

Pandemic, Problems, and Possibilities: A Qualitative Study of EFL Teachers' Perspectives in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)^{1,2}

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Abstract

Pandemics are always unexpected scenarios where the education system has to scuffle and survive. Most recently, the Coronavirus plague caused dramatic changes in the educational settings, most prominently shifting from face-to-face to virtual systems of learning and teaching. A positive side of this online teaching and learning process is that the education system did not cease even in the most critical situations. However, the problem lay with the students and teachers who were not sufficiently qualified or trained for the technology used in virtual learning management systems (LMS). Occasionally, the educational institutes provided them with training workshops that were not sufficient. In this regard, the present study intended to probe into the experiences of EFL teachers in Pakistani universities to identify the problems they faced during e-teaching in the pandemic. In addition, it aims to identify 'solutions' for these problems as applied or suggested by the relevant teachers. For the said purpose, semi-structured interviews of 12 English Language teachers in three public and private sector universities have been taken. The responses are analyzed using inductive thematic analysis for qualitative data to develop codes and categories (using NVivo12). The findings indicate that EFL teachers faced an array of problems; however, they also found significant solutions and benefits during this online shift. The study reveals that besides all issues, teachers found online teaching quite beneficial in many ways. Therefore, the analysis suggests policymakers and stakeholders promote blended learning (a combination of the traditional and online systems) as a futuristic approach to cope with persisting and forthcoming situations.

Resumen

Las pandemias son siempre escenarios inesperados en los que el sistema educativo tiene que luchar y sobrevivir. Más recientemente, la plaga del coronavirus provocó cambios dramáticos en los entornos educativos, sobre todo pasando de sistemas de aprendizaje y enseñanza presenciales a sistemas virtuales. Un lado positivo de este proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje en línea es que el sistema educativo no cesó ni siquiera en las situaciones más críticas. Sin embargo, el problema residía en los estudiantes y profesores que no estaban suficientemente cualificados o capacitados para la tecnología utilizada en los sistemas de gestión del aprendizaje virtual (LMS). En ocasiones, los institutos educativos les brindaron talleres de capacitación que no fueron suficientes. En este sentido, el presente estudio pretendía sondear las experiencias de los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera en universidades paquistaníes para identificar los problemas que enfrentaron durante la enseñanza electrónica durante la pandemia. Además, pretende identificar "soluciones" para estos problemas aplicadas o sugeridas por los profesores pertinentes. Para ello se han realizado entrevistas semiestructuradas a 12 profesores de idioma inglés de tres universidades del sector público y privado. Las respuestas se analizan mediante análisis temático inductivo de datos cualitativos para desarrollar códigos y categorías (utilizando NVivo12). Los hallazgos indican que los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera enfrentaron una variedad de problemas; sin embargo, también encontraron importantes soluciones y beneficios durante este cambio en línea. El estudio revela que, además de todos los problemas, los profesores encontraron que la enseñanza en línea era bastante beneficiosa en muchos sentidos. Por lo tanto, el análisis sugiere que los formuladores de políticas y las partes interesadas promuevan el aprendizaje combinado (una combinación de los sistemas tradicionales y en línea) como un enfoque futurista para hacer frente a situaciones persistentes y futuras.

Introduction

The year 2020 can be considered to be the beginning of one of the memorable periods in history when the world encountered a new pandemic, COVID-19. This new dramatic phase changed the ways actions were carried out in almost all domains of life, including the education sector. In Pakistan, the lockdown was imposed on 15th March 2020 in the interest of public safety and wellbeing as Coronavirus spread voraciously throughout the country. The traditional system of face-to-face learning was not workable due to precautionary measures. Teachers, students, policymakers, stakeholders, and parents were not prepared

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for such unprecedented problems that disrupted and dismantled the entire education system leading to socio-economic consequences.

E-learning became the only solution to carry on educational activities in this situation. Thus, the e-learning platform got the exclusive attention of academia across the globe. This portal was not only used for teaching and learning activities but also for managing assessment and evaluation. The teachers in schools, colleges, and higher educational institutions (HEIs) had to teach and continue academic activities with the only available online teaching option. The whole education sector shifted from a face-to-face system to an online system. This abrupt and unplanned change had its limitations. As Lamie (2005) asserts, a change in the provision of education may not be successful if the innovation involves power-driven policies. Therefore, the unplanned enforced change in English language teaching was a serious implication of the pandemic scenario that necessitated the current study. The present study will help analyze teachers' views on the evaluation of online teaching systems during the pandemic.

