

Teaching during COVID-19 Pandemic: Students' Experiences, Perceptions and Lessons for Higher Education Institutes

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ABSTRACT A sudden shift to complete online teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic created many challenges for educational institutes, their administrators, teachers and students. This study investigated students' online teaching experiences with the intention to shape higher education institutes' (HEI) Information and Communication Technology (ICT) integration policies and practices. A mixed-method research approach was used to collect data. The quantitative data were collected using a survey questionnaire and focus group discussion method was used to gather qualitative data. The students' views of their instructors' online instructional and assessment strategies revealed that teachers confined themselves to the university guidelines and used the recommended learning management system (LMS) and digital tools but lacked the training to utilise many of the features available in the recommended LMS and digital tools that could be integrated with the LMS due to poor knowledge and ICT skills. This study suggests that HEIs should invest in research to understand students' choices of digital tools and train teachers to maximise the use of the LMS.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the mass closure of educational institutes across the world and caused a sudden disruption in the teaching-learning process in Pakistan as it did in all countries of the world. The disruption caused a sudden and hurried hustle at the educational institutes to reorganize and re-plan the teaching learning processes and shift all operations, academic (teaching-learning and assessment) and administrative online. The response to this massive move to online teaching and learning made the governments create new resources for parents, teachers and students. The HEI's adoption and shifting to online teaching was not that difficult because they already have an LMS, which was used to some extent to upload course content. The HEIs have been supporting different public sector HEIs to adopt and improve their ICT related infrastructure and train their faculties as was suggested in its HEC 2025 vision (Higher Education Commission (HEC) 2017). E-learning indeed played an important role in continuing the education process during the closure of HEI but it was also noted that the heavy reliance on e-learning became a challenge, for both the users, the HEI, the faculty and the students (Crick et al. 2021;

Maphalala and Adigun 2021; Zarei and Mohammadi 2021). LMS is the backbone of the e-learning system established by an HEI and it is suggested that a "well-designed e-learning system typically does not only provide learning materials, but also facilitates other activities such quizzes, written examinations, and discussion forum" (Aini et al. 2020:58). E-learning indeed played an important role in continuing the education process during the closure of HEI but it was also noted that the heavy reliance on e-learning became a challenge, for both users, the faculty and the students (Lukas and Yunus 2021; Turnbull et al. 2021).

Objectives of the Study

This study is undertaken to explore undergraduate students' online learning experiences during English 100 level courses and the lessons learned by the faculty and the HEI. This course was offered to all year one undergraduate students enrolled in the four-year undergraduate degree programme. This study focused on two groups, the first group was selected from the Fall 2020 semester (100 students) and the second group (100 students) was chosen from Spring 2021. This study is undertaken to support instruc-

tors and HEI in their planning of ICT integration, procurement of appropriate digital tools and applications policy and training of faculty. The future of technology in Pakistani HEIs and classrooms can be shaped by students' learning experiences and also by instructors' classroom practices.

Literature Review

The use of instructional material and teaching aids are influenced by the teachers' beliefs about the efficacy of teaching in their English language classes. The choice of instructional and assessment strategies reflect the teachers' belief system of effective pedagogy, strategies and procedures and this belief system also helps to understand teachers' classroom practices. The educational administration using this data can design an intervention plan to support teachers to improve the effects of their selected material and instructional and assessment strategies. There is evidence (Morat et al. 2017; Pazilah et al. 2019) that this belief system is shaped by teachers' experiences as students and student-teachers but this belief system can be improved through building a positive and supportive learning culture in educational institutes giving teachers the confidence to try challenging instructional material and teaching aids to support their classroom activities. The support system present in an educational institute will support language teachers to plan authentic language learning experiences in their classrooms, which will transform the whole classroom teaching and learning experiences into meaningful and purposeful experiences for students.

The HEI made use of ICT tools to support both synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching. The former was built using platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard "based on a 'request-response' framework unconstrained by time limitations," while the latter requires "real-time interchange of information... conducted via video conferencing tools" (Turnbull et al. 2021: 6402). The researchers have highlighted that both these were needed to recreate the face-to-face (F2F) experiences in an online teaching-learning environment (McDaniels et al. 2016). The other important elements in the transitioning to online teaching and learning is the teachers' teaching and assessment practices and the support sys-

tem created to support the faculty and students to deliver, teach and assess the students' learning and to sustain their purposeful interaction with the platform. These considerations vary with the nature of the course being taught and the learners' characteristics. The transition from or F2F to an online mode of teaching became challenging in courses where hands-on expertise and lab experiences were required but was much easier in other courses (Mitchell 2020).

