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**CHALLENGES FACED BY ELT INSTRUCTORS AT TERTIARY  
LEVEL IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VLE) DURING  
THE PANDEMIC: OPPORTUNITIES AND WAY FORWARD**

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**Abstract**

With the start of spring 2020 Pakistani educational institutes were forced to be closed due to COVID-19, the outbreak of the pandemic caused the universities to close the campuses temporarily and start online teaching. The purpose of this research is to find out the challenges which teachers faced during online learning during COVID-19 and the way forward in ELT practices in the times of COVID-19. The sudden overnight transition in response to the global educational emergency imposed because of the pandemic, left 1.2 billion children out of school in 186 countries. COVID-19 has redefined the future path of education. Engaging students in communicative activities became our way forward. Just as we were mastering this approach through practice, came the remote classes, and the issue of effectively engaging students without ever setting eyes on them. The digital divide due to the availability of infrastructure requires out of the box innovative solutions to bridge the newest inequity in education. The study explores the challenges faced by instructors in ELT classrooms during COVID-19. The research is quantitative in nature, universities teachers are selected as sample of the study. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to find out the challenges faced by the instructors during online teaching in their classrooms. The interviews are analysed thematically to know the perception of teachers regarding online learning and also the challenges they faced during that time.

## Introduction

In the early Spring of 2020, an unknown virus called corona virus was discovered in the seafood market of Wuhan. The clinical tests results proved person-to-person transmission. The sign visible in the patients of COVID patients were infection of lungs, flu, cough and breathing issues, although this virus was also found in animals as well but proved deadly in humans and the infection transmitted in other humans through human touch. Medical institutes declared COVID-19 a type of flu but this flu proved extremely perilous for humans as it spread through physical contact (Iqbal et al. 2020). It was in March 2020 that the Director General of WHO officially announced Covid-19 as a pandemic. The decision was taken by keeping in consideration the rapid spread and severity of the virus (Huang et al., 2020). In addition, the social distancing was made compulsory at public places and SOPs were followed strictly to stop the spread of the deadly virus.

The fatal spread of the viral disease called Corona virus affected not only the economy globally but also jolted the educational institutes as well. The virus was deadly and spreads in public places rapidly, so it was the need of the hour to maintain social distancing to keep the nations safe and alive. The result of this outbreak caused the closure of the educational institutes to maintain the social distancing (Dhawan, 2020). Many schools and colleges were temporarily closed due to the outbreak. The whole scenario changed altogether. There were also the chances that the ongoing semesters could be on the risk due to the sudden unpredictable situation.

As Dhawan, 2020 stated in his research “As per the assessment of the researchers, it is uncertain to get back to the normal teaching soon. As social distancing is preeminent at this stage, this will have negative effects on learning opportunities”. It was due to the consequences of the COVID that educational institutes went towards closure in March 2020, though in May educational institutes started to open partially but many restrictions were imposed on the institutes. Consequently, instructors sat in front of their computers and started online teaching in this short period of time, while students were also sitting at their homes and teachers were facilitating online session to their students (Bao, 2020). This time was crucial and critical especially for those teachers who were used to of the traditional teaching and now they were worried to adopt the new strategies. As it is always difficult not only to switch to new mode of learning but to excel in that field as well. The situation was extremely unpredictable and there was no confirmation about the reopening of the institutes in consequence teachers had to switch to online learning and faced multiple challenges (König et al., 2020).

By keeping in consideration, the whole scenario, it was the need of the hour to keep the educational institutes temporarily closed. Now it was the need of the hour to switch to online learning to survive in the world by accepting it as a challenge. Different type of technologies is utilized to assist online learning which include laptops, smartphones, internet, and social media. There were some institutes who were reluctant to switch towards online learning but were forced to switch to online learning (Nuraini, 2020). The sudden shift from traditional learning to online learning required the capacity building of teacher. Restrictions imposed on travelling due to COVID brought several changes in the teaching around the world. Face-to-face meetings were replaced with video conference meetings. Different apps like Zooms, Teams and Google Classroom were utilized to make online learning a success, teachers were trained to conduct online sessions as it was difficult for Pakistani teachers to

cope up with the situation in such hard times. In recent times Zoom has gained significant importance and is used in online classes, as it is easy to use and users friendly, its simple features, low network bandwidth demand resulted in so-called Zoom booming. Although Zoom got popularity for being for its simple features' media house expressed their concerns for security and privacy issues. End-to-end encryption is not provided in Zoom app, though the facility of the password authentication is provided but the option of using option is made optional sometimes for the sake of making the app more user friendly (Mohanty & Yaqub 2020). To cope up with the current situation it was important that teachers should learn the technology and feel motivated towards online learning. The closure of the educational institutes transformed these educational institutes to sharpen their ICT skills to smoothly facilitate their online classes. The transformation to online teaching was quite unexpected and unpredicted because of the pandemic and it required wider ICT transition process in the educational system. The rapid progress in the digitalization became an essential requirement of the educational systems. One important argument related to the closure of the institutes was concerned with the gap between student's conventional learning and development at school as the curriculum also needs to undergo major changes, different opportunities should be provided to the students to use the technological tools at the advance level (König et al., 2020).

