



GSJ: Volume 11, Issue 4, April 2023, Online: ISSN 2320-9186
www.globalscientificjournal.com

AUTONOMOUS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN PAKISTAN

By: Aysha Khan

Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences

Hamdard University, Madinat al-Hikmah

Hakim Mohammed Said Road

Karachi – 74600, Pakistan

Email: Aysha.Khan@hamdard.edu.pk Contact: +923003523557

Abstract

The educational system all over the world has been affected severely due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It forced the shutdown of universities in Pakistan which has adversely shaken the student fraternity. Since the nature of COVID-19 was contagious, it enforced isolation that tremendously disturbed the student-teacher interaction. Instead of traditional classroom teaching of the English language, online and computer-based learning has emerged as an alternative. It is therefore pertinent to evaluate the university students' perception and readiness about the autonomous English language learning adopted at the university level; a sample of 10 students was purposefully selected by identifying their knowledge and experience with the phenomenon under study. The participants of the study are students of a public sector university in Pakistan who are at the graduate and post-graduate levels in the department of English and International Relations. The age of the participants lies between 21 to 26 years and they all are enrolled in the same university. The findings of the study reveal a mixed students' response towards online English language learning and acceptance of digital learning systems. Students have accepted the significance of e-learning in the time of the COVID-19 crisis. However, most of them have expressed concerns over the lack of faculty training to use online modalities and problems like power failures that hinder their punctuality and performance in online English classes. Students have stressed the need to blend modern-day technology with traditional teaching for enhancing the language learning process and learning output. The findings of the study will facilitate the faculty members and policymakers who intend to take online English language teaching to the next level.

Key terms: *traditional classroom teaching, digital learning system, e-learning, faculty training*

Introduction

The outbreak of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which is novel coronavirus-infected pneumonia (NCIP) has affected thousands of lives globally. The disease rapidly spread to other countries and soon the public health emergency of International concern had been declared by World Health Organization (WHO) to restrict its impact on global health and economy (Ali et al., 2020). The local transmission of the disease however occurred in all six WHO regions (World Health Organization, 2020). The disease not only speedily spread in China but also in 209 countries of America, Europe, Australia, and Asia including Pakistan (Waris et al., 2020), Pakistan has taken immediate and rigorous measures such as designing special hospitals, laboratories for testing, quarantine facilities, awareness campaign, and lockdown to limit the spread of the virus.

Due to the possible rapid spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19), normal Life has been suspended in various parts of Pakistan. Universities, colleges, and schools across the country remain closed as a measure of prevention and control. Universities however have chosen online classes to keep students on an agenda of learning (Service, 2020). The students who are in the state of “confinement” may resolve to online classes with the help of their respective universities/Degree Awarding Institution that function with LMS and are prepared to commence online lectures (Higher Education Commission, 2020b). The universities and institutes continue to teach, irrespective of the interruption in the Spring 2020 semester, by using methods like distance learning initiatives involving the internet, audio/video conferencing, sharing of information by email/WhatsApp to name a few. It is mandatory to find out the perceptions of students regarding online English classes at university. It is

important to find out that during COVID 19 pandemic, whether or not the distance learning activities developed independent English language learners at home (Xie & Yang, 2020). It is also viable to investigate if students can set goals and are determined to achieve academic milestones provided their teachers guide them using online teaching techniques.

Autonomous Learning refers to the ability of learners to view online learning as an opportunity by setting their academic goals and choose learning methods that can help them evaluate their learning as well as assessment (Chan, 2015). Autonomous learning is an opportunity for students to adopt better learning methods and following strategies that are timely and productive. Students who tend to show proactive behavior in coping up with new learning methods like online classes can effectively improve learning performance; additionally, it also inculcates the habit of life-long learning practices. The concept of autonomous learning requires students to not only monitor their academics but also their behavior and environment (Zhou & Li, 2020). Not only this, but students should also enjoy the support of external factors such as infrastructure and teaching strategies to create a more favorable language learning experience. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across Pakistan has provided new realities to deliver instruction as well as to be independent at one's learning with the help of the respective institution. Most students, however, find themselves forced to use technology as they attend online classes (Lederman, 2020).