Many studies have identified the benefits of the online teaching mode but at the same time, many problems affect students' learning. The advantages include access to course material, assessments and rubrics, reinforcing the content taught in online video sessions using resources such as videos, and students' learning time and pace chosen and decided by the students' themselves. The educational and IT companies located in the developed world made their content accessible to teachers and students in underdeveloped countries. The disadvantages faced by students in the underdeveloped world were internet connectivity and speed issues and access to hardware, such as desktops, laptops, tablet PCs and smart mobile phones to fully and actively participate in the teaching-learning processes happening online. The HEI face an extra financial burden to procure hardware and services to support the online teaching-learning along with recruiting new personnel to manage the newly procured equipment and manage the services acquired from the educational and IT companies (Adnan and Anwar 2020; Lassoued et al. 2020).

Universities across the world have been offering distance learning educational programmes through their Open University structures, which use technology to provide students access to content (text and videos) and assessment. Pakistan has two universities, Allama Iqbal Open University and Virtual University, and these universities offer courses in the humanities and social sciences disciplines. Though these universities have developed programmes in the natural and physical sciences and the students were provided lab experiences in the designated labs in different cities across Pakistan. There have been a few studies analysing students' learning experiences at these universities (Akhter and Mahmood 2018; Nasreen and Afzal 2020; Noreen and Malik 2020; Sardar and Ajmal 2021) and these studies have found a very complex set of findings. On

the one hand, students would like to attend these courses, while on the other hand, the students would like these universities to improve their ICT related infrastructure, recruit faculty equipped with ICT skills, and train their faculty in using the university's ICT services to their maximum potentials, such as LMS, and online counselling and consultation services.

There are multiple mobile and computer applications designed to support language teaching and language at all levels. It was pointed out that the selection of ICT applications and resources was insufficient to support students' language learning. The teachers' planning of instruction and ICT embedded pedagogy are essential elements of language classrooms. The instructor's role is not just planning instruction plans and creating resources to support the learning plan but also to provide a supportive culture that supports students' learning (Al-Sobhi and Preece 2018). The issues identified by researchers in the past in school settings (Khokhar et al. 2017; Khokhar and Javaid 2016) are still valid for the HEIs, whereby the incapacity of the faculty to make effective use of ICT platforms and applications adopted by the HEI is evident, to support online teaching and learning. The faculty's lack of preparedness and poor understanding of when and where to use different applications affected students' motivation and learning (ALKhoudary 2020; Eltayeb et al. 2020; Halim et al. 2020; Supriyatno et al. 2020).

The educational videos posted on different video sharing platforms (such as YouTube, Dailymotion and Vime) are a reusable instructional teaching aid preferred by language teachers because they could be embedded in the LMS, facilitating the content sharing with the students. These videos also support students to manage their learning pace and autonomy for these videos, as they are stored in an open repository, that is video sharing platforms. Language videos have become a core component of instructional plans and strategies to teach and reinforce the content studied in the classroom. The videos were used to improve students' listening comprehension (oral reception skills) and their speaking skills (oracy skills). This use of videos to develop these linguistic skills made language instructors review and redesign their language courses and their instructional and assessment practices aligned with personalised instruction aimed at different

types of learners in their classrooms (Bobkina and Romero 2020; Mansilla and Gómez-Ortiz 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive mixed-methods research method and collected quantitative and qualitative data using a survey questionnaire and focus group data collection strategies. The sample to collect quantitative data comprised of 200 students and qualitative data was collected from 50 students, using the focus group discussion (FGD) method. The mixed-methods research helped triangulate the responses collected using the quantitative research instrument, that is, survey questionnaire, with the qualitative responses collected using the focus group discussion strategy.

