

A Narrative Enquiry into English Teachers' experiences and challenges in Online Education during Pandemic

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Abstract

The research study investigated the reflections and observations of English teachers and the insights gained by them regarding English language instructions offered to students in Online classes during the Pandemic times. The Participants of the research study are English Teachers from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in the suburban region of Ibri. Narrative Inquiry was employed as the research design to unleash the experiences and opinions of the Participants. The research data was investigated by using thematic analysis, and the findings have been organized into varied themes. The result of the research study shows the multifold challenges faced by teachers such as financial issues, mental health, technical challenges and the need to utilize different teaching strategies. Thus, the Findings of the Research study demonstrate 1) The teachers realised the transition to online instruction to be challenging initially, and they had concerns with regard to finances, technology, and mental health. 2) During the pandemic's early stages, the instructors also found out several essential lessons that emphasized the need to consistently changing their pedagogical methodologies and approaches, giving customized, personalized feedback to encourage students' engagement and involvement, and developing themselves as flexible teacher-learners. The research study makes discussions and recommendations for both teachers and policy makers and decision-makers.

1. Introduction

It is true English language teaching (ELT) witnessed a remarkable and unprecedented transformation owing to COVID-19 pandemic over the past few years. The Transition from Face-to-Face teaching to Online teaching has been a huge challenge for the Teaching Community of Universities and colleges worldwide and in Oman. The Covid Pandemic restrictions imposed by the Sultanate of Oman curtailed Face to face classes in the educational institutions and as a result the teachers have resorted to Online instructions in their Online classes which has been a highly a challenging task. Teachers and pupils have been forced to stay at home for an unspecified amount of time owing to 19 measures, namely maintaining physical distance measures. Both teaching fraternity and student community were not ready for the transition in terms of integrating technology in to teaching. Until COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were reluctant to use technology profusely in their classroom, despite the fact that numerous studies—including those by Harmer (2001), Eaton (2010), and Gilakjani (2014)—have emphasized for its usage to enhance language learning.

As a result of suspension of physical classes owing to Covid –19 pandemic, teachers were forced to teach through Online. They were compelled for a big transition in the use of Online technology namely the shift from using low-key technical options namely MS Outlook emails, WhatsApp for giving their University tasks to interactive online platforms like MS Teams, Zoom and Google Meet. Subsequently, Language instructions that generally relied on teaching vocabulary, grammar exercises, and reading comprehension demanded novel teaching strategies. Teachers were in a situation to evaluate pupils remotely that has made language evaluation more difficult for them.

Certainly, blended learning has been emphasised by many educators and research studies over these past years. Although blended learning has been adopted gradually, only a few studies have been conducted on the pandemic crisis because it is an enforced event (Gonzalez and St. Louis, 2018). According to research by Cao et al., the sudden shift to a full-fledged online education has had an impact on progress and development of students (2020). In addition, the research study conducted by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) in a remote area of Indonesia and found that the hindrances that students faced during Online classes included economic constraints to pay for internet data, poor internet network and coverage in mountainous regions, and students' lack of preparation for online learning activities. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the difficulties underwent by teachers in Indonesian rural areas and it highlighted various viewpoints.

Moreover research study by Nartiningrum & Nugroho (2021) titled "English Teachers' Perspectives on Challenges, Suggestions, and Materials of Online Teaching Amidst the Global Pandemic" highlights the observations of 20 EFL

secondary school teachers' with regard to the varied trials and difficulties underwent by them and their recommendations for the type of teaching materials needed during the Covid-19 outbreak. The teachers suggested that the primary focus should be on maintaining stable internet connection. Furthermore, it is again utmost important that there should be easy accessibility to online applications and websites for procuring teaching and learning materials for online teaching.

Moreover, the main objective of the research study carried out by Mahyoob (2020) entitled "Challenges of eLearning during the Covid-19 Pandemic by EFL Learners" was to pinpoint the challenges and hindrances encountered by English language learners (EFL) at Science and Arts College, Alula, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, during the change from physical classes to online learning in the second semester of 2020 owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. The results indicate that the main challenges that adversely affect online EFL learning during Covid-19 are related to technology, academics, and communication. It also pointed out that most EFL learners expressed their dissatisfaction with regard to online learning, as they could not demonstrate the required progress in their performance related to language learning.

Varied studies have reviewed the challenges encountered by language teachers especially in terms of the usage of technology while delivering language instructions. Research studies from the past have pinpointed various issues and problems related to technology that includes limited accessibility, insufficient training and support, and lack of help from the technical and administration front. Research from other nations have identified comparable concerns, such as inadequate learning facilities in rural areas, overcrowded classes, and limited access to technology for both teachers and pupils. The language educators should also consider the availability of technological resources and skills of their students besides their own skills in using technology. In addition to these challenges, language instructors are suggested and recommended to use varied strategies and resources so as to offer their students high-standard instructions and learning platforms.

