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**A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CHALLENGES IN ONLINE ELT
CLASSROOM AMIDST COVID 19: STUDY CONDUCTED AT
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES, RAWALPINDI**

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Abstract

With the evolution and growth of novel corona virus, the complete education sector had to undergo a rapid and significant shift. It was because of the shift of the teaching mode from face to face on campus learning classes to online second language learning classroom setting. In the course of this shift the students and the teachers both had to face the unseen challenges. The commitment with the education cannot be left uncatered at any cost. Therefore, the

current study has tried to identify the issues that remained hurdle while online teaching at the university level. And for the later researchers it leaves a gap to further pinpoint the exact tasks that could enhance the online quality teaching. The purpose of the current study is to find out the challenges confronted by learners from the NUML University, Rawalpindi Campus, during the transition to online English language learning in the second semester of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and explore possible solutions and suggestions for future virtual learning.

Introduction

Consciously or unconsciously the corona virus has affected the education as a whole. Neither it has spared the teachers nor the students. The teaching methodologies that were used earlier did not prove to be enough in the midst of online teaching. And the same happened to the English language learners, especially the new coming students in the first semester at the university. The novice learners expect quality education at university level. An education that is focused towards building their career and enhancing their psychomotor skills. Before entering into the practical world university is the only platform that nourishes those sublime dreams. Whilst the high secondary school teachers both teach and ensure that task is brought to an end with the prime motive of achieving a basic level of education. On the contrary the role of university lecturers and professors is principally to provide the students with a scaffold and the skills from which they can explore their academic subject.

To achieve the purpose many independent bodies are assigned by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan to ensure the best education being provided in the universities. The course curriculum even for the English language is designed and approved by NCEAC. The National Computing Education Accreditation Council (NCEAC) is an accreditation body under the administrative control of Higher Education Commission (Pakistan). This body has provided with its own pattern of dividing and presenting the curriculum. It provides world leadership in assuring quality and in stimulating innovation in applied sciences, computing, engineering, and technology education. For the past few years, the Pakistani universities have signed a Washington Accord. This is to further comply with providing up to the mark education to the engineering universities and to pursue the Objective Based Education. The university like National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad that is considered to be the very well-established institutes in Pakistan is without a doubt very much concerned about the course curriculum and its implementation. The National University of Modern Languages is a public university with its main campus located in Islamabad, Pakistan and other satellite campuses in different cities of Pakistan. It was established as an institute in 1969 and upgraded to university on May 29, 2000.

Despite the fact that the National University of Modern Languages, Rawalpindi is striving hard to provide the quality education to the students but still, the teachers and the students faced some genuine issues. For example, while using E-learning platforms like Learning Management System, online meets or google classroom there were some factors that might be considered hurdles in students' due course of learning. These difficulties added to the problems already faced by the students, such as lessened motivation in English language learners, tardy feedback or assistance due to the fact that teachers were not always available at the time students may need help while learning, or moods of quarantine and isolation due to lack of physical presence of class fellows. But the positive factor here is that, these hinderances and complications can be overcome and avoided with the help of language teachers who should adapt their teaching strategies to the needs of students. In order to achieve the desired results, experience and knowledge about teaching in the online

environment is necessary. Further in order to resolve the issues the students are facing during the online English language classroom settings it is necessary first to identify the problems. The students should be asked to share their issues so the teaching staff would be able to comprehend the problems and finally resolve the issues. The study actually provides us with the problems and challenges faced by the students of first semester in NUML, Rawalpindi.

Literature Review

Online learning has become a significant module in education, and it is thought to offer distinctive advantages in the learning progression (Appana, 2008; Dolence & Norris, 1995; Katz, 1999; Shopova, 2014). Therefore, around the world in many countries, instruction or mode of teaching has begun to alter from traditional or face-to-face classroom settings to online learning environments. This shift can be observed, has been occurring almost in all faculties of education, including English language learning (Vovides, Sanchez-Alonso, Mitropoulou, & Nickmans, 2007). Clarke and Hermens (2001) suggested that online learning is actually student-centered because, it is in the hands of the students to set their own learning pace. Furthermore, the activities can be flexible and adaptable so as to better ensemble according to a student's preferred learning style. Active learning opportunities are built in online teaching scenario (Dolence & Norris, 1995).

