education in current pandemic is relatively less and this area needs to be researched and is a relatively new endeavor. This study is an attempt to explore the perceptions regarding e-learning within Pakistani context, of students and teachers of English so to know the effectiveness of e-learning within a diverse, multilingual country like Pakistan.

Methodology

This study investigates the perception of students and teachers about e-learning that has recently been introduced during the pandemic covid-19 in the context of Pakistan and specifically in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The population of this research study consisted of university teachers and students. A representative sample of one hundred and fifty participants was selected for the present study. The data was collected from one hundred students and fifty English teachers of five private and public universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Random convenient sampling procedure was used for the collection of data. The perceptions of teachers and students were investigated through semi structured interviews which were administered through online and offline resources. All these teachers were teaching English courses at university level. All the students participating in the study were from the same universities from English departments studying English at undergraduate level. A survey research design was used to collect data from the students. The interview consisted of questions about the suitability of e-learning for different subjects of English. The perceptions of teachers were also taped through semi structured interview. The teachers were asked about the real outcome of teaching different subjects of English through e-learning. Both the instruments were pilot tested and their validity was confirmed after removing the ambiguities. Research tool i.e. semi structured interviews for teachers and students were approved by experts of the said field. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was made sure.

Qualitative approach was followed to explore the perceptions of students and teachers about e-learning. The perception of the respective participants was collected through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis to convert data into different themes to make sure the data make sense by observing emerging themes from the data and classifying them into thematic groups to create larger meanings of understanding (Creswell, 2012).

Results

Results of this study are presented in the form of different themes that emerged when the students and the teachers were asked about different subjects taught online. These themes were deduced from the problems in different subjects in the department of English. These themes were categorized to show exploiting

information and communication technology resources, information and communication technology skills, need for face to face interaction and learning and teaching experience in e-learning where S represents student participant while T represents the teacher as participant. The following themes were deduced from the results of the present study.

Exploiting Information and Communication Technology Resources

The results of this research show that students were in favor of e-learning English if provided with the solutions to address the problems mentioned; otherwise, they were in complete dismay towards e-learning amidst Covid-19. The students faced technical issues mostly. Due to electricity failure, most of the technical issues arose. "Internet browsing and speed" (S10 & 14) was also the main issue that was faced by the students. The internet was not constant and speed was not fast enough so the content delivered i.e. online lectures were difficult to be assessed. "In a developing country like Pakistan, we have to at first work on and plan for better technology integration and then apply it in education" (S50).

"The students were facing technical issues and so were the teachers" (T32), therefore e-learning became a difficult task. The traditional classrooms were more favored by the students however the teachers after being well aware of the situation were in favor of e-learning during this exigency "to save the time of students and to continue the learning and teaching processes" (T19).

Information and Communication Technology Skills

The level of awareness of the students was found encouraging as most of the students knew about e-learning. "E learning is using electronic medium for learning" (S78, S97). They were using it as a "supplementing tool for learning" (S88, S65) in day to day routine. The computer literacy of the students was also encouraging as they had the skills and knew on how to use e-learning as a tool for learning and were able to differentiate between traditional and e-learning. "Traditional learning is one which is used in classrooms while using electronic media is e learning" (S76, S43). However some of the students claimed that they were "not assisted by universities in e-learning" (S28) and in usage of software. It was a totally new experience for them.

The teachers found it hard to deliver the online lectures as they were not much tech savvy but still they were "working out of their comfort zone" (T38 & T21). They were not trained well and due to lockdown and the training of overall universities faculty, there was somehow a gap in learning to deliver teaching content. "Zoom, Whatsapp, Google classroom" (T15 & T39) were used by the teachers for teaching English online.

Need for Face to Face Interaction

The students preferred "traditional face to face learning" (S16, S35 & S79) in classrooms and considered it difficult to learn online. "I find phonetics and phonology really hard to learn online as when we were in classroom, we were told and helped on how to articulate sounds but we cannot learn it now as efficiently as it was" (S20). The students were resistant to change and preferred the traditional learning. "We don't get the environment for learning at home even if we study it online. Classroom is necessary for learning" (S10).

Although online learning is not as effective as traditional, however, it is "by no means conclusive" was the view of most of the teachers. They were of the view that e-learning is effective and acceptable "In the initial stages, challenges are confronted but they must be dealt with" (T27, T2, T48). To make the students accustomed to this new mode of learning, they must be given time to adapt themselves to the current scenario was outlined by almost all of the teachers.

Learning and Teaching Experiences in E-Learning

The students of English found it “difficult to communicate online” (S15 & S 23). The learning experience was at the lowest as the students complained about the teachers who were “not tech savvy” (S91, S36 & S72) and were ill-trained and the delivered content also lacked homogeneity. “When we study novel, the plot, themes and everything is given to us in recorded form and it is really a burden to deal with this stuff within one hour”(S95). The content was considered to be substandard by the students. “The course is not planned and we cannot understand it” (S85). The regular classes are more workable was the view of the students.