This present study investigates the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers during pandemic and to look for the way forward in online learning. The sudden overnight shift from traditional teaching to online teaching was a drastic transformation not only for students but teachers and in this scenario, it was the need of the hour to take online learning as a challenge and look the ways forward to conduct online classes smoothly and in successful way.

### **Research Questions**

1. What were some challenges faced by ELT educationist during pandemic?
2. What is the way forward in this digitally transformed world of education?

### **Objectives**

- To find out the challenges faced by teachers during pandemic
- To explore the way forward in the digitally transformed world

### **Research Gap**

COVID was highly infectious disease and caused lock down all over the world, educational institutes were temporarily closed students were facilitated through online sessions. Many educational institutes were not ready to switch to online learning as instructors had certain apprehensions in their mind, few of them were the engagement of students during the session, to keep students motivated for active participation in class and to make sure the presence of students during online sessions by using the different strategies effectively. This research explores the challenges which teachers faced during online learning during COVID-19 and the way forward in ELT practices in ESP classrooms.

### **Literature Review**

The spread of the novel virus corona virus resulted into person-to-person transmission, discovered in |China in a sea market. It was a time when the whole world plunged into the depression and anxiety to save themselves from the virus. As the clinical

analysis proved that the virus spread from human touch, henceforth, the director general of WHO made the announcement for social distancing. The decision was taken to stop the spread of the deadly virus which could be possible by implementing the rules for social distancing (Farboodi et al., 2021). The outbreak of the virus caused the closure of the educational institutes to stop the spread of the virus. Educational institutes had to terminate the ongoing semester and future assessments because educational institutes were closed and researchers assessed that “it is uncertain to get back to normal teaching anytime soon” (Dhawan, 2020). New challenges require new skills to meet the challenges the closure of the educational institutes made the online learning compulsory and the institutes which were not ready to go online also switched to online learning (Carey, 2020).

### **Online Learning**

Technology has played a vital role in the manifestation of technological tools in the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and consequently technology has become an integral part of routine life (Barzani et al., 2021). Online learning has provided greater opportunities not only to teachers but students as well (Erarslan & Arslan, 2019). The traditional teaching methods have been replaced by online learning and teachers are more profound in the usage of technology.

Latest development in technology has made online learning convenient. The mode of online learning like web-based learning, computer mediated learning, blended learning and m-learning can be continued from anywhere, all you need to do is to relate to a computer and network (Dhawan, 2020). Online learning can be considered as tool which can make the learning experience student-centred and ingenious. Online learning can be defined as “learning experiences in synchronous and asynchronous environments using different devices like mobiles phones and laptops with internet access. In these environments student can be anywhere (independent) to learn and interact with instructors and other students” (Singh and Thurman, 2019). Synchronous learning environment is termed more organized as sessions are facilitated face-to-face and real-life interaction occurs between instructor and learners. While in asynchronous learning environment learners do not get immediate feedback nor real-life interaction is possible, recorded lectures are available for students. During this situation it is important that the facilities like video conferencing, stable internet connection, availability of lectures not only on laptops/computers but also on mobile phones (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020).

A research in 2020 on “Impact of Virtual Teaching on ESL learners” was conducted to examine the attitudes of students towards virtual teaching. Sample of the research were university students. The research explored those students had positive attitude towards virtual teaching, although it was a brand-new experience for them, and it took a while in adjusting in the “new normal”, but it was a happy experience for them.

### **Online Learning Indispensable during pandemic**

Most of the world was quarantined due to pathetic situation of pandemic COVID-19, henceforth, many cities turned into phantom cities which consequently effected the educational institutions as well. In the amidst of this pandemic online learning and online teaching can be considered as panacea (Dhawan, 2020). Educational institutions must move towards online learning from the traditional method of teaching. Many institutions which were reluctant to go online had to accept the change and adopted different platforms for online pedagogical approaches. It was a sudden overnight shift from traditional classrooms to

online classroom therefore the quality learning grabbed the attention of many educationists. However, in the times of corona the initial focus was not the online learning methods but how to conduct online learning in such massive manner (Carey, 2020).