Mostly, online allocated courses are ekitted with dynamic functions and operates. For example, the online exercises can contain the videos or the downloads. Students learning online have to know how to perform a variety of functions on laptop or computer systems for example how to click, drilldown, open new windows, and save files (Tsai, 2009; Wang & Chen 2007; Wu, Fitzgerald & Witten, 2014). In the field of cognitive issues and challenges, English language learners need developed and sophisticated cognitive ability to comply with the more multi-dimensional and multimodal learning tasks and complex content (Tyler-Smith, 2006). In addition, the good online classroom setting, that might include the good online learning applications or software, the students get the opportunities to express opinions, participate in the discussion and further share expertise equally, no matter what is the size of the classroom or the time (Harasim, Calvert & Groeneboer, 1997).

With regard to self-perceptive and metacognitive issues and challenges, online learners enjoy a great freedom and autonomy with respect to the expression of thoughts and skills and of learning. May be it is due to the fact that there are no specified class schedules, and classroom attendance is not compulsory (Tsai, 2009). In such a scenario a positive thing is that the students take the responsibility of learning, on themselves and somehow, they monitor and self-regulate their learning style as well as the learning outcomes by setting up a studying schedule to ensure they achieve all the provided tasks and be done with their assignments well on time. According to Chang's (2013) study, students who adopted the self-monitoring performed academically better than those who did not on the test of general English proficiency.

The third challenge on the online classes could be the involvement of computer and thus this gives rise to the Internet anxiety. According to Aydin (2011), computer anxiety adds to a significantly negative impact on learners' achievement of the goals and the tasks. This is due to the fact that when a student is studying, he is uni focused and in the due course if the internet went down or the charging of the laptop falls down and if the student has no access to internet or the electricity the student would feel frustrated. This is because the student might not be able to follow the instructions and the lessons. This triggers anxiety and apprehensions among lower Internet skilled students (Ekizoglu & Ozcinar, 2010; Saadé & Kira, 2009).

In order to achieve the online learning goals, Online Learning Strategies (OLS) are adopted. OLS is defined as students' ability to control and understand their learning process by retaining a range of cognitive, metacognitive, resources management strategies and affective strategies in order to achieve online learning goals. Another factor that adds to online learning achievement is affection in online learning (Hu & Grambling; 2009; Tsai, 2009; Zarisky & Styles, 2000).

Cognitive strategies, according to Cook and Mayer (1983), Payne, (1992), Pintrich, Smith, Garcia and McKeachie (1993), and Puzziferro (2008), can be defined as the behaviors required in order to successfully achieve the knowledge during the course of engaging in the learning process. These components include selection, acquisition, construction, and integration of information. Cognitive strategies are sub-divided into six strategies namely (1) rehearsal strategies, (2) elaboration strategies, (3) organization strategies, (4) comprehension/critical thinking strategies, and (5) internet skills.

Affective (triggering the emotions) strategies in online learning, according to Tsai, (2009) depends upon the students' perceptions towards the fact that to what extent he thinks that he could benefit or gain from online learning. It also includes the willingness to learn by having a positive attitude, motivation, and ways to reduce anxiety in a particular learning environment. It is sub-divided into three sub-strategies: attitude, motivation and anxiety control.

Shih (2005) conducted a study. This study was to assess the online English language learning strategies of Taiwanese EFL learners. It was also found that successful learners used metacognitive and cognitive strategies more frequently than unsuccessful learners. Further it was observed that the successful candidates applied a larger variety of strategies. A similar result was found in Chen, Zhang, and Liu's (2014) study. Eighty-two intermediate level Chinese students' use of listening strategies in a Web-based CALL was investigated. It was found that students tended to use metacognitive strategies the most, followed by cognitive strategies; affective strategies were used the least.

Puzziferro (2008) studied the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies and students' online learning outcomes of the college students. The top strategies used were effort regulation followed by time and study environment, while peer learning and help seeking were the least used strategies. It was also found that the online learning strategies that could predict students' grades were time and learning environment. Students were more likely to achieve online course when they managed their time well and studied in a good environment.

Methodology and Participants

The study was conducted at the undergraduate level for English language learners in the Faculty of Computer Science at National University of Modern Languages, Rawalpindi. It was performed after completing online teaching classes and during the final examinations in the first semester of 2020. The sample comprised 106 students: 90 male and 16 female students in two sections of bachelor's degrees with English Composition and Comprehension as their compulsory subject. Students in the Computer Science department form the highest number of University students whereas other departments have few students. Most of the students in the study did not have any previous experience with online learning. Earlier the students were never exposed to the online teaching. They had been studying and using the computer but the online teaching on such a formal level was never observed by the students and the teachers. The examinations were conducted face-to-face.