The change relied on the use of technology or digital skills. Technology integration in the form of blended learning approaches, like Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) already proved efficient in English language teaching (Pardede, 2012). Tomlinson and Whittaker (2013) scrutinized a collection of 20 case studies for the blended learning approach in English language teaching (ELT) and regarded it as a helpful approach to teaching the English language. However, it is essential to note that a complete replacement for a face-to-face method of teaching was never proposed; instead, the hybrid/online teaching approach was suggested as a supplement to face-to-face teaching methods to enhance its efficiency. In the COVID-19 scenario, a technology-based online teaching system was adopted by all the teachers. However, most EFL teachers were familiar with e-learning, virtual teaching, or hybrid teaching system. Thus, the perspectives of EFL teachers are significant in analyzing the problems they faced and finding solutions to those problems.

Many EFL teachers highlighted problems while teaching online during the pandemic. One factor was its suddenness or abruptness, while others were mainly technical and professional aspects. Various authors studied the problems faced by teachers (Joshi et al., 2020; Lestiyawati & Widyantoro, 2020; Nashir & Laili, 2021; Pustaka, 2020; Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020; Todd, 2020; Verma & Priyamvada, 2020; Wen & Kim Hua, 2020; Younesi & Khan, 2020). As these studies mentioned, EFL teachers faced many issues, including network error, power breakdown, digital literacy, internet connectivity, data cost, interruptions, distractions, a lack of training, a lack of support from institutions, less attendance of students, a lack of response from students, difficulty in assessments and evaluation. These teachers needed suggestions or strategies to cope with the problems in the pandemic era. However, suggestions are dependent upon problems; therefore, the researchers of the current study focused on the teachers' viewpoints.

The present study also probed into the perception of EFL teachers about the pandemic-induced shift to online teaching. Alonso Diaz and Blázquez Entonado (2009) compared online teaching to face-to-face teaching almost a decade ago and found no significant differences between them. They asserted that the difference might be a consequence of teachers' involvement or commitment to the learning processes. However, the pandemic-induced online teaching system brought many different and new challenges for EFL teachers. They implemented the online system and found it quite different from the traditional teaching methods. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) also termed this online teaching system as emergency remote teaching and refrained from equating it to the online learning system.

The pandemic-induced e-learning in academia at HEIs has revolutionized the education sector in such a limited time. According to Strielkowski (2020), the change in the education system from face-to-face to online teaching system actually takes a long time for execution but at the beginning of the pandemic, it had to happen in just a few days. Due to this urgency, everything was planned and implemented within the days. The teachers in HEIs taught English using online LMS teaching systems, so their viewpoints are significant. Chapelle (2007) emphasized that students' performance and teachers' perspectives are vital in evaluating any shift in the provision of education. Students' performance in the online system has been studied by Adnan and Anwar (2020), while the analysis of the teachers' perspectives was the scope of the present study. Thus, the study underpinned the following objectives:

1. *To analyze the experiences of EFL teachers for pandemic-induced e-teaching*
2. *To probe into the problems faced by EFL teachers in e-teaching during the pandemic*
3. *To suggest some possible solutions to the identified problems*

The study focused on the following research question:

RQ. How did EFL teachers at HEIs cater to and respond to the online pedagogical shift during COVID-19?

The results might be beneficial for educational policymakers and the higher education commission (HEC). They may take necessary steps to facilitate and improve the online education system. Moreover, by following suggestions and solutions, ELT teachers will be prepared and equipped with the tools needed to deal with any similar situations in the future. Furthermore, they can serve as guidelines for EFL teachers who wish to pursue their careers as online EFL instructors internationally.

Literature Review

Some scholars perceived the shift to an online teaching system during the pandemic as a failure, while others were ambivalent about its outcomes. Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) called it a failure since it lacked proper planning and preparation before its implementation. On the contrary, Todd (2020) and Pustika (2020) found significant benefits in a similar context amidst problems.

Some teachers perceived the pandemic-induced online shift in education as a positive outcome, while some remained pessimistic. Onyema et al. (2020) have outlined the adverse and devastating effects of the pandemic on the online education system across the globe. The delineated problems as a result of this change in academia include learning disruptions, inaccessibility to education, job losses, and students' debts. They concluded that poor digital skills and poor infrastructures are the key reasons for the huge damage to the education sector.

Teachers from India found technological and personal problems as the main hurdles in teaching online. Joshi et al. (2020) outlined the barriers into four categories: barriers related to home environment setting, barriers regarding institutional support, a lack of technical support, and personal problems. The problems in these categories include a lack of basic facilities, distractions, interruptions, a lack of budget to purchase advanced technology, a lack of training for the use of online technological tools, a lack of clarity and directions, a lack of information regarding the technology integration to the course and a negative attitude. They have also emphasized the lack of motivation as the fundamental problem in teaching online because continuous distractions reduce teachers' enthusiasm.

Similarly, from Malaysia, Nashir and Laili (2021) outlined the problems EFL teachers encountered: increased workload, inadequate facilities, internet cost, connectivity issues, difficulty in assessments, and a lack of student feedback. A significant percentage of teachers (66%) preferred teaching face-to-face. In comparison, only 34% preferred the blended teaching method for EFL classrooms, and none of the teachers chose online teaching in the study. The reason may be a lack of resources since Wen and Kim Hua (2020) considered online resources and infrastructures the most significant factors affecting EFL teachers in Malaysia. Online teaching was not successful since it was not implemented with proper planning and infrastructure.