Problem Statement

The coronavirus – COVID-19 – pandemic is a public health emergency of global concern and presents a challenge to psychological strength (Wang et al., 2020). Education has been hit predominantly during the COVID – 19 pandemic with 1.53 billion learners out of school and 184 country-wide closures that have impacted nearly 87.6% of the world's total enrolled learners. To initiate necessary defense against the COVID – 19 pandemic, 124 governments in the world announced the closure of academic institutes that resulted in over 1.2 billion learners

without access to education; for a majority of students, studying remotely would be the first time experience (UNICEF, 2020). While distance learning programs are attempted, still its impact will not reach all children, especially those who are without internet access or teacher supervision. The situation in Pakistan is alarming since coronavirus has affected the education of 46.8 million students including the ones who are enrolled at different academic levels (Yousafzai, 2020). With the help of the World Bank, steps to minimize the education losses include the development and implementation of distance education and its successful delivery with the help of current curricula and content available.

Accompanied by an extremely chaotic situation, the COVID – 19 is an opportunity to re-design and re-think the evolution of the education system in Pakistan; luckily the coronavirus will not differentiate by class but raises a question on planning the academic activities for the future. However, the universities in Pakistan may offer online classes provided the campuses are equipped with essential technological/digital infrastructure. Considering the challenge like COVID-19, the real challenge is to create a solution that can respond to multiple end-users and their needs. The significant problems are related to students' motivation in a transformed classroom setup and whether a certain platform suits all students or only a few of them (Siddiqi, 2020).

Methodology

The study examines the effectiveness of autonomous English language learning of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan. It explores the success of online English language classes that are held to facilitate students during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study is designed around semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions for collecting the data. During the interviews, twenty main questions, other than ice-breaking and probing ones are asked to receive students' responses. The questions are about students' perceptions of independent learning and learning English online. Besides, students are also asked about the

barriers they have faced while participating in online classes and opinions about teachers' feedback that they have received while attending online English classes. The data that was studied reveal that the existing infrastructure in Pakistan does not support the immediate shift from traditional classroom teaching to an online mode of teaching/learning. The participants of the study have confirmed that they suffered from extended hours of load-shedding and poor or no internet support especially in remote areas hence they were unable to attend online classes. Participants have acknowledged the fact that online English classes are fruitful for those students who enjoy better internet services at their doorstep. Recognizing the effectiveness of online English classes, participants have agreed that such a facility is good for improving English speaking skills as they could interact with peers in English and also seek help from online resources like Google to confirm grammar rules. Participants however believe that the success of online English classes also depends on the expertise of teachers who should be able to use technology conveniently. It was observed that untrained teachers are most likely to face greater hindrances while guiding students in online classes. Online classes promise students autonomy as they enhance their digital interactions with peers and teachers. At the same time, it is a challenging experience for most of the students because they have to immediately learn the new interface like Zoom and Google Classroom. For this reason, the online English language classes did not receive an overwhelming response from students as they all believe that they could learn better in a traditional classroom where the teacher was available physically to answer their queries.

Discussion

The study hypothesized that online English language classes that were held during the COVID-19 lockdown imposed in Pakistan present varying results. Different opinions have been registered during the interviews conducted for the study and people have given the varying perception of COVID-19 (Mahmood et al., 2020). The education programs held during

the lockdown aimed at improving the knowledge of people and also to keep them motivated due to the sudden shift away from the traditional classroom in many parts of the world. People continue to wonder if the shift to online learning will continue to take place post-Covid and to what extent will it affect global education (Li & Lalani, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over, and educational sciences will undoubtedly continue to study this abrupt global change in teaching and learning online for many years to come. The experiences of students during COVID-19 online classes make a unique collection of real-life accounts soon after the sudden shift to online classes. As a result, the students who were earlier habitual of traditional classroom learning were suddenly exposed to a new form of learning/teaching (Jandrić et al., 2020).

For autonomous English language learning of university students during COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan, the following themes have emerged from the data reviewed in the form of students' interviews:

- I. Learning Opportunity – the online form of education is an opportunity for students to learn even during a crisis like COVID-19.
- II. Continuing Education – students can continue to attend online classes and complete their academic tasks provided they enjoy access to a stable internet connection and necessary resources.
- III. Necessary Training – to implement the online model of teaching and learning, it is necessary that teachers and students are given basic training to use several computer software and internet-based facilities.
- IV. Technical Support – it is important to provide the latest infrastructure to educational institutes and also to remote areas that support the online form of education and language learning.