According to Johnson et al. (2016), teachers' positive and negative attitudes, their approaches and beliefs towards the existing situation and crisis are crucial in deciding how challenging it is for to teach languages, especially during the unusual and abnormal situation like Covid-19 pandemic. His research study states that Positive teachers are more likely to use technology for remote instruction effectively. Yet, it's possible that teachers in rural areas lack confidence in their knowledge of both English and technology, which can make it difficult for them to maintain control of the class while utilizing technology.

Many organizations and companies played a crucial role in extending their help to both teachers and student during Covid 19 Pandemic. Companies namely the British Council, TESOL.org, and Pearson, have provided free online resources and webinars to facilitate distant learning and Online teaching -learning process.

Various studies have been carried out on Narrative Research. According to Ehrlich, Flexner, Carruth, & Hawkins (1980) the term narrative is derived from "to narrate" or "to tell (as a story) in detail".

In the words of Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) there was a breakthrough in the field of education owing to Narrative inquiry in Research. Also, according to Trahar, was Theoretical narrative inquiry in the arena of educational research has flourished well. (Trahar, 2011). For instance, personal stories has gained its validation in academic sectors as it inculcates professional development of teachers through collecting data by listening to them and emphasising to the world individual stories that were said in not so large groups, or programs or in workshops.

Bell observed that teachers' personal experiences and knowledge that were demonstrated in their stories have been examined by the field of English teacher (Bell, 2002).

Furthermore, for professional development and authentic classroom practices of teachers, the essential element is knowledge that is generated by the teachers for the teaching community. Golombek and Johnson opine that the better scope for personal and social growth of teachers relies on following narrative inquiry in systematic fashion (Golombek & Johnson, 2004).

According to Nelson, narrative inquiry is not only a research methodology and a learning equipment, but it is also a befitting pedagogy (Nelson, 2011). In the similar vein, Johnson and Golombek observed that narrative inquiry in English language teaching facilitates professional development in teachers. Also, it enables research in the stream of teaching (Johnson & Golombek, 2011a, 2011b).

Again, in narrative research study, the researchers tend to write the narratives of their participants' experiences, describe their lives, collect their stories and tell their stories publicly (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

2.Methodology:

This research study deployed a qualitative methodology and a total sample of 24 English teachers were the Participants who work at the university of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibri.

A narrative frame was used for Data collection. Regarding the narrative frame, a guided story template was used. The participants were made to fill the incomplete sentences to provide answers that were purely based on their reflection.

To analyse then participants' interactions, the instrument was structured with a dimensional space narrative. Furthermore, the data was examined using inductive thematic analysis. The analysis included decoding their narratives and generating themes from it. Thus, the process of deducting themes from narrative frame includes acquainting with the data, coding, creating initial themes, naming them, and writing up the analysis. The participants were motivated to express their feelings freely without feeling nervous and apprehensive.

3.Results and Findings:

The findings of this research are the narratives given by the teachers that have been thematically analysed and summarized by the researchers. They have been categorised in to varied themes as follows:

3.1. Teachers' and students narratives on Challenges encountered during Online teaching :Thematic analysis

3.1.1 Economic Constraints

The participants of the research pinpointed that both students and teachers encountered challenges with regard to the expenditure they had to incur on internet data while doing their course in online learning. The research participants revealed that applications like MS Teams were difficult to use because the students couldn't afford to procure internet data and did not have suitable devices like laptops or smartphones. Also, it was really challenging for them to get these devices that facilitate online learning due to their economic constraints.

Other participants opined that some of their pupils were unable to join the meeting due to limited internet data, while another participant shared that some students neither had cell phones nor smartphones, and they had to rely on their parents' phones to pursue their online learning. Other participants shed light on the complaints that they received from their students' parents. Their concerns were that class room and home tasks given to students were enormous that demands more internet data and that they couldn't afford to. Subsequently, some of them requested for class rooms tasks and home written tasks in written form. One participant observed that they had to make arrangements for their own money to make online learning functional, and another participant stated that some students did not possess the required electronic devices that were necessary for online learning.

The findings thus showed that the transition to online learning was challenging due to the lack of readiness, economic constraints of both students and teachers in terms of internet access and possessing laptops or other suitable devices to facilitate online learning.

3.1.2. Technical issues and challenges

The teachers also observed that the transition to online learning was challenging for both students and teachers due to their lack of adequate knowledge to handle internet and digital tools. They were familiar with using teaching methodologies related to physical classes and were apprehensive about the transition to online learning. Both Teachers and students alike faced this challenge. Some teachers had to grasp skills to use digital tools and applications, while others found it difficult to cope with their students' inadequate knowledge and skills in technology.