From Indonesia, Lestyanawati and Widyantoro (2020) outlined six problems faced by EFL teachers, including lack of digital knowledge and resources, a lack of school support, confusion about the content or material, students' inaccessibility to the internet, students' poor financial condition, and lack of parents' support system.

The opinions of EFL teachers were also studied by Verma and Priyamvada (2020). They developed an opinionnaire and categorized ELT teachers' ideas into three issues: the use of online tools, personal and professional problems, and learners. Among many challenges, the teachers also mentioned the significant benefits of teaching online; however, they were more confident in teaching with traditional methods. They reported many problems with online teaching, including a lack of training workshops, equipment, and resources, increased workload, security and privacy concerns using the internet, a lack of social interaction, and inattentive students.

Amid the pandemic and problems, Pustika (2020) quoted benefits: less cost of traveling and commuting and easy access to the material from anywhere. Teachers did not disregard the challenges of the e-teaching system. Instead, they suggested stakeholders improve the infrastructure per technological advancement to support E-learning. Another study highlighted the benefits of an online teaching system during the pandemic. Fansury et al. (2020) studied the use of digital content in online English classrooms and its potential to evoke interest in students. They found the digital content helpful and easy to use in language classrooms during the pandemic for the millennial generation.

Some problems can be solved, while others take time to resolve. Younesi and Khan (2020) and Todd (2020) suggested improving the technological infrastructures to make the e-learning system efficient. The current study acknowledged the voices of ELT teachers from all perspectives. The participants were asked to comment on the pandemic-induced shift. They stated their ideas regarding the problems and benefits of

online teaching. They also provided solutions and suggestions, which helped the researchers understand their perspectives.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, the perspectives of English language teachers at the university level in Islamabad, Pakistan have not been studied yet, which establishes the research niche.

Research Methodology

The undergoing study explored and thematically analyzed the problems faced by EFL teachers during the pandemic. The researchers adopted a qualitative research methodology to gain insight into the teachers' perspectives regarding the shift from face-to-face to online teaching.

Participants

The participants were 12 ELT teachers who were interviewed to help the researchers achieve the objectives of this study. All of the participants were English language teachers teaching at HEIs, and they had undergone a shift to an online teaching system during the pandemic. Around 20 teachers were contacted through email correspondence and their consent was taken. They were provided with the sufficient details about the topic, nature, and scope of the study. Only 12 teachers who showed their willingness were further contacted for the research. The demographic information of the participants is given in Table 1:

Participants	Age (years)	Gender (M/F)	Qualifications	Teaching Experience (years)
Participant 1	42	F	PhD scholar	12 years
Participant 2	52	F	MPhil	18 years
Participant 3	38	F	MPhil	8 years
Participant 4	42	M	MPhil	12 years
Participant 5	51	M	PhD	18 years
Participant 6	35	F	MPhil	6 years
Participant 7	30	F	MPhil	4 years
Participant 8	44	M	PhD	15 years
Participant 9	47	M	PhD	14 years
Participant 10	58	M	PhD	19 years
Participant 11	48	F	MPhil	12 years
Participant 12	32	F	MPhil	4 years

Table 1: The participants' demographic information

Instrument

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used for data collection. The semi-structured interview (see Appendix) was appropriate since it gave detailed information about the interviewees' experiences. The questions were designed generally to cover pandemics, problems, and solutions to the problems. However, the other responses highlighting the benefits of online teaching are also acknowledged and included in the study. The questions were formulated after a discussion with an ELT expert and a pilot study. Initially, the questions focused on problems and solutions, and the questions asking about the benefits were added after the pilot study. The interview took 17-20 minutes for each participant, and the recording was done after the formal consent of the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed carefully for repetitions, incomplete phrases, interjections, and false starts. The participants counter-checked the verbatims to ensure clarity in representing their thoughts.

The Context

The participants were selected from three universities: National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamic International University Islamabad (IIUI), and Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). All three universities are renowned Higher Education Institutions in Islamabad. They have distinguished English language teaching departments and had undergone the shift from face-to-face to online teaching systems. The universities follow a semester system (Fall/Autumn). All the teachers were employed as following the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) criteria; therefore, they were qualified and trained for teaching at HEIs. NUML is in the public sector, IIUI is a semi-government university, and AIOU is a distance learning institution. Thus, the researchers believed that interviewing ELT teachers from these universities had the

potential to reveal significant findings on the underlying problem for the government, semi-government, and private sectors of education.

