

Online English Language Teaching (OELT) at the Tertiary Level During Covid-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh: Problems and Solutions for Future Adaptability

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Abstract

The devastating nature of Covid-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the education sector throughout the world. To mitigate the apparent academic loss due to the closure of educational institutions online teaching was introduced. As a result, a sudden chaotic situation came into being in terms of ELT teaching. Bangladesh also started conducting online classes at the tertiary level during this period. Though this endeavour had many positives, at the same time many problems started to surface. It was found that there was a lack of technical resources and knowledge of ICT among teachers and students alike. Many teachers and students preferred face to face classes to online classes. They had negative attitudes toward online classes. Hence active participation was not taking place. Emergency OELT is more complicated than the usual OELT course since there is no sound theoretical base for them. There is still a looming possibility of Covid-19 creating further closure of the educational institutes if the infection rate increases. So, to make sure if that scenario ever happens again OELT is a viable solution to face to face ELT classes a well-planned theory of OELT, uninterrupted technical and financial support, counselling and mental support for teachers and learners are paramount.

Keywords: Covid-19, Bangladesh, online language teaching, problems, solutions, adaptability.

1. Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly has had an unprecedented impact on the education system throughout the world. “The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has directly impacted the education of learners all over the globe”(Moser et. Al, 2021). It resulted in massive academic loss due to unavoidable situations and psychological problems in learners. To counter this countries around the world had to resort to an alternative approach to teaching namely online teaching. (Besser et al., 2020; Favale et al., 2020; Rajhans et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Educational

institutions all over the world had to shift from conventional education to distance (online) learning system as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Ta'amneh, 2021) Due to this pandemic, All the schools, colleges and universities in Bangladesh were closed on March 18, 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing the impetus for online education systems. (Ta'amneh, 2021). “English language education in Bangladesh has always been problematic” (Rahman & Pandian, 2018) and the necessary movement towards online ELT has complicated the situation further. Though schools, colleges and universities have been conducting ELT using multifarious online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Team as well as social media platforms such as Facebook, What’s App, Youtube etc., (Chen et al, 2020) the expected result from this endeavour has not been achieved. There have been some contexts where OELT has seen some success but at the same time, it has been met with several problems. This article is going to focus on the problems of OELT at the tertiary level of education in the context of Bangladesh and probable solutions for future adaptability.

2. Literature Review

There are many related existing studies on the perspective of ESL but not EFL in the context of Online English Language Teaching. (Afrin, 2020) Especially in the case of emergency online language teaching, there are very few studies. This is because the world has never faced anything like Covid -19 before. Though many studies have focused on related issues, very few studies have delved into the aspects that will be discussed in this study.

This virtual process of online teaching is not the actual or real process; instead, it happens in the place of an existing system having similar dynamics and aspirations. (Shahzad et. al, 2020). Virtual English Teaching, therefore, may take place on an online platform using the internet or any other virtual media like television.

Many researchers have investigated the effectiveness of online English language classes. Sarica and Cavus (2008) consider online learning as an alternative to studying English discretely and give students good opportunities for the development of learning processes and improving their language skills (Sarica and Cavus, 2008). Similarly, a study conducted by Raymond et al. (2012) examined the effect of e-learning tools in improving students’ English communication and performance. The results showed that using these tools outside the classroom encouraged students’ engagement in the process of learning (Raymond et al., 2012).

Bashitialshaaer et al. (2020) investigated the obstacles of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants consisted of 400 teachers and students from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq and Palestine. The researchers wanted to investigate the different ways used by students to continue learning outside universities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They used a

questionnaire to achieve the objectives of their study. The results showed that the difficulties faced by the participants were self-imposed, pedagogical, financial, technical or organizational (Bashitialshaaer et al., 2020).

Another study conducted by Raheem & Khan (2020) found that e-learning can be a very safe and effective as well as personalized and available tool to strengthen students during the nationwide lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Raheem & Khan, 2020). Since there are many advantages to using online media for learning English over in-person classes many students in various contexts have also been observed to prefer virtual classes (McCready, 2020). Online Language Teaching employs predesigned well planned strategies to teach whereas emergency remote online language teaching is a temporary and abrupt shift to instructional delivery due to crises such as weather, war, or health.