### **Challenges**

Practices in Education changes along with the time integrating contemporary skills in education systems (Umer et al., 2018). Therefore, digital transformation is not something new to the world, it has gone along with the higher education for many years now. This transformation has been the concern of many educationists hence, it has been a challenge for the universities to prepare for online teaching and apply ICT successfully in several domains. Kopp et al. (2019) considered five common assumptions which he explained were the impediments to digital transformation of higher of higher education and these assumptions are linked to (i) change (ii)pace (iii)technology, (iv) compactness and (v) financing. Digitalization he further explained should not be considered as e-learning as online is one of the features digital transformation of higher education institutes (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). In the times of digital transformation mode of delivery, it is evident that there were some challenges as well. To access students' assessments according to the grading policies, is one of the biggest challenges. To keep the grading unbiased and even handed, districts must enact the policies by keeping in considerations the following factors, (i) stress caused by pandemic left negative effects on students' performance (ii) students' academic performance is also influenced by ethnical, economical and resources differences and (iii) most of the instructors were not ready for online mode of learning (Ribeiro, 2020).

Instructors faced many challenges during online learning and these challenges were not limited to instructors but students as well. Students' concerns were about their grades as online learning was a brand-new experience for them and it was for the first time that they were sitting in their homes and getting online education. So, it was tiresome practice to keep students motivated and engaged during online learning. The substantial challenge for teachers was to engage the learners during online sessions (Dhawan, 2020), as in Pakistani traditional mode of learning students are not accustomed to the digital mode of learning and were reluctant to participate in online class. For teachers it was a brand-new experience to move from face-to-face to online mode of learning, and to switch to the teaching methodologies which cater to virtual learning environment. Developing the content which not only covers the course content but also keep the learners engaged was another challenge for instructors (Dhawan, 2020).

According to Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020 online learning has its advantages too, like flexibility (Smedley, 2010), interactivity, self-pacing (Amer, 2007) and opportunities. The current efforts to adopt online transformation by universities is due to the demand of both local and global practices as it was the requirement of the digitally transformed world to move towards online learning. Online learning methods and procedures are well-built, which can save us from unpredictable hard times. Online learning is flexible regarding timings and location as e-learning authorizes its learner to customize the processes and procedures depending on the requirements of the learners (Dhawan, 2020).

Apart from the opportunities there are certain weaknesses too in online methods. As it creates gap in the communication of instructor and student because both are not physically present, so the communication is hampered (Favale et al., 2020). In such cases the nonserious behavior of students irritates the instructors. All students are different in terms of their

capacity to learn, they vary in terms of their capacities and confidence level. Some learners find full convenience in online methods while on the other hand there are some students who are frustrated and confused. There can be several reasons for learner's annoyance such inappropriate compatibility between "the design of the technology and component of psychology required by the learning process".

The procedures and methods of online learning are robust which can save us from the hard times. It facilitates the students with a great deal of flexibility regarding time and location. The availability of the online tools enables the learners to customize the procedures depending on the requirements of the learners. These tools make the online learning environment more efficient and successful. Instructors utilizes the combo of audio, videos, and the text to connect to their learners in the times of crises, it provides healthy and interactive learning environment to the students (Dhawan, 2020).

### **Methodology**

Online and face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection with open ended questions. It is with the help of the interviews that a researcher elicits teacher's knowledge, attitude, and perception (Birello, 2012). To elicit demographic information a written questionnaire was also employed. The teachers at University of Central Punjab were selected randomly as sample of the study, who taught students during VLE. Ten university teachers were selected as participants of the study, five male and five female teachers. Convenient sampling method was chosen for the study. The research was qualitative in nature.

The tool used for collecting data was semi-structure interview. Questionnaire was adapted for interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned to teachers to keep clarity in research. The content of the interview data was thematically analyzed.

### **Results and Findings**

#### **Interview analysis**

According to Gill et al. (2008) in qualitative research semi-structured interview is one of the most common methods used for data collection. It is essential to target those questions which can elicit extensive information from the participants and can meet the objectives and goals of the study in effective manner.

#### **Themes**

Following themes emerged after the interview's thematic analysis:

##### **Challenges**

- Lack of motivation in students
- Internet connectivity issue
- Student's engagement
- Monitoring the students

##### **Way forward**

- Incorporate more interesting activities
- Teacher's training in technological tools
- Cameras must be used to make the sessions more interactive.

##### **Lack of motivation in students**

The most coined theme was lack of motivation in students and all participants of the study were found talking about this issue 'lack of motivation in students' they were reluctant to attend online session and resultantly they were demotivated. P1M stated during the interview "there was no self-motivation students lacked motivation and therefore they were not interested in online classes". P2M said that "students were very much reluctant in accepting this sudden change" Most of the participants said that when teachers are unable to see the instructors. P3M "keeping student's motivational level, concern and interest up was the major challenge. The overnight shift to online classes was a big change for students they were reluctant because they were afraid of this new situation which became one of the major reasons for lack of motivation for online classes. P7F stated that of course the student is not in front of them and teacher is not in front of them, and student lose their interest.