Some teachers even had to teach others how to use digital apps while focusing on their students simultaneously. In addition, students were not familiar with using gadgets and did not have email addresses, which made communication difficult. These findings suggest that neither teachers nor students were neither adequately prepared for the transition to online learning nor possessed sufficient knowledge in terms of technology use.

3.1.3 Mental issues

The teachers' reflections revealed that online teaching –learning process adversely affected the mental well-being of both teachers and students. As they were compelled to work from home, they underwent stress and anxiety. Also as they were unable to meet their students, it created in them feelings of alienation and loneliness and they stated that they missed their students badly as they could neither interact nor meet them as in Physical classes. In the similar vein, students also had their own challenges and concerns to encounter. One of the primary challenges was distractions from social media and disturbances in the background at their homes. Some other students admitted that they developed the urge in them to cheat in their online exams, tests and assignment, thus resulting in making them lazier and diffident. These narratives showcase that online teaching and learning had demonstrated that the pandemic and home learning situations had negative impact on both teachers and students, affecting their mental well-being and loss of self-discipline and learning principles.

3.2 Insights Gained:

3.2.1 New Learning Strategies:

The teachers observed that they embraced novel strategies in their online teaching methodologies and approaches after a year of encountering challenges of online teaching during pandemic times. Upon retrospection of their Online classes, they learned to reform their approaches and strategies towards students while conducting online teaching: usage of varied applications namely YouTube, organizing recorded video lessons, online virtual classes and integrating online platforms for tasks. These reforms that they incorporated enabled the teachers to involve their students in a better fashion in learning and in group discussions. In addition, these facilitated problem-solving skills among students as well. They also discovered methods to make learning enjoyable for better students' engagement.

3.2.2 Individual feedback

Personalized feedback is an essential element in the teaching –learning process. It means remarks, opinions, and appraisal and reviews offered to students on their tasks and performance. This feedback is customized to suit the student's positives and negatives and they offer better guidance to improve upon their learning.

The teachers also observed that during online teaching they adopted revised and novel methods of communication to provide feedback to students easily. Various modes of communication namely MS Outlook, MS Teams and sometime, MS Word and sometimes whatsapp were used to serve the purpose. Such measures taken by the teachers ensured the students that teachers are supportive and are approachable. For instance, a whatsapp group was created by one teacher to communicate with their students. Teachers also provided encouragement to their students through personalised feedback in whatsapp.

Some participants stated that they gave personalised comments on students' tasks and performance using online platforms namely MS Outlook, MS Teams or during online sessions. They also observed that they developed a tendency to showcase their utmost sincerity and dedication in their Online teaching and also while giving personalised feedback to their students. Some participants also revealed that they spent extra time to provide encouragement, motivation and support their students.

3.2.3 The teachers as learners

The participants also shared their thoughts that the unexpected pandemic situation resulted in remarkable transformation teachers regarding upgrading their technical skills to handle online education. Moreover, they also stated that they have utilised this unprecedented situation as an opportunity to retrospect and also to reflect upon their pivotal role in enhancing the performance of their students. They also discovered varied ways to adapt and imbibe the required skills for Online education. They also learned to be more creative, motivated, encouraged and flexible in their teaching methodologies. The participants have also opined that they comprehended the importance for being innovative, confident and have the readiness and willingness to learn new methodologies and strategies in order to offer the best output to students in terms of education and teaching. They also stressed the importance of the reforms in the education system to face challenges in such times of crisis namely upgrading teachers with technical skills and making them prepared to encounter such unexpected situations in the education sector.

Furthermore, the teachers' participants observed that they developed positive outlook in due course of time during pandemic situation and were consistently working hard to integrate novel strategies and methodologies in their teaching and sources of learning to keep online education interesting and engaging. They gained insight that teachers ought to always come forward to adapt to any crisis like situation and build a pleasant and enjoyable ambience for their student community whatever may be the circumstances. Thus these findings bring to limelight that teachers have to be consistent learners that teachers never stop learning.

4. Discussions

This narrative research study has brought to limelight two pivotal factors that rose from the experiences of the teacher participants during the unprecedented transition from physical classes to Online Education due to Pandemic: Reflections of the teacher participants are the First factor which emphasized the impact of Pandemic on language learning in educational institutions.