Research Method

The qualitative data (transcribed interviews) have been analyzed using inductive thematic analysis since it facilitates the extraction of meaning from the raw data to record themes (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Therefore, the systematic analysis enabled the researchers to discuss findings and results after evaluating and developing themes. The coding and categorization of themes were done using NVivo12 software to validate the findings. The nodes and cases were developed using keywords to avoid overlapping ideas and concepts. The member-checking technique was used to establish the credibility of the collected data. The participants re-checked and reflected their views on the transcribed data. The inspiration for NVivo12 is the case study by Rasmitadila et al. (2020) that used the same software to analyze teachers' interviews during the pandemic. They claim that NVivo 12 software is applicable and conducive to analyzing semi-structured in-depth interviews. Developing themes, codes, nodes, and coding summaries made the analysis straightforward and uncomplicated.

Findings

The perspectives of EFL teachers through in-depth, open-ended interviews for the problems and solutions yielded the following data. Figure 1 illustrates the diagrammatical representation of the nodes and cases after thematic analysis via NVivo12.

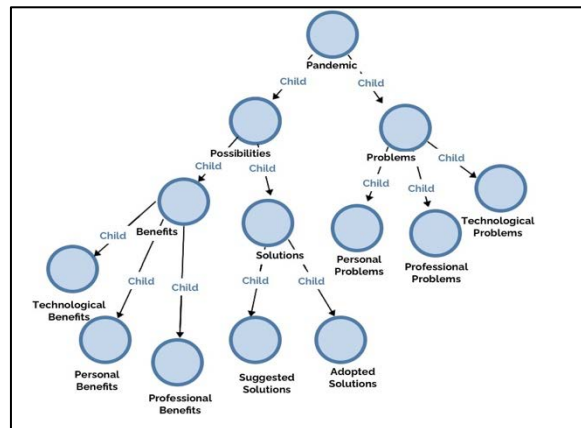


Figure 1: NVivo12 Nodes Coding for Interviews

The hierarchy of nodes and child nodes represents the overarching major themes and subthemes extracted from the interviews taken by EFL teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the pandemic encapsulates all the subthemes, so it is at the highest level in the hierarchy. The problems and solutions are the sub-themes: the problems are further divided into technological problems, professional problems, and personal problems, and the solution node is further subdivided into solutions and benefits. The solutions are classified into adopted solutions and suggested solutions, whereas the benefits are grouped into technological, personal, and professional benefits. Since the teachers mentioned both problems and benefits for technological, professional, and personal aspects, these issues are discussed simultaneously in the forthcoming sections. Firstly, the problems and benefits faced by the participants are mentioned as per sub-categories of technological, professional, and personal aspects; secondly, the adopted solutions and suggested solutions voiced by the teachers are delineated.

Technological experience in online English language teaching

The pandemic engendered an online teaching system in EFL classes and brought several technological, professional, and personal problems. It has also endowed the teachers with some technological benefits (personal and professional). Therefore, the themes are discussed with the views of the teachers in the analysis.

Technological problems

The technological problems are mostly the consequences of the digital illiteracy of ELT teachers, as some of the teachers mentioned:

I wasn't gadgets friendly. (Participant 2)

I did not know how to use a laptop. (Participant 9)

We were not more exposed to the technology as a teacher. (Participant 3)

It was a nightmare for me. (Participant 2)

Load shedding was another problem for many teachers. One of the teachers stated,

All of a sudden, you'd lose your network and connection with the student due to a power outage. Then I needed to share the link again, so that was the main problem. (Participant 3)

All participants reported the persistent problem of unstable internet connections.

The foremost and the most important problem everyone was facing in the Covid era was the internet connectivity issue. (Participant 9)

The internet was the problem. (Participant 1)

The biggest problem was an internet connection. (Participant 4)

The internet was the problem. (Participant 10)

The disrupted internet connection. (Participant 12)

We don't have strong internet connections in our country. (Participant 5)

The connectivity issues. (Participant 8)

The main problem was very poor internet. (Participant 6)

Sometimes I find network problems as a teacher. (Participant 7)

...connectivity issues...so there would be break up some conversation or I would have to repeat myself several times" (Participant 3)

I couldn't cover quite as much material and in this one lesson just because of the technical technology problems. (Participant 2)

The technical or mechanical problems, thus, hampered the online teaching for almost every participant in the current study.

Technological benefits

Besides these problems, the teachers teaching highlighted some benefits related to technology or ICT (Information and communications technology). The technological benefits enabled teachers to use readily available digital content, as a teacher said,

I have utilized digital content available across the internet. (Participant 1)

The online system of teaching saved time in the preparation of quizzes and assignments for many teachers.

I took much advantage of online learning apps, for example, apps for conducting quizzes and yeah well in some ways the online classes made things easier, and I felt like it was a time saver. (Participant 8)

It also helped the teachers develop their IT (Information technology) skills and enhance their digital literacy over time which was the primary advantage noticed by the majority of the teachers.