Remote teaching is never the same as planned online teaching (Hodges et al., 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) emphasized that: the main target in these situations is to provide interim access to instruction and instructional support which is easily accessible and efficient during the period of crisis (Hodges et al., 2020). The move to remote teaching was very hasty and without much consideration for needs analysis or sound policy processes (Persico et al., 2020). As a result, this sudden movement has encountered a lot of problems in various contexts.

3. Problems of OELT in the Bangladeshi Context

In the context of Bangladesh online teaching during Covid-19 began as an emergency response to the sudden closure of educational institutions to stop community transmission of the disease. It was so sudden that no one knew how to approach the new normal teaching procedures online. It becomes even more difficult from the perspective of ELT. The condition of Language Teaching in Bangladesh was already very problematic (Rahman and Pandian, 2018) and shifting to remote online classes made things even more complicated. So, when the sudden transition to online language teaching was made many problems started to surface for both teachers and students alike.

3.1. Lack of Resources

Online Language Teaching requires several essential resources such as computers, laptops, mobile phones, headphones, software, high-speed internet connection etc. Teachers and students all around Bangladesh suffered from the lack of these essential devices as well as high-speed internet services during the Covid-19 pandemic (Zaman, 2020). Especially students and teachers from remote areas of Bangladesh could not avail these facilities. Though at the tertiary level of education some initiatives were taken by the authority to provide these supports, they did not translate into actual success (Rahman et al., 2020).

Various researches also suggest that unstable internet connection was a great barrier to successful online Classes. (Majed et al., 2020; Zaman, 2020). The overwhelming demand for internet use also slowed the speed down (LightCastle Partners, 2020).

Most importantly economic constraints and poverty played an essential part in students' and teachers' inability to afford devices like Computers, laptops and mobile phones which are necessary for any online course (Majed et al., 2020). Only around 36.7% of households in Bangladesh have internet access, and only about 5.6 % have computer facilities (Majed et al., 2020; Al-Zaman, 2020). This problem leads students towards mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and frustration, specifically among lower-income families because of their inability to afford required facilities (Al-Zaman, 2020). These mental problems aggravated to the level where students are committing suicide (Lathabhavan and Griffiths, 2020; Mamun et al., 2020). A 'suicide pact' by mother and son in Bangladesh related to online schooling reflects the unresolved issues associated with e-learning (Mamun et al., 2020). All these came together as a major hindrance to conducting online language classes since regular online attendance for students and teachers was very difficult.

3.2. Lack of Interest

OELT during Covid -19 pandemic was not welcomed by all teachers and learners. Many factors like economic barriers, aversion to the use of technology, lack of resources(Majed et al., 2020; Al-Zaman, 2020), and psychological and emotional issues like stress and anxiety(Al-Zaman, 2020; Kaisar and Chowdhury, 2020) contributed to the lack of interest in OELT all over the country. Mithila Afrin (2020) in a study of the pros and cons of Virtual English as a Foreign Language at the tertiary level in Bangladesh points out the fact that economic constraints and slow internet speed contributed to the lack of interest of both teachers and learners (Afrin, 2020). This finding is also true for secondary and higher secondary teachers and students. Moreover, lack of training on conducting online classes and orientation with technology (Mondol and Mohiuddin, 2020) played a vital role in creating aversion toward teaching English online among teachers. Also, many teachers have to pay the internet bills which is deemed a burden by many of them (Hossain, 2021). A study conducted by Shifat(2020) insinuates that most students find OELT classes stressful (Shifat, 2020). The majority of students do not find OELT classes enjoyable as well (Shifat, 2020). Again, regarding the effectiveness of OELT classes in developing communication skills and the reliability of online assessment majority of students are sceptical (Shifat, 2020).

Moreover, teachers' salary in Bangladesh is not very high (Roy, 2016). So, they tend to apply themselves more toward finding some means of extra income rather than engaging in innovative teaching methods (Roy, 2016). The same thing applies to learners as well. The socio-economic crisis created by Covid has compelled many poverty-stricken students to look for means of earning (Bodrud-Doza, 2020). In such socio-economic conditions lack of interest in Online

Language classes is natural. All of these contributed to the build-up of a general lack of interest in OELT.