### **Student's engagement**

Another theme which emerged was student's engagement during online classes. Teachers reported that it was difficult to engage students during online sessions as it was first time that students were attending online sessions. P6F "Student's engagement was the worse challenge", in Pakistan it was the first time that all university had to switch to online mode of learning which was one of the major factors. P3M "when you are not physically before them you see make them realize about our prosodic feature and the non-verbal and paralinguistics features like our facial expressions. The involvement in the classes P1M "students were not able to engage themselves properly there was no self-motivation" as it was a sudden shift from traditional to online mode of learning, so it took students time to settle themselves in online setting.

### **Internet connectivity issue**

The second theme which emerged after the interviews was the connectivity issue, as this was not only the concern of the instructor but students as well, however, teachers were more concerned about this issue, P2M said "I was relying on three different connections at the same time" P5F said loss of internet connectivity certain times. P9M "The first challenge was use of technology and internet for teaching purpose" as teaching becomes an impossible task without technology in online sessions, so teachers were more concerned with technology to keep their sessions interactive. Not only teacher's own internet connection was their concern but also student's connection was teacher's concern. This challenge was a major concern of teachers because students used to exploit such situations so resultantly teachers were more concerned and vigilant. P6F said "connectivity issue sometimes from my side and sometimes from student's side"

### **Monitoring the students**

Monitoring students was another challenge for teachers because in online sessions the environment was totally different. Sometimes students log in and then leave the sessions just to mark their attendance in class. P5F "To monitor when somebody slipped out of class" as in physical classes monitoring is an easy task because students are right in front of your eyes but in online classes it was a hard nut to crack. P10F "sometimes when you see the attendance list you can see the students there but when you ask something they do not respond", P7F "this is something beyond of screen, there is nobody who is looking over their shoulder" there is no accountability on them.

## **Discussion**

### **Way forward**

#### **Incorporate more interesting activities**

Student's engagement was one of the major issues in online classes and to engage student's teachers suggested to involve students in some activities which could become the reason of their involvement. As English is a theoretical subject and instructors need to incorporate more activities to make the session more interactive. P5F stated "if we incorporate some activities which are more interactive" it would serve the purpose of conducting the session. P3M "we can use some techniques and activities which should be somewhat like the short videos or clips" P3M stated students are unable to understand the topics if teachers do not incorporate activities "we are unable to comprehend the concepts" P10F stated without activities sessions are not fruitful "the activities can be called life of a session."

#### **Teacher's training in technological tools**

In this digital era the usage of technological tools has become compulsory for all and sundry, especially for teachers who are facilitating online sessions. Teachers training on technological tools emerged as a significant theme because if teachers are not trained, they could not train and engage their students during the session.

P1M stated teachers should be trained in the usage of technology for smooth facilitation of sessions "Teachers are not able to use computer properly". P10F reported that if teachers are not trained the sessions won't be engaging for students because teachers would be busy in tackling those issues and students would suffer "the more a teacher is efficient more interactive session would be".

#### **Cameras must be used to make the sessions more interactive**

While looking the ways forward in ELT practices in online sessions another theme emerged to make the sessions more engaging was turning on the cameras. It is considered important to turn on the cameras to monitor the students as students are more vigilant when they know that teachers are looking at them. P7F was of the view that there is a psychological "to reduce the psychological barrier cameras should be on". P10F stated that cameras should be turned for surveillance of students and to keep them alert "turning the cameras on is one of the best strategies to keep students alert".

#### **Limitations of the study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the challenges which instructors faced during online teaching and also the way forward in ELT practices.

- The limitation of the study is that the study was conducted in one university and the data could not be considered enough to make an overall generalization.
- Moreover, the focus of the study were only ESP teachers; the findings could be different if the second language teaching had been focused.

#### **Conclusions**

"Natural disasters can stimulate our motivation for the adoption of highly innovative communication technology and e-learning tools" (Dhawan, 2020). Online teaching could be different if we had mastered it before but now, we are forced to adopt technology in the times of COVID-19. The study concluded that ELT teachers faced different challenges during



online teaching which included the lack of motivation in students for online mode of teaching, use of technological tools and teachers training. Teachers said that they were working in different manner to tackle these issues and concerns. Furthermore, the study also explored the way forward in online teaching and teacher's perspectives were noted down in this regard. Teachers were of the view that teachers training, and the utilization of technological tools could enhance the quality of online teaching. Additionally, student's involvement could be increased by practicing more interactive activities in online sessions.

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