I think even just trying out new methods. (Participant 10)

I guess the only benefit was that it pushed me to develop my IT skills. (Participant 12)

I have learned about online gadgets, marking papers, using digital content, etc. I use word doc, convert pdf to word, and attach emails and files. I was never good at that... I have learned to use my mobile phone for academic use. I now know about digital literacy... (Participant 5)

A teacher also highlighted an ecological benefit linked to this online teaching shift: fuel-saving, fewer carbon emissions, and less pollution due to fewer commutes.

One benefit, I think yeah! we'll say frankly environmental I think there were loads of benefits and everybody was producing a lot of carbon using their devices, but at least people weren't polluting the atmosphere in the online system, so that's a huge benefit. (Participant 6)

Another advantage was the adjustment of classes in case of emergencies. A teacher mentioned,

And one more thing that if we have any problem, any emergency or commitment we would easily swap or change our schedules and even the students cooperated; moreover, it could facilitate learning in other similar situations like protests, roadblocks, emergencies, etc. (Participant 7)

Professional experience in online English language teaching

Professional problems

The professional problems impeded the teaching even further. The teachers complained about the interaction and assessment problems.

Interaction was missing in online classes... [and] most of the students, the girls especially, refused to turn their cameras on so you had no idea whether they were cheating and whether they were using other materials, especially on exams and assessments. (Participant 2)

This led to inadequate assessment of learning, as another participant also shared,

There were times when it felt like it was hard to make accurate assessments. (Participant 3)

Moreover, attendance remained a serious issue as some students were absent or disappeared during the online session. One teacher commented,

A student once disappeared from the class and later on, joined back,...[and] it was a lot more difficult in connecting with students. (Participant 7)

The teachers were also less confident in e-teaching due to unclear and undefined methodologies.

In the beginning, believe me, it was a nightmare that I had to take an online class... How to conduct and if something went wrong... (Participant 2)

Professional benefits

Despite the problems mentioned above, several teachers reported the professional benefits of online teaching. They mentioned that they had grown professionally.

I think this pandemic gave me the opportunity to grow professionally. (Participant 9)

Teaching online in many respects greatly enhanced and improved my IT skills. It was a very, very steep learning curve, and I have become a lot more competent with the internet and with various IT skills, whether it be Google Classroom LMS copy-paste files etcetera, etcetera. (Participant 3)

I have learned a lot. I have learned many educational technology tools, and I'm including them in teaching and learning processes. (Participant 6)

Yes, professionally in the sense that I learned about online gadgets, marking papers, using digital content, etc. (Participant 8)

I can now easily assess my students' learning and gradual improvement in their learning process. (Participant 1)

It's a blessing in disguise. I have improved a lot. I have learned how to use a lot of applications, software, and tools. I somehow got mastery using these all when before I wasn't. (Participant 9)

I learned about MS Office and other things, so it's a plus point. (Participant 10)

My digital skills were very weak in the beginning, but after a few weeks, I was much more active, and now I'm well versed in using online platforms and digital tools. I can even prepare my lessons quickly now... (Participant 11)

We are now more exposed to technology as a teacher. Because I found the workshops useful, I can now efficiently handle online tools. (Participant 5)

Online teaching is comparatively easier for me now. The one-hour and 30 minutes slot is easier and advanced learners are easy to deal with when compared to beginners. (Participant 7)

The teachers are now more confident in handling online tools and resources in online classes.

Now I can handle all gadgets and confidently take an online class. (Participant 1)

Digital literacy and tools handling have been enhanced. (Participant 8)

I am more comfortable with online classes now. (Participant 12)

The participants' viewpoints revealed that digital illiteracy was initially a problem, which turned into an advantage after a few weeks. The pandemic-induced online teaching gave teachers another benefit.

It has also opened the horizon for more opportunities to connect with the outside educational world. (Participant 1)

It is much easier to teach online or do catch-up classes online or teach from various locations if you have to that makes a big difference. I think it will diversify the kinds of courses that we have and probably the kinds of people who would be interested in doing a course because they're able to do it online maybe from work they can't come into a class or center, so I think it will take just diversified classes. (Participant 3)

The benefits are not surprising since the blended learning approach was already integrated to some extent in EFL classrooms. The teachers voiced benefits and remained optimistic about the outcomes of the online classes in the future.

Personal experience in online English language teaching

Personal problems

The teachers also highlighted some personal problems they faced in adjusting to the new e-learning and e-teaching system.

It was a new thing, so the adjustment was the problem...both for teachers and learners. (Participant 2)

Moreover, they found it hard to maintain home and work separately and stated,

It was initially super stressful for everybody in the whole world, so it made the boundaries between home and work hazy, which I didn't like. (Participant 3)

Some personal problems included distractions and interruptions from family members and outside. They were troubled by

...a lot of distractions. (Participant 5)

The distractions of the traffic outside and the salesmen. (Participant 6)

The teachers were stressed out due to being confined to four walls all the time.