Research Instrument

To gain and collect the data the students were given the online forms. The students were from the 1st semester. The forms were prepared on the google forms app. The form had basically three parts. The first part was only to collect their demographic data. This would tell the researcher the number of male and female participants. The second part of the form had yes/no questions. The questions were 25 in number. The questions were based mostly on their personal experiences of the students. They were asked to provide with yes/no answers to their experience of online classroom issues like if they were comfortable with the online teaching app the teacher was using and so on and so forth. The third part was about their fulfillment and contentment with achieving the course contents in online English language learning classroom. These were actually the open-ended questions in order to get any added information regarding online education during the COVID 19 crisis. For validity and reliability fulfillment the questionnaire was tested.

Research Questions:

1. How do ESL learners familiarize themselves with online platform?
2. How well are the remote towns equipped with the internet access for online classes?
3. How much the online pedagogy influences the students' engagement in English language learning classroom?

Research Objectives:

1. If the ESL learners familiarize themselves with the online platform.
2. If the students have the access to internet in the remote towns or not in order to take the online classes.
3. If the online pedagogy influences the students' engagement in English language learning classroom.

Results

With the data collected from the students through the online google form it came into the knowledge that students faced various issues regarding the online classes. The students faced the issues like slow internet for example if there are 50 students in the class all connected at one time, it is likely to happen that anyone of them might have any internet issue. Sometimes if the teacher has the internet problem, then the whole class is disturbed. The blackboard tool causes problem sometimes. The teacher uses the tool to write and explain simultaneously. But the problem that occurs is that sometimes due to the internet issues the board and the teachers sound do not synch properly. This causes the lack of attention among the students. Then sometimes screen is stopped again causing disruption in the middle of the lecture.

There are some other technical issues as well that do not allow the students to download the audios and the videos. Here in this institute the students further mentioned that the teachers have to take the attendance during the lecture that students due to the internet issues sometimes, remain unable to mark themselves present, during the class. Further, the students have to upload the assignments and quizzes on LMS and if by any means a few students remain unable to upload the assignments on LMS, they are made to submit the assignments or quizzes on google classroom or any other app. This way students have to expose themselves to so many different apps for simply submitting the assignments or quizzes. One more area of concern that cannot be denied is the fact that different teachers use different

apps to teach for example zoom, google meet, teams etc. according to their own ease and comfort. Resultantly the students get confused unlike in face-to-face classroom setting where the teacher come and go in the same classroom setting where there is no internet issue obviously.

Another area of concern for the students was familiarizing themselves with the online platform due to the variety of apps the teachers are using and further the LMS provided by the institute it becomes difficult for the students to familiarize themselves with that particular app. Here two problems arise: (1) the impression that the pedagogical sequencing being followed by the teachers is in appropriate or not upto the mark is falsified. Because when students are unable to use the app, they perceive as if the teacher's performance is not up to the mark which is actually not the case. (2) Secondly, the student with the rural background when puts in an effort to learn an app or program the next teacher would use another app or program. So, the students think that they are burdened with both psychologically and physically with familiarizing themselves with the app and with the new course.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

The study focusses to survey and research online learning tasks, and issues in the midst of COVID-19 confronted English as a second language learners. The synchronized e-learning was the only solution or the remedy to carry on with the activities to some extent, no matter at a low pace, at the outbreak of the COVID-19. Nevertheless, it undesirably impelled the English as a second language learners' performance and course learning outcomes. The study found out that the reason that the ESL learners faced was the technical issues mainly. Almost about 25% of the learners missed the classes and other tasks and assignments due to the non-familiarization with the app or online source being used. The study conducted at the university level revealed that the primary issue was neither that of the curriculum and nor of the teachers or the university admin but the internet connectivity problems like accessing the online classes, that further lead to the submission of tasks or downloading the teaching material.

A few students were unable to access the final term paper because they did not know how to use the app because they missed the tutorial conducted by the teacher due to unavailability of the internet at their hometown that was actually a remote area. And as far as the English language learning class is concerned It remained quite difficult for the students to comprehend the speaking and listening tasks. Less than 55% learners were fulfilled with the on-line classroom teaching environment. 16% learners were satisfied with the on-line classes. However, the percentage, of the ESL learners who want education to not to be continued as status quo, is 38%. Myriad issues are still left to be discussed by the teachers in the midst of this pandemic. As no one is clear about the fact that for how long the current scenario persists, therefore pedagogical study should be done with respect to areas and regions, where there is access of internet resources and the trained teaching staff, accordingly.

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