Sample of the Study

The study focused on year one undergraduate students enrolled in a core course, that is, English 100 level course offered to all undergraduate students studying in different undergraduate programmes offered by the different faculties. This course was offered to students in the second semester of their four-year undergraduate degree. The data from the first group were collected after the Fall 2020 semester in January 2021 and the second group participated in the data collection exercise in June 2021 after the conclusion of the Spring 2021 semester. The sample comprised 85 female and 115 male students. The English 100 level course was selected because it was studied by all students in all universities across Pakistan, and students who participated in this study were also enrolled in other courses. It was easier to compare different students' experiences of their learning experiences in the English 100 level course and their experiences in the other courses they were enrolled in these semesters.

Tools of Data Collection

The quantitative data was collected using an online survey-based questionnaire, which was designed to investigate students' learning experiences and challenges and how they overcame the challenges during their online classes. There were 23 questions (yes/no, multiple-choice ques-

tions), which covered the study's objectives. The questions were divided into three sections, that is, use of LMS, digital tools used by teachers, and problems encountered by students during online learning. The Google Forms tool was used to design the online survey questionnaire and it was distributed using WhatsApp and email in the last week of the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. The students were given one week to respond to the questionnaire. The students were selected using a convenient sample strategy. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information. The second part of the questionnaire contained questions about students' online experiences with online learning platforms and digital tools used by the instructors. The third part was about the challenges and problems encountered by students during online learning while the last part of the questionnaire covered students' satisfaction with the online learning platforms, digital tools and their ability to troubleshoot the problems faced during online learning. The data collection tools were checked for validity and reliability.

The qualitative data were collected using the focus group discussion method and each focus group session was for one hour. At this stage, 50 participants were chosen using a random sampling strategy from a group of 200 students. Google Meet was used to have online focus group sessions. Each focus group consisted of 10 students and each student was given 5 minutes to talk about his/her online learning experiences and challenges. These sessions could not be recorded because the female students did not approve of recording these sessions. The facilitator wrote the key points and summarised them under the theme given in the Google Form. The ideas shared by students in each focus group was shared with the focus group participants just before concluding the session.

RESULTS

The questionnaire separated the questions under the categories listed below and the authors framed focus group discussion questions around these categories.

1. The use of online platforms recommended by the university and other than the ones recommended by the HEI and the use of

available activities and services in the online platforms used by the faculty.

2. The digital tools used during online learning by the teacher, recommended by the HEI and the ones preferred by the faculty.
3. The problems confronted by students during online English classes and strategies used to overcome those problems.
4. The students' satisfaction with virtual learning during COVID-19 and the use of the educational digital tools in the future learning of students.

Learning Management System (LMS)

The first set of questions was related to the LMS and the data showed that the majority of the students (73%) worked with Google and used its Sites and Classroom applications. The other LMS that students worked with was Moodle (12%). The data showed that students also worked with other LMS such as Edmodo, Canvas, Coursesites and Schoology, though the number of students who used these platforms was very small. The data also showed that most teachers preferred to use the LMS other than the one recommended by their HEI (56%) and a significant number of teachers (44%) used LMS as per the recommendation of the university (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Use of LMS by teachers

	Responses	%
Google Classroom/Google sites	146	73
Moodle	24	12
Edmodo	10	5
Canvas	6	3
Coursesites	6	3
Schoology	8	4
	200	100

Source: Extracted from data

Table 2: Teachers used LMS recommended by the university

	Responses	%
Yes	88	44
No	112	56

Source: Extracted from data

The students highlighted in the focus group discussion that their teachers used multiple platforms for different reasons. For example, teachers

used Google Forms to gather responses from students in the beginning, the middle and at the end of the session and used this information in their teaching. A group of students shared their experiences of using Moodle and Google Classroom together and the instructor used both these platforms for different purposes. Another group of students shared that their instructor used Google Sites and Google Classroom applications together. The course content was posted on Google Sites and assessments were posted and collected on Google Classroom. The use of Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp digital tools were also employed and teachers posted their recorded lectures/sessions on Facebook and YouTube. The students were concerned about the privacy issue and they were worried whether these videos would be viewed by other than those who were not enrolled in the English 100 level course.