Being locked in four walls...makes me feel I was nobody. (Participant 12)

Some teachers got demotivated and distressed when students stopped responding to online classes. They were remorseful and explained,

It is like talking to machines sometimes. I get demotivated.... When I was speaking continuously, and students did not respond, it was demoralizing. (Participant 5)

In addition, some of the teachers complained about ignoring 'selves' and ignored taking care of their personality and personal grooming when they locked themselves at home. A teacher exclaimed with sorrow,

I have left myself... I never took care of myself... I got stressed... I also got late for my class... I didn't even wash my face for online classes sometimes. (Participant 12)

Some health problems were also crucial concerns.

Now my sitting hours have been increased, and it has affected my health. (Participant 3)

The screen time has been increased too, and my eyes hurt due to constant screen reading."

sitting hours increased at a distressing level. (Participant 10)

The teachers voiced their professional, ecological, and health concerns with this online teaching system.

Personal benefits

The teachers also shared the benefits at the personal level. They managed work and home simultaneously, saving much time,

I feel for teachers it was beneficial in two ways; it was easier to manage home and teaching at the same time, and it was a time saver. (Participant 3)

They enjoyed the comfort of home while working. A teacher said,

Personally, I really just loved being at home. I liked being at home. I liked the flexibility of it. I liked the feeling of online classes once I understood how to do them. There was a lot of positivity as well. (Participant 7)

Online teaching from home saved energy resources and commuting expenses. One teacher expressed, Above all, the teachers became more confident in attending virtual conferences, webinars, and presentations because of teaching online. A teacher shared personal experience in words:

It saved resources and energy. You didn't have to wake up, press your clothes every day, it saves your electricity; It saved commute time and cost; fuel consumption was saved. You saved a lot of money. (Participant 9)

My personal life has been changed. Previously, I was much worried and scared of going online, but now I feel more confident in attending meeting webinars, and presentations. (Participant 1)

I would like to say that it was a very new thing for me. I never talked about that before, but it was a new experience and not really good, but of course an experience. Then you have to learn, and you have to experience new things or to learn new things because you have to fit yourself into a different environment, so that was a kind of practice, so I learned a lot. (Participant 10)

A teacher also mentioned it overall a new learning experience with both positive and negative sides.

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This new experience has enabled teachers to teach at an international level and earn by teaching as online tutors in foreign countries. A teacher mentioned:

It is like an extra income method of income or career change like it's possible to be an online tutor now, and that's good like I have it I guess much wider range of IT skills they went by this little bit they run amazing, and now I feel like I've got more capacity to learn more about IT also just different teaching strategies for motivating students online those would be the main things yeah alright so ... (Participant 1)

Solutions adopted for problems by English language teachers

The teachers adopted various strategies to overcome the problems they faced. They managed the time very well by dividing the time efficiently in order to gain maximum participation from the students.

The first half is my presentation, and the rest half is the activities where I indulge my students. (Participant 3)

I divide my class, I deliver a lesson, then interact with the students after making groups. I make groups of students and call names to make them participate actively. (Participant 5)

Initially, I faced problems with time management, but then I made it clear to students that there are certain terms and conditions. If some activity is longer. We would divide it over two or three days... I managed time well. (Participant 9)

They either confined themselves to a room or counseled their family members to keep quiet during the online classes to avoid interruptions and distractions.

Sometimes there was noise in the street you know there's not a lot you can do you have to close the windows and the doors. (Participant 1)

I usually would just lock myself into one room and make sure that nobody, nobody disturbed me. (Participant 12)

Whenever I prepared for the class, I locked my door and sat alone in the room so that there might not be any distractions. Also, I gave instructions to my family and kids that I had a class and not to make noise. (Participant 7).

Some teachers dedicated a place and set a workstation for e-teaching to discipline their teaching time and place.

I found ways to kind of signal to myself because I have my desk that I only used for online teaching, and so I never did that anywhere else in the house. I didn't teach anywhere else because that would be in my private space, so initially, I didn't like that, but I found ways around it. (Participant 4).

Many teachers also found ways to efficiently assess learners fairly and thoroughly using digital content.

I would give them topics for presentation. I would check their pronunciation. I also gave written assignments. (Participant 7)

I found different ways...So, I'd asked them to write things down, and then they sent me screenshots. (Participant 11)

I'd give quizzes.... I give assessments in the form of interactive questions because that is the only way of doing a fair evaluation. (Participant 6)

To gain maximum attention from students and maintain interactions, teachers would prepare "assessments in the form of interactive questions." These steps helped them improve the online teaching system; they adopted it on their own over time.

Suggested solutions for unsolved problems in online English language classroom

Despite the management of online classes and overcoming several issues on their own, teachers articulated problems that persist and need solutions. The participants put forward some solutions to leftover problems to improve the overall online teaching system. The most frequent solution suggested by almost all the participants was the provision of better internet connections.

