

Envisioning Online Language Teaching in Pakistan's Context: Lessons Learnt from Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Covid 19 impacted several social groups, including English language teachers in Pakistan's context. English language teachers encountered several issues due to the emergency shift from on-campus to online teaching mode during Covid 19. The current study was a case study that mainly investigated the university English language teachers' challenges in online teaching during the lockdown using Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) to understand language teachers' challenges. TPACK is the effectiveness of lesson delivery with the help of technology (Koehler et al., 2013). The current study also explored how university language teachers handled the arising challenges and the areas of improvement they suggested for future online language education in Pakistan. Three language teachers from a public sector university in Punjab were recruited to collect data. The data was collected through class observations in nine lessons taught by the three participant teachers and by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings suggested that the key challenges included were (a) accessibility to technology, (b) pedagogical challenges, and (c) learners' behaviour towards language learning. This study gives some practical suggestions for successful online language education in the future.

Keywords: Online teaching and learning; Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK); challenges during the pandemic

1. Introduction

Online education is shaping the traditional education system (Jie & Sunze, 2021). A noticeable increase in online teaching was witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic in most parts of the world. Online teaching and learning was the only option available for continuing education (Todd, 2020, p.5).

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This shift was relatively unplanned since educational institutions were hardly ready to adopt these measures (Rañosa-Madrurnio, 2020). Studies conducted during the pandemic frequently reported weaknesses in online teaching. For example, Tang (2019) found that online language learning may be less effective than face-to-face learning in terms of student engagement and teaching complex concepts. Understanding language teachers' challenges seem crucial since teachers play an essential role in implementing this shift and reflecting on their challenges during this change. Moreover, language teaching requires more extensive student-teacher interaction than several other subjects, particularly in the university context (Todd, 2020), so online mode impacts language teaching.

This paper focuses on English language teachers' challenges in online teaching. It chose Pakistan's higher education context, where switching to online teaching was sudden, relatively unplanned, and constrained due to the institutions' limited resources during emergencies. Some studies (e.g., Tarrayo et al., 2021; Voogtv & McKenney, 2016) found face-to-face communication more successful than online mode. However, several factors are that online language teaching seems to be a regular part of the post-pandemic. This paper is not focusing on those factors. Instead, it mainly focuses on identifying the challenges language teachers faced due to the sudden shift to online teaching during the pandemic, how they overcame the issues, and what improvements are needed to make online teaching-learning successful, especially in low economic contexts like Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Teaching and Learning before Covid

Cope and Kalantzis (2013) emphasised a need for an ongoing review of traditional teaching approaches and understanding how they can be adapted in online mode to meet the requirements. Studies before the pandemic explored the positive and negative effects of technology and learning innovation among learners and teachers (e.g., Caldwell, 2018; Frazer et al., 2017; Herrando-Rodrigo, 2017; Voogt & McKenney, 2016). In the field of English language teaching, before the pandemic, research centred around the topics such as the use and effects of online technology on language education and integrating technology and internet-based applications in language teaching (Lawrence et al., 2020; Ulla et al., 2020), teachers'

perceptions about learners in online English language courses (Guler, 2018), the ways technology can help in ELT and the strategies to do online teaching of ELT (Tang et al., 2020; Tour, 2020). In general, these studies reflect that the integration of technology in language learning can improve learners' cognitive and creative skills by providing a learner-centered atmosphere (Steele et al., 2019).

Some English language teachers viewed technology-based learning as an opportunity to enhance learning, while others could negatively view learners' engagement (Trinder, 2015; Vurdien, 2019; Nicol et al., 2018). In addition, learners' understanding of the content (Forrester, 2020) and limited skills in handling technology (Andrei, 2016) were common challenges.

Generally, the studies before Covid-19 considered online teaching and learning a supplement to face-to-face or physical teaching and learning. During the Covid-19 online teaching was the only option left to continue studying in many educational contexts worldwide. Moreover, online education before the pandemic was usually experimented and experienced in economically prosperous contexts where teachers and learners had access to technological devices (e.g., computers, iPads, laptops, etc.) and had stable internet connections. The current shift during Covid-19 was much more challenging for the teachers and learners from low and middle-income groups. Thus, investigation of challenges imposed by online teaching during this emergency in less prosperous contexts is imperative as online education was not used before the pandemic in these contexts, and a sudden shift in limited resources might have challenged teaching and learning.