Digital Tools Used by Teachers

The most often digital tools used by teachers (Table 3) during online classes were quiz (46%), videos (46%) and online surveys (8%). The instructors chose to use the digital tools required by the university and did not try to find and explore tools that could be integrated with their online teaching. A small number of teachers used survey tools (online forms) to engage students and keep them actively engaged with the content and with the instructor. Quizzes and videos (92%) were used by the majority of the teachers to teach and assess students' learning, and this was underlined by the students in focus group discussions. The students believed that teachers did not take a risk and did not try to explore new digital tools and preferred the digital tools recommended by the university. The majority of the teachers (92%) used the suggested digital tools and only a small number of teachers (8%) experimented with new digital tools (Table 4).

Table 3: Digital tools used by teachers

	<i>Responses</i>	<i>%</i>
Quiz	92	46
Videos	92	46
Survey	16	8
Groupwork	0	0

Source: Extracted from Data

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Table 4: Digital tools used other than recommended by HEI

	<i>Responses</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	184	92
No	16	8

Source: Extracted from Data

The students shared their experiences of how their teachers used different digital tools in their classes. The students acknowledged that though their teachers used different digital tools in classrooms but there was little impact of these digital tools on their learning. The students felt that their teachers used YouTube videos in their classes but those videos did not help them to learn and practice what teachers were teaching and expecting them to practice. They believed that teachers used digital tools just to show to the HEI management that they were using different digital tools to make their lessons interesting for their students. The groups who participated in the Fall 2020 focus group discussion sessions were of the view that their teachers did not learn from their Spring 2021 semester and this was evident from their second online semester.

Problems Encountered by Students During Online Learning

The students faced problems during their online learning journey. The students acknowledged that teachers provided the course material on the university's recommended LMS and in some cases on multiple platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. The data (Table 5) disclosed reasons given by students that were related to their lack of motivation affecting their

Table 5: Problems encountered by students in online learning

	<i>Responses</i>	<i>%</i>
Access to online learning platform	64	32
Access to reading material	56	28
Access to online assessment tools	22	11
low ICT literacy	18	9
Lack of Motivation	14	7
too many distractions, e.g., games, YouTube, etc.	26	13

Source: Extracted from Data

performance in class. The lack of motivation was also due to the many distractions such as video games, movies, etc. that kept them busy during the hours that could be used to complete the assigned tasks or read the required readings. The focus group discussion also revealed that students were quick to learn the ICT skills related to entertainment, especially how to find their favourite shows and movies, play them online, or download them for later watch. The students were reluctant to quickly learn the digital tools used by the course instructors, especially, the online assessment tools. The teachers were using platforms other than the ones recommended by the university because they found it easier to learn and use them in their teaching. The students took time to explore the digital tools recommended and used by the university and their teachers.

The students also showed interest to continue to use the digital tools and online learning resources in their future semesters. A large number of respondents (70%) showed a willingness to continue using the digital tools and online learning resources in their future semesters (Table 6). This is in contrast to a very small number (7%) who said that they would stop using the online learning material shared by their instructor and they would go back to the traditional learning mode, which is using traditional learning resources (printed articles and books) and assessment (printed worksheets and research essays). This is aligned with students' level of satisfaction with the online learning material and digital tools used by their instructor. A large number of participants (70%) were satisfied with the course, course material and digital tools used by the instructors while the remaining (30%) found the course unsatisfactory (Table 7). The questionnaire also asked questions about teachers' online teaching styles (Table 8). The data illustrated that students found teachers only talked in their

online sessions (63%) while a few students pointed that their instructors used video in the sessions as they teach, or before teaching or after teaching. The integration of video in online classes became a source of content/information along with the instructor. A very small number of students saw their teachers using group work activities in their online classes (7%).

Table 7: Learners' satisfaction with online learning

	Responses	%
A lot -I will continue to use the digital learning tools	134	67
to some extent-I will rely less on digital tools	52	26
I will revert back to face-to-face traditional learning	14	7

Source: Extracted from Data

Table 8: Instructor used digital tools during teaching

	Responses	%
Talked only	126	63
Used video with talk	42	21
Discussion forums/breakout rooms	14	7
Survey/quiz	18	9

Source: Extracted from Data

The students in the focus group discussion sessions explained this phenomenon and they attributed the lack of group work to teachers' poor skills in finding appropriate tools for group work activity or group tasks. The students during the focus group discussion sessions identified that the idea of peers learning from their peers was missing because the instructors did not embed it in the course. The students also stressed that their teachers did not use the online quiz/survey tool, which was available in all the LMS. The students' observations about their instructors' skills of embedding different digital tools in the teaching and assessment practices revealed a huge gap between what the HEI was preparing their teachers to use in online classes and how students view their instructors' online teaching practices and their instructors' skills of selecting appropriate digital tools and embedding them to teach and assess students in the online mode of learning.