Provide better internet connection. (Participant 9)

I think no matter how well trained or qualified teachers are, how organized we are, how great the system is, if the internet is failing, then there's no point, we need to resolve this problem to do our jobs efficiently. (Participant 5)

Yes, better internet provision. (Participant 3)

The provision of affordable internet packages is another possible solution to make this online system work.

The only thing that I would want to change is the internet packages. The government should facilitate students in this regard and instruct mobile connection companies to offer educational packages at a lower cost. (Participant 8)

University management or government should provide some packages to these students. We should be facilitated in terms of internet packages and gadgets. (Participant 2)

They also outlined other suggestions for ELT teachers, including fewer task assignments for students. A teacher mentioned,

I don't think that every teacher should be giving extra work all the time because students are exhausted, and they've had to sit in front of a screen for five hours a day because actually it's not physically healthy to sit down in front of a screen for four or five hours like that and they're not machines. (Participant 7)

Almost all of the teachers agreed, "We have to shift to technological tools" and that there is a need for more training and workshops for new teachers and students.

Training and workshops for those and new teachers are requirements of the time. (Participant 10)

New teachers and new students definitely need it before entering the world of online education. (Participant 1)

We need to spread awareness we need to arrange some workshops training programs for students. (Participant 4)

Teachers should be well-equipped with tools so that they can better assess students' learning and improvement. (Participant 1)

Training and workshops should be conducted. (Participant 3)

I think we are moving into the latest technology era, we all should even students should get on and off training. (Participant 8)

Yes, if it happens in the future, training and workshops should be conducted. (Participant 10)

A very important and useful suggestion was to switch cameras on in online classes by students and teachers. They said,

We have to pinpoint each student. We should ask students to switch their cameras; otherwise, you never know whether they are in shopping malls or cafés" (Participant 9)

Our students should be trained for using cameras. They should not be hesitant. If the cameras are switched on, they are active and alert, so cameras should be switched on during online classes. (Participant 12)

The teachers also believed in changing pedagogies as they said that they have to "change our teaching methodology" for online classes because "It should be student-centered rather than teacher centered." The teachers preferred more interactive activities to be included in the online classes, as they mentioned,

Language class is interactive, so we need to maintain two-way communication. (Participant 1)

The content and methodology should also be changed as per the online system of teaching because overgeneralizing the one from conventional face-to-face teaching to online isn't a good idea. The content should be considered important. The students should be more interactive and involved in multiple activities for online classes. (Participant 4)

Teaching time in the online system should be kept at a minimum level. A teacher mentioned,

I think the timing was too much; if we make them a little shorter, maybe it will capture students' interest more. (Participant 2)

Some teachers suggested a hybrid system of teaching.

I suggest a hybrid system of teaching so that students slowly become used to a new normal situation. (Participant 3)

For practice, we should have both forms of classes. 70% should be on campus/face-to-face, and 30% can be online teaching. (Participant 2)

On the other hand, some teachers suggested on-campus classes for writing skills, and only one teacher suggested that ELT be on-campus rather than an online system. They said,

Writing tasks cannot be done online, so we need on-campus classes to teach writing skills. (Participant 3)

It's better to be on-campus for ELT. (Participant 5)

Therefore, the teachers were ambivalent about teaching English online. They faced problems, found solutions, acknowledged benefits, and suggested solutions to remaining problems. Almost all of them were optimistic about the change in teaching EFL classes from face-to-face to online teaching and the success of the online teaching system during the pandemic.

Discussion

In light of the above findings, ELT teachers catered to and responded optimistically to the online pedagogical shift during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants acknowledged the benefits of teaching online. Despite several problems, they did not perceive such a shift as a failure. This finding is in contrast with Atmojo and Nugroho (2020), who found the change to the online system a breakdown. Lamie (2005) also stated disagreement regarding the mode of teaching. The positive outcomes and benefits are consistent with Nashir and Laili (2021); however, none of the participants in their study favored an online teaching system (66%

preferred face-to-face teaching while 34% voted for a hybrid teaching system). On the contrary, the ELT teachers in the current study voiced benefits, highlighted problems, and shared solutions to improve the online teaching system. The findings are outlined in major themes of problems, solutions, and benefits.

The problems of 'online distraction' and 'interruptions' during online teaching are consistent with Joshi et al. (2020). Digital illiteracy and a lack of workshops or training were major hurdles that hampered the online teaching system. The problems were also regarded as serious challenges by Lestiyanawati and Widyantoro (2020). In addition, a lack of technical support and Internet connectivity issues were also found by Nashir and Laili (2021). The findings for the theme of technological problems are consistent with their outlined problems of the cost of the internet, inadequate technological facilities, and poor internet connections. Sugianto and Ulfah (2020) mentioned the problem of access to the internet as a substantial challenge in teaching online which is also corroborated by the current study's findings.