3.3. Lack of Sound Pedagogical Base

A sudden move to a fairly untapped pedagogical procedure was also a problem for teachers who were to adapt their classroom activities to an online platform (Mahmud et al.,2021; Khan et al., 2012; Khan et al., 2021). “Bangladeshi ELT policy has always been driven by a basic uncertainty and lack of clear vision as to the fundamental status of English in the country” (Rahman and Pandian, 2018). This poses a serious problem for language teachers, who had to suddenly teach English online during Covid. Adapting to online or virtual teaching suddenly is difficult for teachers. For any online language, course to be successful a sound pedagogical theory that can be practised in a given context is necessary(Moser et al.,2021).

How language will be taught, the lecture method, what will be the activities during the classroom, assessment procedures, and how learners and teachers will engage in the language learning process are all vital to the success of an online language programme.

In many cases, emergency remote learning was not as well prepared as traditional online learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Emergency remote learning has been meaningfully different from a well planned online learning experience since they lack viable planning. These sudden moves online by many educational institutions have left several challenges teachers face to provide a high-quality online learning experience (Hodges et al., 2020). Many teachers did not have enough time, pedagogical knowledge, and online proficiency to prepare the classroom.

3.4. Lack of Technological Knowledge

The success rate of any education-related innovations primarily relies on the skills and knowledge of teachers (Pelgrum,2001). When teachers lack the necessary knowledge and skills it becomes one of the main obstacles to the use of ICT in education in most situations (Mamun and Tapan, 2009; Pelgrum, 2001; Ihmeideh, 2009; Williams, 1995). Integration of technology in any form into a curriculum requires a vast knowledge of the subject, learners' expectations and level of technological expertise (Morgan,1996). Many teachers feel they lack the necessary skills as they had to adjust to this new system (Shifat, 2020). Teachers' ability to employ computer and internet know-how in their English language teaching classes is vital to attain the desired goal(Ajmal et al., 2020) but most teachers did not receive any training regarding how to use various ICT tools and the internet (Khan et al., 2021). Therefore, lack of knowledge regarding the use of ICT as well as lack of skill in ICT tools and software have also limited the use of ICT tools in teaching-learning practices of the English language in Bangladesh during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a result, OELT teachers ultimately became reluctant to conduct OELT classes. A lot of English language educators in Bangladesh are not tech-savvy and learners found them unskilled in the use of online platforms (Hossain, 2021). A large number of students also feel they lack the necessary computer and internet use knowledge to operate the software necessary to attend online classes and create digital notes and presentations (Ferdous and Shifat, 2020).

3.5. Lack of Participation

During the Covid-19 pandemic closure of educational institutes, only one-third of the total students at the tertiary level attended online classes (Islam et al., 2020). Whatever has been discussed so far in this study are the causes behind the lack of participation in online classes. Since language learners had physical distance from the educators and teachers had no direct eye contact with learners, many learners felt they could not concentrate enough on the classes (Hossain, 2021; Ferdous and Shifat,2020; Khan et al.,2021). This resulted in students feeling disinterested to participate. The majority of the learners do not find online classes to be as engaging and interesting as face to face classes (Sreehari, 2020). Without spontaneous participation, language classes cannot fully be effective (Moser et al.,2021). Students from less affluent sections of the society cannot afford devices and high internet costs and students living in remote areas fail to participate due to poor internet speed (Hossain, 2021; Shifat,2020; Khan et al.,2021).

The following are the primary causes of lack of participation-

1. Lack of resources like computers, laptops, mobiles and Software
2. Lack of ICT knowledge
3. Financial constraints
4. Negative attitudes toward online class
5. Less opportunity to engage in the learning process

4. Solutions for Future Adaptability

Though there are a few drawbacks to online language teaching, proper planning and execution can make it successful (Afrin, 2020) in future during pandemic situations. Afrin (2020) suggests six ways to solve the problems of OELT at the tertiary level: a) recording live lectures while streaming, b) showing the teacher's face, c) keeping videos simply short, d) testing slides and pre-lecture videos before launching, e) use existing resources, f) ensuring open access, g) giving definite directions, h) interactive activities and well-designed course outline, i) setting practical expectations, j) auto-checking to count attendance, k) communication with students, l) let students take control, m) do not hide feelings, n) repeating learning style (Afrin,2020).