2.2 Online Teaching and Learning during Covid-19

Some recent studies investigated the impact of Covid-19 on education in various ways; for example, Bao (2020) and Zhou et al. (2020) explored administrative responsibilities and initiatives. Demuyakor (2020) and Pastor (2020) analysed learners' responses to the shift to online teaching; Mailizar et al. (2020) explored teachers' perceptions related to the institutional readiness and challenges in online education during Covid-19. Kalsoom (2021) examined the experiences of teaching mothers in Pakistan regarding their challenges in managing their work and life. However, virtual learning raised questions about successful learning. Researchers (e.g.,

Almaiah et al., 2020; Dubreil, 2020; Loo, 2020; Macnaught & Yates, 2020; Forrester, 2020) noticed that online teaching is challenging despite the affordance of technology. The affordance of technology seems to make online education feasible. Yet, online teaching and learning remain a complex matter (Dubreil, 2020; Mouchantaf, 2020), particularly for English language teachers who need to handle technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge together in online mode to make teaching successful. With this premise, the current research explores English language teachers' challenges in online classes during Covid-19 in Pakistan's higher education context.

2.3 Shifting to Online Teaching in Pakistan

In Pakistan, educational institutions were closed on 13 March 2020 due to the spread of the novel coronavirus. University teachers were advised to take classes online using online platforms, such as Zoom or Google meet. Online teaching was a new concept for English language teachers in Pakistan as language teaching is strongly associated with one-on-one or at least face-to-face interaction between teachers and learners. Research shows that learners' previous educational experience in language learning builds their beliefs (Fujiwara, 2012). These beliefs can play a vital role in successful or less successful teaching. In Pakistan's context, neither teachers nor students experienced online teaching and learning, and they were not prepared for this change.

2.4 Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)

This study used Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) to understand English language teachers' challenges. TPACK has been expanded from Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Shulman, 1986). Koehler et al. (2013) introduced it to envision teacher knowledge needed for instructional practices and technology. This model comprises three knowledge domains: pedagogical knowledge, technical knowledge, and content knowledge. Instead of looking at these three domains independently, it focuses on the interaction of these domains; Koehler et al. (2013) argued that effective teaching with technology could be achieved with more interaction among these three knowledge domains. The point where technical knowledge interacts with pedagogical knowledge informs the way teachers may use technology for educational purposes. The point where technical knowledge interacts with content knowledge illuminates

the way teachers may use technology for certain course content. The end where pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge interact, highlights the way teachers can use course content and teaching knowledge during their teaching.

This framework will help identify where English language teachers face challenges while teaching online in the university context. Since online teaching (maybe in the form of blended education) seems to take place as a routine in post-covid time, TPACK can be integrated into the post-Covid-19 English language syllabus in Pakistan, thus arises a need to draw our attention to 'the connections, interactions, affordances, and constraints between and among content, pedagogy, and technology (Koehler et al., 2013). This study identified the challenges or areas to improve in online teaching. It investigated the following research question:

2.5 Research Questions

1. Which challenges did English language teachers face in online teaching in Pakistan's context?
2. How did they handle these challenges?#
3. What areas of improvement did they suggest for future online education?

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The current study adopted a case study method. This study recruited three English language teachers who teach at a public university in the Punjab province of Pakistan. They all had more than five years of full-time work experience and were trained ELT practitioners by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The researcher observed three classes of each teacher in online mode, thus forming nine (N=9) online classes.

3.2 Class Observati

The researcher observed three complete lessons of each teacher. One observation was two hours long with a ten-minute break in between. She took observation notes on the significant aspects of technology, pedagogy, content, and students.

3.3 Interviews

After each session, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers, i.e., three teachers' interviews conducted after each observed lesson (N=9 interviews in total). All of them were using Zoom as a platform to teach online. With their approval, the interviews were recorded. This study also used TPACK in designing the interview questions.

3.4 Data Collection

Classroom observations were noted in writing by the researcher. The interviews were conducted verbally in a mix of their native language Urdu and professional language (i.e., English), depending on each participant's choice.