These problems might have occurred because of a lack of preliminary planning and preparation, as Atmojo and Nughroho (2020) suggested; however, the problems are not unsolvable. Interestingly, the teachers of the current study adopted measures to overcome these problems and suggested solutions for upgrading technical devices. The suggestion to improve technological infrastructure by the participants of the current study was also mentioned by ELT teachers in studies by Younesi and Khan (2020) and Todd (2020).

The benefits of readily available English teaching content and instant access to ready-made quizzes and assignments are also corroborated by Fansury et al. (2020). In addition, Pustika (2020) and Verma and Priyamvada (2020) highlighted easy access to teaching resources as a significant technological benefit of an online teaching system. A prominent advantage of 'no commuting cost' is concordant with Pustika's (2020) findings. Although the mentioned studies highlighted the benefits of online teaching during the pandemic, they reported that the participants were more confident in teaching in the face-to-face environment than in the online system. In the present study, teachers were equally confident in both teaching systems since they preferred solutions instead of rejecting the new normal altogether.

Thus, the pandemic was an unprecedented challenge; however, it established the importance of technology in the world. In findings, similar to Strielkowski's (2020) example of 'creative destruction,' a teacher called it a 'blessing in disguise, which transformed the status quo in the entire academia. Thus, the online shift has been deemed helpful and positive as per teachers' perspectives in the current study. The pedagogical shift has also established the undeniable role of technology in today's era. Technology has proved beneficial during this pandemic-induced online shift. Although the pandemic has brought several problems, it enabled continued educational activities despite the lockdown.

Conclusion

Pandemics are always troublesome in history. The recent pandemic also caused the world to change its traditional teaching methods. The E-learning platform was adopted to continue with the teaching and learning activities at all educational levels. However, this shift was quite sudden and haphazard. There was not much planning behind the process. As a result, it caused many problems for both teachers and learners. The present study was initiated to provide insight into how ELT teachers at HEIs catered to and responded to this shift in the teaching system. Initially, the researchers anticipated exposing the problems and expected solutions; however, procuring benefits is a significant turn added later to this study while doing the thematic analysis via NVivo-12. The results of the study exhibit an indecisive disposition of ELT teachers at HEIs for the pedagogical shift during COVID-19. The responses by teachers from different universities were more or less similar regarding the problems they faced. However, teachers have used different apps for teaching English online. The teachers from IUI and NUML preferred *Google Meet* or *ZOOM* (despite having LMS platforms), while the AIOU teachers were more inclined towards using university LMS.

There were many sorts of problems reported by the teachers. Mostly, internet connection problems, data packages, and power outages are prominent ones. The study suggests these problems should be addressed at the governmental level. Most of the professional and personal issues were solved by EFL teachers over time, for instance, handling distractions and interruptions, organizing content, preparing lessons, handling tools, and connecting with students. While discussing the solutions, teachers also acknowledged the benefits of technology and online teaching system. As per the teachers, some major benefits are timesaving, cost-saving, fuel-saving, enhanced digital literacy, and a gateway opening for online tutors across the globe. Thus, it is indeed a blessing in disguise since online teaching found its possibility during the pandemic.

Thus, the study recommends that educators need to equip themselves with cutting-edge technological expertise as it is the need of time. E-teaching can work if technological support is guaranteed by education

shareholders and the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The problems and challenges that EFL teachers face are more or less the same on a global scale. Many studies from different parts of the world focus on the issue; however, there is a scarcity in reflecting EFL teachers' voices.

Moreover, the study provides some EFL teachers' perspectives to cope with pandemics in the future. Moreover, in Pakistan, it is even more advantageous in cases of roadblocks during protests, sit-ins, or unannounced political processions. Therefore, for a pandemic, this study helps provide suggestions and possible solutions for the problems suggested by EFL teachers. The researchers suggest shareholders invest in infrastructures to provide teachers with better internet connections and data packages. A comparative analysis is necessary to gain more insight into the online teaching system and face-to-face teaching method that can scope future studies.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Teachers' Perspectives on Online English Language Teaching

Do you teach online in ELT classrooms?

Which online teaching platform do you use to teach the English language? (*LMS, Google Meet, Zoom, MS Teams, etc.*)

What problems do you face while teaching the English language online in the COVID-19 era?

How do you manage time in the online teaching system?

How do you handle distractions and interruptions from family members while teaching online from home, if any?

How do you assess a learner's learning and improvement in the online teaching system?

In what ways the shift in the teaching system (face-to-face to online) has affected you personally?

Has this online shift affected you professionally? If yes, how?

Do you feel the need for training and workshops for teaching online more efficiently?

Have you found any benefits of pandemic-induced online teaching?

What do you think can be changed in this online language teaching system for improvement?

What are the future implications for online English language teaching?