Afrin (2020) also suggests that the authority needs to pay attention to the problem of online teaching and take necessary steps to mitigate them in future if such conditions arise again when

educational institutions are closed for an indefinite period (Afrin, 2020). Online education, the virtual class, blogs, web conferencing and discussion, can be a method of ensuring that learners continue their education, and this strategy is remedial in case of study related anxiety (Sahu, 2020; Zhai and Du, 2020).

For online classes to be of use there must be provision for the tools (technical and financial) required to conduct online classes ((Van der Spoel et al., 2010) but at the same time making proper use of whatever resource is available is also necessary for emergencies like a pandemic(Czerniewicz et al.,2020; Hodge et al., 2020). Moravec (2020) opines that “the sudden disconnecting of global engagements has made the absence of our growth through international education and internationalization efforts particularly visible.”(Moravac,2020). He also emphasizes that change is the norm of the world and society and emergencies may arise at any point. So, he advocates precautionary measures and preparation for abrupt changes in times of need. He insists that we “must prepare students to be successful in environments and contexts that may differ greatly from what we experience today” (Moravec, 2020).

Bao (2020) mentions six instructional strategies to recapitulate current online teaching experiences for university instructors and suggested five high-impact principles for online education: (a) high relevance between online instructional design and student learning, (b) effective delivery of online instructional information, (c) adequate support provided by faculty and teaching assistants to students; (d) high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student's learning, and (e) contingency plan to deal with unexpected incidents of online education platforms (Bao, 2020).

Further, since a substantial number of university students learning English in Bangladesh are from the rural areas and 68.90% of students are dependent on mobile internet, therefore, the concerned authorities like UGC and Education Ministry need to take proper initiative to convince mobile operators to provide better and uninterrupted internet facilities at a reduced cost (Islam et al.,2020). If there is an uninterrupted internet connection and the cost of using the internet is affordable students will be keener to attend online classes. Teachers at the tertiary level can play a pivotal role in the success of online teaching. Islam et al. (2020) suggest teachers should provide (a) easily accessible and “well-organized teaching & study materials”, (b) “more interactive and flexible online classes (c) opportunity for “controlled group discussion” and (d) psychological support and motivation to students (Islam et al.,2020). Moreover, the worries and anxieties of students regarding their future, financial struggles etc. need to be alleviated as well and a strategic initiative based on these suggestions need to be adopted by the authority (Islam et al.,2020)

In addition to these culture-sensitive instruction and pedagogy with “mini” lessons is again a productive way to increase the effectiveness of online education and most anxiety-related stress can be maintained by “well constructed and lenient approaches and solutions”(Ferdous and Shifat, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Teaching English in Bangladesh has been a matter of concern for many years (Rahman and Pandian, 2018). The outbreak of the Covid -19 pandemic created an even more complicated situation (Rahman et al.,2021). Both teachers and learners at the tertiary level had to suddenly adjust to teaching and learning online. It created a lot of doubt in the minds of learners and teachers. Anxiety, stress, lack of technical knowledge and resources, financial constraints etc. played a negative role (Mahmud et al.,2021; Yasir,2020; Khan et al., 2021; Majed et al., 2020; Sarker et al., 2019; Zaman, 2020). Most teachers were not prepared and ready, no sound pedagogical principle existed for teaching language online (Khan et al., 2021). Learners had mental health issues, financial constraints and sometimes negative attitudes toward learning English online (Khan et al., 2021). Despite such obstacles, OELT seems like is a viable solution for the academic gap created by closure during pandemics (Moser et al.,2021).

A well planned and financed pedagogical theory of OELT and uninterrupted technical and financial support to both teachers and students alike will solve the problems discussed in this study. No method is perfect, therefore, problems will always arise but in future pandemic situations if the problems discussed in this study are solved OELT can be a success. Like most research, this study is not without limitations. There is always scope to find more problems and solutions for OELT at various levels of education.

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