3.5 Data Analysis

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Another English-Urdu expert double-checked each transcript to avoid any errors. Pauses, speech fillers, etc., were removed at the checking stage. The researcher translated the transcription into English; she is an English-Urdu translator. Later on, the translated files were sent to the participants for translation agreement. This process guaranteed transparency. Participating teachers' approved data was used as an instrument.

Interview data were analysed using NVivo software, and a thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved three steps.

- First, the data was coded with ideas (themes) related to pedagogical challenges, and the views were named.
- Then the identified themes (coding) were carefully compared, looking at their relationships and placing them under three key concepts found in the current study, including technology, pedagogy, and English language learner.
- Finally, the researcher re-evaluated all the themes/codes and their relationship (i.e., how teachers are challenged to teach learners online).

With the coding based on a top-down approach, themes were sorted out accordingly, such as (1) technology mediation, (2) disruptive pedagogy, (3) English teaching, and (4) learning flexibility.

4. Results

The findings highlighted three main challenges (themes) English language teachers faced in online English language teaching in higher education, which is as follows:

- accessibility challenges to technology (e.g., buying computers, iPads or laptops) and technology handling (e.g., how to operate Zoom/Teams as teaching platforms and use of their specific feature including breakout rooms, screen share, conducting an online survey, making host and co-host etc.) were vital challenges.
- Pedagogical challenges included teaching longer texts or concepts, e.g., language analysis. Teachers wanted to learn some practical ways to handle such issues. Also, conducting writing tests and avoiding cheating was found challenging. Initially, teachers did not have courses/modules and exercise ready to deliver online, and they had to do it; this increased their workload.
- Learners' behaviour towards language learning in terms of their motivation to engage was challenging.

The detailed findings are as follows:

4.1 Technology-related challenges

In Pakistan's context, affordability to buy a computer is low among the students of public sector universities as they generally come from middle and low-income groups. Online teaching pushed teachers and students to purchase computers, an additional burden on them and their families.

Teacher#1 told

"Online teaching forced some students from low economic backgrounds to buy computers. Students have large families and many siblings in a household study simultaneously; thus, buying a computer for each child is almost impossible for parents. A single family may hardly afford one computer for exams/assessments in a low-income household, while other children usually use mobile phones to attend lectures. A girl

informed me that her father had to sell his motorcycle to buy a computer; otherwise, her BS (Hons) degree would be at stake."

Since the start of online teaching, broadband speed has fluctuated in the daytime due to increased users, and it has caused hindrances in delivering and attending lectures.

Teacher# 2 reported the broadband speed issue:

"The speed of the internet is sometimes slow, and it is hard to connect for myself and students....it breaks the teaching temperament."

All teachers agreed that online teaching needs technical knowledge and skills.

Teacher#2 reported:

"I was more worried about developing and timely using the functions in Zoom, such as sharing screen, using breakout rooms function, using chat, whiteboard functions and making host and co-host etc. She agreed that these skills diverted their focus from teaching and learning to technology handling."

Teacher#1 reported the challenge:

".....in the beginning, Zoom connection automatically ended after every 40 minutes, which distorted the flow of my lesson. However, students and I were habitual later on, and they would re-connect in case of loss of connection".

4.2 Pedagogy-related challenges

Teaching the reading skill was difficult in online mode. Students had to read long texts on the screen, which needed more focus and time than reading on paper. Teachers viewed the turning of book pages as more interactive than reading on screen.

Teacher# 3 stated:

"Students can read various pieces of information by turning pages side by side, but they cannot do so on a computer and mobile devices."

She further mentioned:

"...In online mode, we cannot physically check students which page/part of the text they are reading; rather, we have to rely on whatever they say."

All teachers agreed that teaching grammar is more straightforward than teaching concepts or language analysis in an online mode. They taught grammar by sending students worksheets by email and later discussing them in class. In contrast, teaching concepts needed more detailed discussion and reading more extended texts, which proved challenging.