Moreover, the teachers' narratives also brought to the fore three valid themes namely economic constraints, technical issues and mental wellbeing in Online education. The narratives of the teachers also brought forth the second factor, the insights gained by the teachers through this pandemic situation. They imbibed novel strategies, offering individualised feedback and to be consistent learners irrespective of the situations

The study also revealed a valid, noteworthy finding that economic constraints faced by students regarding internet and required electronic devices namely laptops and mobile phones hindered them from Online learning

Another issue that has been highlighted in this research study is mental wellbeing of both teachers and students. Also, during the initial phase of Online Education, both teachers and students were confused on matters such as learning instructions and materials, feedback, online assessment and learning from home. Moreover, the teachers felt stressed out owing to the intense workload, online assessment through moodle and MS Teams, Ms outlook as a result of pandemic situation

On the other hand, the students found it extremely challenging to study without being monitored directly by teachers as in Physical classes. Online learning resulted in their being distracted by other social media even during their MS Teams online classes and disturbed in their own homes. They also developed in them cheating habits that were against the learning ethics.

However, this unusual pandemic crisis also facilitated them to gain various insights and sense of acceptance of the then situation that was totally unexpected. In addition to it, the teachers developed readiness in them to take up different orientation training, webinars offered to them on using various features of MS Teams to equip them with adequate knowledge to handle Online education. Another remarkable outcome of the Online Education was that all teachers were simultaneously learning and progressing too by making reforms in their teaching strategies to suit the demanding situation.

Some teachers strove hard to keep Online Teaching as competent as Offline Teaching by introducing discovery learning and instill problem solving skills. problem.

The teacher participants also brought forth a breakthrough through their novel approach in Online Education by customising their views about ideal classroom teaching. In addition to bringing reforms in their strategies, classroom instructions, utilising varied online platforms. Their objectives, in addition to achieving learning outcomes were also to engage the students.

Moreover, the teachers developed a new way of offering feedback to their students. They realised that students' participation is more important in Online education for their achievement and subsequently offered individualised feedback to engage them.

In this study, the teachers took special measures to leave positive feedback on the students' tasks and performance. They ensured that they were available in Ms Teams to offer their personalised feedback. This method of consistent feedback and comments assured them both teachers and students the continuity and effectiveness of Online Education and teachers were able to understand their students better.

It is true that the students always consider their teachers as their role models. Teachers' participants agreed that they realised that they have a pivotal role to play in the classrooms irrespective of the type of class namely offline or online. As a result they ought to be more creative, innovative and exhibit and exude confidence and optimism in their Online classes. Thus, the participants also realised that they have to be teacher-learners and remain updated to adapt themselves to any situation.

Another reflection that could be imbibed from this research study by the teachers' experiences is to put a halt to the complaints and challenges about online classes and to instill positivity and pleasant ambience in the Online Education. The teachers also understood that their efforts to be innovative, creative and encouragement was actually a platform for better opportunities and possibilities in language learning in future. These teachers actually offer valuable insights to the Online teaching world that is going to be a major feature of the future education sector and where online learning might become the prime feature of teaching due to the rocketing advancements in the field of technology.

The teachers predominantly reflected and learnt a lot from these unprecedented situations of Online teaching. They embraced this unusual situation ultimately through their grit and determination and their dedication and commitment towards their teaching role. Though they had to encounter challenges in varied forms, namely economic constraints, technical issues and mental struggles, they never gave up their efforts. On the other hand, they were flexible by changing their learning styles, offering personalized feedback, and learning each day and every day. They also became confident and competent by strengthening their commitment, and by increasing their level of awareness (Lie et al. 2020; Iswati 2021). The teachers exhibited their professionalism and commitment during this challenging phase of their career, and they succeeded in what they did.

5. Conclusion:

To conclude, this narrative research has brought to limelight the challenges encountered by both teachers and students during Online Teaching and Learning Process. Online teaching was the only viable platform during times of crises and pandemic situations so that education remained unhalted for the student community. However, there were some indispensable challenges the teachers and students faced during the process namely economic constraints, technical issues and overwhelming mental issues. On the other hand, the teachers admitted challenging scenario also was thought – provoking and brought in transformation in them. They gained varied, valuable insights on Online Teaching during crisis. It made them think out of the box and deviate from the traditional approaches of teaching. They adapted themselves to the unexpected situations and customised their teaching strategies to cater to the needs of the hour and suit the requirements of the students that resulted in the accomplishment of tasks of both teachers and students.

6. Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the research study, the researchers would like to make the following recommendations:

- Educational Institutions in all around the world should ensure that both the teaching fraternity and the student community are equipped with adequate and innovative, upgraded technical skills that would enable them to encounter any challenges related to education during a crisis like situation like pandemic and others.
- The policy makers of educational institutions must also consider the economic constraints, mental wellbeing and technical upgradation while implementing Online Courses and Programs in their Educational Institutions.
- As the saying goes, Preparation is the key to success, the education sector should be far sighted and take lessons from these pandemic times and be prepared and act quickly to counter challenges that crop up from an unprecedented, indispensable crisis and situations so that education remains unhalted and goes forward smoothly without many hitches and stumbling blocks.

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