- V. Learning Barriers – most students struggle in online English language learning because they are not exposed to this form of education previously; it is challenging for students to cope up with new demands.
- VI. English Speaking competence – since students use online-based facilities and receive/send instructions in English, it is more likely that students excel in English speaking skills.
- VII. Understanding Technology – students simultaneously learn the use of gadgets and apps as they make effort to attend online English classes.
- VIII. Flexible Learning – students are facilitated with a flexible timetable to complete their due tasks and respond to teachers' queries.
- IX. Parallel Learning – for most students, the prospects of online English language learning stand as an additional benefit to their traditional classroom learning.
- X. Guided Learning – students believe that online English language learning is a good option if teachers' guidance is present to help them improve academically.
- XI. Memory Drill – students have confirmed that for the experience of online English classes, they all had to rely on their memory thus it enabled them to retain more information in their minds.
- XII. Independent Learning – students do believe that online education makes them independent learners as they had to keep themselves motivated for the classes and continue doing the activities on their own.
- XIII. Self Learning – students have confirmed that online English classes provided them an opportunity to self-learn and find out information with the help of websites and eBooks.

- XIV. Digital Interaction – students enjoyed the new interface of digital interaction with peers and teachers, although some of them have also complained that it was difficult for them to switch to digital learning,
- XV. Blended Learning Facility – students have stressed that their traditional classroom teaching/learning should be assisted with technology and there should be a few online sessions too in a semester to familiarize them with new methods.
- XVI. Improved learning facility – students believe that online teaching/learning is a better facility to access information and interact with each other. However, it has some drawbacks such as power failures and poor infrastructure.

It is also a fact that many students considered the facility of online English learning an opportunity and a means to continue their education, there is a large number of students who did not enjoy this transition. Some students live with an unreliable internet connection because of which they struggle to participate in online classes (Li & Lalani, 2020). The infrastructure that exists in Pakistan does not support the immediate shift to online classes since most of the respondents have confirmed that they suffered from long hours of load-shedding and poor internet connectivity issues. The shift from the traditional form of learning to online classes however remained fruitful for those students who could seek immediate help from English language websites. Digital learning has increased the learning opportunities for them (OECD, 2020). Students have stated that online classes were useful for them as they could practice English speaking skills and also learn meanings of difficult words or grammar rules from Google. The availability of fast internet access thus makes it easier. Students have also convincingly believed that the success of online classes may also depend on teachers' expertise to use the latest technology. Untrained teachers are most likely to face hindrances while taking students on board in an online English language class (Coman et al., 2020). Online learning

does indeed promise students' autonomy as learners are perceived to be more responsible and prompt in managing their digital interactions with peers and teachers. On the contrary, it was the first experience of many students to attend online English language classes; most of them had to cope up with new trends such as downloading apps like Zoom and Google Classroom. The students believe that the success of online classes is dependent upon the availability of high-speed internet services in all areas of Pakistan and the training of teachers to swiftly use the services. The online English language classes did not receive an overwhelming response from the student population since they still believe that the traditional classrooms promise better learning/teaching. One group of students accept that the world is changing and there are facilities like Youtube where one can learn independently. The other group however believes that the traditional classrooms are better suited to students of Pakistan as we have limited resources to implement an ideal online model (Hunter, 2020).

Implications

The current study has proven to be an exploration of how the idea of autonomous online English language learning is received by university students in Pakistan (Farooq et al., 2012). The technology-based initiative that was taken during the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the process of learning and teaching at formal institutions. One of the implications of the study suggests that distance education is at the heart of the latest technologies thus enabling students to seek maximum advantage of the digital age. It is crucial however to design the online English classes while accepting teachers' central role in building knowledge (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). It is mandatory to bridge the digital divide while maintaining quality teaching and learning too. The online English language classes are yet another facility to utilize the new technologies provided the teachers' and learners' roles are redesigned in the distance education model.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Online education is one of the growing areas in the world, especially after the recent pandemic of COVID-19 where the global community had to rely on technology for their needs. It is apparent from the data analysed that online education in Pakistan is weak currently due to poor infrastructure and untrained staff and teachers. Based on the themes that emerged from the data studied, the following recommendations are given for teachers and scholars to implement and improve online education in Pakistan.

1. Online mode of learning/teaching should be implemented in educational institutes provided there exists an infrastructure that supports such a change.

2. The faculty members should be trained on using the online modalities and should be able to design everyday lessons in English.

3. Students should be kept engaged and motivated by involving them in interactive activities thus ensuring their academic progress.

4. Traditional classrooms should be modified a little with the help of technology so that students are familiar with internet-based facilities and apps that support their learning.

5. With the help of technology, students should be made independent to improve their English language competence by signing up for free grammar eBooks and downloading activity packs.