".....I preferred teaching grammar more extensively as it was easier to teach rules. I made grammar worksheets and sent students their emails before the start of the lesson. I would instruct them in-class time, followed by students solving the exercises. Teaching longer texts, such as comprehension passages, summary writing, and language analysis, was hard in an online class. These topics needed longer attention from students and teaching in online mode. I could not ensure who were attentive and who was not. A teacher had to speak a lot in teaching such topics, and I was often exhausted after teaching them."

She also found academic writing challenging. Teacher# 3 explained:

".....I think teaching academic writing is tough in online mode. I had to conduct individual tutorials to explain to each student the linking of ideas and coherence. I shared my computer screen with each student in the online class. In the physical classroom, I walk around the class to view how they are handling the task."

All teachers agreed that they did not have enough resources for online teaching. To develop such resources, they had to spend long hours teaching online classes, which increased their workload. However, they were hopeful that all their hard work would pay off and have materials/resources ready in the future.

Teacher#2 said:

"This shift to online teaching increased English language teachers' load tremendously. In the beginning, we did not have resources or materials for teaching in an online mode. So, we had to type and design worksheets and other materials. I had to sit on the computer for the whole night

sometimes. I know this is a one-time effort, and we can re-use the materials in future classes if online teaching continues."

All teachers found online assessment very challenging. They reported that all students' online arrival to the online platform due to internet connectivity was sometimes an issue, and the exam could not start at the scheduled time. Moreover, teachers had to limit their assessment to under 40 minutes to avoid hassle as the accessible version of the Zoom connection automatically ended in Pakistan after every 40 minutes.

English language teachers found that cheating/copying was an issue despite the fact they gave clear instructions to students to be alone at examination time with cameras on and keeping their eyes on the screen. Before the exam, they asked students to show their sitting space/room through a computer camera and during the exam, they constantly invigilated students online. With the university's permission, teachers had to allow students without desktops and laptops to do the assessment with pen on paper and connect live on mobile phone with camera on and place it in front of them to ensure that teacher can invigilate them like other students. At the end of exam time, such students took pictures of all pages and sent them to the teachers' email.

Teacher#1 expressed concern about the exam fairness in the process of taking and sending pictures to the teacher's email; such practice gave students extra time, which was unfair as they could copy or cheat. Teachers asked students to upload the document picture within 10 minutes; students sometimes took more than 10 minutes, excusing slow internet.

4.3 Learners' behaviour towards language learning

4.3.1 Motivational Issues

Participants' university initiated an online platform for teachers to record the talks or even brief lectures online in response to the Covid-19 closure. Later, teachers were instructed to record their lectures at home and upload it on the given platform. Though recorded lectures and online teaching seemed a viable option in stressful times, teachers and students found it boring. Recording lectures was a challenge for teachers as neither had training or prior experience of recording nor lecture recording equipment or

studio. However, as an alternative, they used mobile phones to record the lectures, which was challenging for them. Teacher#2 explained:

".....background noise at home was a big issue for me while recording the lecture as I live in a house located on the main road, and traffic noise could not be avoided. Students found recorded lessons boring because they missed the one-to-one conversation with teachers. Later on, all classes were turned live on Zoom, Google Meet and Teams with a recording option and to place lectures on the university's web page for students' reference post attendance."

One critique related to the content of English language teaching was that students used mobile phones for taking online classes because many of them did not have a desktop or a laptop, whereas language teaching in the local context required extensive text reading and writing. Teachers were sending the materials to students but reading extended texts on mobile phones was challenging due to mobile's limited screen and academic features. Printing or photocopying the texts was not easily affordable for lower-income groups. Thus, all three teachers reported that they modified the materials to reduce students' challenges, such as they reduced the length of the texts and allowing the student to write their responses on paper instead of typing on the computer and sending the pictures taken from the mobile to the teacher's email address.

4.3.2 Distraction & Less Discipline

Many students live in large families or a joint family setup, making it challenging to attend online classes peacefully. Students cannot ask their family members to keep silent all the time. Teachers advised them to use the 'mute' option, except when speaking. However, students are disturbed by the background noise or activity.

4.3.3 Increasing bilingualism

The researcher noticed frequent bilingualism in online English language classes. Teachers and students often used their first language (L1) for lesson instructions or handling of Zoom. In contrast, they completed the writing and reading activities in English, which showed that English was mainly the language of reading and writing. In an interview, teacher#1 reported:

".....online teaching needed us to be bilingual otherwise students may not comprehend instructions because online teaching restricts the body

language, and we need to rely on verbal communication and instructions in Urdu are easier for students to comprehend."