The teachers were of the view that we are “still stumbling with the education instead of making bold strides” (T49) and for progressing and pacing up with the world. After the content analysis, the findings show that most of the teachers were in favor of e-learning. To facilitate learning, teleteaching through “video conferencing”(T11 & T17) was used whilst observing social distancing measures. As the situation arose at once, the “content and curriculum’s quality was also somewhat compromised” (T38, T42, & T9). Most of the teachers were of the view that the “content and supplementing supports in learning were the key factors that were at least delivered and if not much but at least were somehow effective” (T5, T28 & T50).

Teaching and learning objectives need to be rethought. The “online lectures lead to reduced participation” (T4, T17). The lectures reduced interactivity and questions of the students when the recorded lectures were shared. Rather than running large face to face classes, online recorded lectures can be delivered and the queries can be settled with other means. “By group or small interactions” (T1) the issues can be well resolved.

Discussion

Internet access, internet stability and bandwidth were the major issues that were being faced by the students. The remote areas of the country don’t have access to internet and if they get it then high speed internet is not there. The access to internet must be ensured for all the students so to make e-learning an effective technique for learning and teaching English. The overall findings suggest that the students were not in favor of e-learning as a tool for learning and they preferred traditional classrooms. The students were uncomfortable when the paradigm shift was there in learning. It is evident however that due to negligence of training, the effectiveness of e-learning was lost. Due to cost and unplanned approach of Higher Education Commission of Pakistan towards e-learning, this idea that was implemented resulted as a major failure in academia of Pakistan.

Faster internet, student facilitations and planned actions can improve and help in this difficult time of learning where distancing measures are to be taken care of as the virus is sweeping across the globe. Instead of repackaging, the radical changes must be made within the educational sector. We must adapt to the changes and must develop the necessary basic computer skills and must inculcate them into the students and teachers space.

The unexpected traffic-e-learning has resulted in slow down of internet throughout the world and it needs to be upgraded. The applications used in e-learning crashed because there was excess load on server. Nobody knows for how long this distancing and lockdowns will last. The universities in other countries have opted for hybrid learning for the next few months even if the disease gets controlled. To organize things, it’s difficult but incentives must be taken for medium term so that we can have effects which are long term in nature. This e-learning can be a somewhat failure but in future, the deficiencies must be removed and people must be helped with so to be ready for digitalized pedagogy. The world will traverse this distance at varying speed but they have to keep moving and must aid other were the pleas made by the teachers

Before online teaching to be made the default mode, there must be some standards which must be provided by HEC and planned before this implementation. For deploying and developing solutions, these teaching experiments are must. However, it will take some time to reach to the standard of quality but the good thing is that this has started now.

Conclusion

The students of English though better than the students of other department in terms of medium of communication being English still faced many problems during e-learning. For example, some the students expressed that when study novel, the plot, themes and everything was given to them in recorded form and it was really a burden to deal with that stuff within one hour. Similarly, they found phonetics and phonology really hard to learn online as could in classroom. They could not learn the sounds as efficiently as in classroom. The contents for some subjects was considered to be substandard by the students. They were not planned and the students could not understand them. As a whole, the regular classes were more workable was the view of most of the students. The findings of this study augment the previous studies as were carried on by Crawford, et al., (2020), Bozkurt and Hilbelink (2019), Nasir (2017), Sclater, (2012).

To cope and deal with current exigency, we need to harness the passions and energies of youth to overcome the challenges that will arise after this disruption. We must give them tools to thrive and survive. Subsidized access to internet, shorter classes with synchronous along with asynchronous learning, offline learning mode i.e. distributing content locally through CDs or DVDs, students facilitation centers are some of the recommendations that can augment to the benefits of e-learning.

The users and developers must tame the technology and must adapt it to our context so that a localized and customized match develops and the objectives are achieved. The above mentioned issues must be addressed efficiently within the country so to be benefitted from e-learning. To reap the benefits of e-learning private-public partnerships can be made and investments, trainings can be imparted to make it possible to learn and to devise ways to make it successful. Developing national e-centers and coordination of e-learning must be introduced within the province and at country level. After Covid-19 crisis, blended learning must be incorporated so that the students are ready and system is ready to cope with the future challenges. We need to limit the damage and must make it sure that another pandemic may not cause the same effect as it has caused. After this pandemic to be over, the world will emerge and will find the ways and will work on the gaps to minimize and to be ready for the next pandemic if (God forbid) occurs. However, we must understand this that this e-learning is not a substitute to conventional learning but is an appendage and a temporary aid during this difficult situation.

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