References

Ali, S. A., Baloch, M., Ahmed, N., Ali, A. A., & Iqbal, A. (2020). The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)—An emerging global health threat. *Journal of Infection and Public Health*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jiph.2020.02.033>

- Chan, M. (2015). Language Learner Autonomy and Learning Contract: A Case Study of Language Majors of a University in Hong Kong. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 05(02), 147–180. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2015.52013>
- Coman, C., Țîru, L. G., Meseșan-Schmitz, L., Stanciu, C., & Bularca, M. C. (2020). Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Students' Perspective. *Sustainability*, 12(24),. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122410367>
- Farooq, M. U., Al Asmari, A., & Javid, C. Z. (2012). A Study of Online English Language Teacher Education Programmes in Distance Education Context in Pakistan. *English Language Teaching*, 5(11). <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n11p91>
- Guri-Rosenblit, S. (2009). Distance Education in the Digital Age: Common Misconceptions and Challenging Tasks. *Journal of Distance Education*, 23(2), 105–122.
- Higher Education Commission. (2020b, April 15). *HEC COVID-19 Policy Papers Policy Guidance Note 5: Online Readiness*. Higher Education Commission, Pakistan. <https://hec.gov.pk/english/HECAnnouncements/Documents/nCoVirus/Covid-19-Policy-Guidance-No.5-Online%20Readiness.pdf>
- Hunter, R. (2020, February 25). *Education in Pakistan*. World Education News + Reviews. <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/02/education-in-pakistan>
- Jandrić, P., Hayes, D., Truelove, I., Levinson, P., Mayo, P., Ryberg, T., Monzó, L. D., Allen, Q., Stewart, P. A., Carr, P. R., Jackson, L., Bridges, S., Escaño, C., Grauslund, D., Mañero, J., Lukoko, H. O., Bryant, P., Fuentes-Martinez, A., Gibbons, A., & Sturm, S. (2020). Teaching in the Age of Covid-19. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00169-6>
- Lederman, D. (2020, March 18). *Most Teaching Is Going remote. Will That Help or Hurt Online learning? | inside Higher Ed*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/03/18/most-teaching-going-remote-will-help-or-hurt-online-learning>
- Li, C., & Lalani, F. (2020, April 29). *The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/>
- Mahmood, S., Hussain, T., Mahmood, F., Ahmad, M., Majeed, A., Beg, B. M., & Areej, S. (2020). Attitude, Perception, and Knowledge of COVID-19 Among General Public in Pakistan. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.602434>
- OECD. (2020). *The potential of online learning for adults: Early lessons from the COVID-19 crisis*. OECD. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135358-ool6fisocq&title=The-potential-of-Online-Learning-for-adults-Early-lessons-from-the-COVID-19-crisis&_ga=2.14176624.679874322.1630314472-135609754.1630314472
- Service, R. F. (2020, February 17). “The disruption is enormous.” *Coronavirus epidemic snarls science worldwide*. Science. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/02/disruption-enormous-coronavirus-epidemic-snarls-science-worldwide>
- Siddiqi, S. A. (2020, April 18). *Covid-19 education response*. The News; The News. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/645803-covid-19-education-response>
- UNICEF. (2020, March). *Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Global Response*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/covid-2019.html>
- Wang, C., Pan, R., Wan, X., Tan, Y., Xu, L., Ho, C. S., & Ho, R. C. (2020). Immediate Psychological Responses and Associated Factors during the Initial Stage of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Epidemic among the General Population in China.

- International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(5),
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051729>
- Waris, A., Atta, U. K., Ali, M., Asmat, A., & Baset, A. (2020). COVID-19 outbreak: current scenario of Pakistan. *New Microbes and New Infections*, 35, 1–6.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nmni.2020.100681>
- World Health Organization. (2020). *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*. World Health Organization; World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>
- Xie, Z., & Yang, J. (2020). Autonomous Learning of Elementary Students at Home During the COVID-19 Epidemic: A Case Study of the Second Elementary School in Daxie, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China. *Papers.ssrn.com*.
- Yousafzai, A. (2020, March 31). *WB, UN bodies helping Pakistan minimise educational disruption amid COVID-19 crisis*. The News; The News.
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/637068-wb-un-bodies-helping-pakistan-minimise-educational-disruption-amid-covid-19-crisis>
- Zhou, L., & Li, C. (2020). Can Student Self-Directed Learning Improve Their Academic Performance? Experimental Evidence from the Instruction of Protocol-Guided Learning in China's Elementary and Middle Schools. *Science Insights Education Frontiers*, 5(1), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.15354/sief.20.ar01>