With limited body language (e.g., having a glance at their writing scripts during class by getting close to their seat or placing a finger on their textbook to discuss something) needed more thorough verbal instructions in online mode. Also, teacher#3 reported:

".....online teaching mainly demands verbal communication whereas, in the face to face teaching, paralinguistic skills also helped them. Thus, they had to be bilingual, which hampered the aim of using 'English only' in their class."

In group works, particularly in the breakout rooms, students preferred to speak in their first language and English, which was seen as damaging by all three teachers.

5. Discussion

Like some earlier studies (e.g., Drent & Meelissen, 2008; Voogt & McKenney, 2016), the current study also reflected that teachers faced challenges in blended teaching, and lack of technological knowledge was one of the problems. In the current study, teachers reported struggles in handling technology and lacking the training to address the specific problems related to technology use. However, teachers agreed that they could sort out some issues when they learned the use of technology. Almaiah et al. (2020) found that efficient use of technology determines online teaching and learning success. Similarly, English language teachers felt the need to develop skills necessary to teach online, mainly related to the platform they use to take full advantage of its features. Some unexpected technology-related issues, for example, broadband speed and power failure, cause anxiety. Pedagogical challenges were also immense, which overburdened them with the extra work to develop online resources and caused frustration and a lack of confidence in making online teaching successful. Despite all odds, this study found that online education proved one way to avoid a complete interruption in studies during a pandemic; however, it is not a complete substitute for face-to-face learning. To ensure that technology is used effectively, the availability of computers, laptops, and equipment is mandatory for all teachers and students. Online teaching requires some prerequisites to ensure successful education (Mouchantaf,

2020). These prerequisites include enough economic resources, training to handle resources, qualified teachers to conduct successful online classes, etc. Also, technical failures must be reduced, such as power shutdown and slow broadband speed. This study confirmed Mouchantaf's (2020) findings which highlighted that slow broadband speed becomes a prominent issue in online teaching, which should also be checked. Learners should be highly motivated to overcome challenges in online learning because of the less teacher-learner interaction than in face-to-face learning in a physical classroom. In the Pakistan context, where teachers and students live in large families or joint families, background noise and quiet learning spaces were the challenges that reduced learners' motivation. Thus, such issues should be kept in mind when planning online classes.

The increased bilingualism in online English language classes was a noticeable phenomenon that emerged naturally to overcome physical distance. It shows that languages are in contact in online language teaching. For users, it is challenging to be monolingual and separate languages with different labels; thus, they use other codes (English and Urdu in this case) as a repertoire (Canagarajah, 2013). Canagarajah (2013) highlighted that despite the appreciation of monolingual orientation in some educational contexts, the mixing of codes increases. Hence, it should be accepted within reasonable limits. This increasing bilingualism in this study shows that though English remained a dominant language, learners' L1 also served their needs in the classroom. Ideally, English should be the language in the English language classroom. Yet, it is essential to understand that languages are not opposed to one another (Canagarajah, 2013). Instead of viewing one language as an advantage and another as a disadvantage is not suggested because, naturally, they exist together in a cluster. Following Aronin and Lo Bianco (2020), the mutual co-existence of languages is a strength as they complement each other. However, the teachers should carefully understand that by extensive training and building English language capacity, they can help students use English only in their English language classrooms.

6. Conclusion

Since online language teaching was recently introduced in Pakistan during the pandemic, English language teachers' and learners' challenges are exclusive. These challenges are multiple, related to access and expertise in the use of technology, motivation and experience, and related to the

financial affordability of teachers, learners and institutions to invest in online teaching and learning process. The current article highlighted only a few most important challenges reported. It only illustrated the hurdles university teachers at public university face in online teaching. As some challenges were faced due to the teachers' and learners' low-income backgrounds and limited resources, limited training, and their views about online pedagogy, it might be a reason for their less preference for online teaching and learning. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) and university management in public sector universities in Pakistan should understand the challenges of teachers and learners and devise policies accordingly, considering their viability for low-income groups.

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