Table 6: Use of digital tools after the Covid19 Pandemic

	Responses	%
Strong agree	86	43
Agree	58	29
Disagree	30	15
Strongly disagree	26	13

Source: Extracted from Data

DISCUSSION

Learning Management System (LMS)

The participants' observations were reinforced in recent studies that analysed the use of LMS in Pakistan, either in school settings or in HEIs. These studies (Ahmed and Mesonovich 2019; Akram and Khan 2020) found that the optimal use of the functions of LMS could not be made possible due to the unavailability of trained staff in educational institutes that could train and demonstrate to instructors the various functions that were present in the LMS and could be used to engage students in classroom teaching and learning and to support their peers in the classroom and their learning processes. The participants felt that though LMS were designed to maximise students' learning experiences but the instructors remained confined to the traditional use of LMS, that is, distribution of instructional and assessment material and submission of assigned tasks. The students considered the integration of LMS in planning, designing and executing the planned learning experiences of 'poor quality' (Taybý and Ba'aran 2018), and the instructors did not try to experiment new features and integrate other digital tools with the LMS.

Digital Tools Used by Teachers

There are plenty of free digital resources available to English teachers and they use them to teach and reinforce all four linguistic skills. Vocabulary learning is both a conscious and unconscious process and this can strengthen students' spoken skills. The teachers use digital tools to teach vocabulary and support students' vocabulary learning as they engage consciously and unconsciously in learning vocabulary. It is also important that students use the recommended and used digital tools outside classrooms and this was only possible if they are motivated to do so. The most preferred digital tools were either video sharing platforms or assessment tools such as quizzes and assignments. The FGD sessions with participants also highlighted the lack of motivation on the part of the HEI administration and instructors to explore and use digital tools. The FGD discussion revealed that though students felt that ICT devices supported their learning

(Prince 2017), they felt that the instructors over-use the videos in the classroom and did not make use of group work and survey options available in online meetings.

The participants shared their experiences of learning online and thought that the online classes were just like the traditional classrooms where teachers taught (lectured, used PowerPoint presentations) and students listened but this time they were sitting in front of their devices at their homes. The instructors preferred Zoom over Microsoft Teams and Google Meet but they very rarely used the Breakout Rooms function to encourage group work in classrooms (Andrei 2019). The participants felt that the digital tools used by their instructors were not appealing and they found their use a boring activity and this also led to the least interest in the digital tools preferred by their instructors (Bakla 2019). The students believed that teachers were teaching in a new environment and they were never trained to work in such an environment. The planning of teaching an online class required more preparation because now the instructor was also exploring and finding appropriate digital tools along with traditional preparations such as preparing PowerPoint presentations, handouts/worksheets and assessment tasks. The instructor never used the e-portfolio to assess students' learning though it is argued that the e-portfolio is an effective digital tool to assess students' learning in online classes (Yein et al. 2018).

Problems Encountered by Students during Online Learning

The problems faced by learners, for example, accessing online material and accessing LMS during their online English language learning classes also contributed to their perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning in online learning mode. The internet connectivity and old, slow desktop and laptop computers at home also contributed to students' participation in online classes including language classes. This was found in many countries, as is highlighted in a recent study (Onyema et al. 2020) where the researchers found that poor digital skills, school policies, digital divide poor electricity, unavailability and accessibility, network issues, inadequate facilities, lack of training, lack of funding

and resistance to change as key factors that affected students' participation in online classes and their academic performance in studies.

Though the quantitative data revealed that their instructors were using the LMS and digital tools as per the directions given by their HEI whether it was the LMS or digital tools. The qualitative data collected using FGD strategy found a gap between what students find an engaging online lesson and what their instructors thought of a good online lesson. The students considered that the role and place of videos and other digital tools in online classes should be just a teaching aid used by a teacher but they judged that their teachers were using it as an alternative tool of teaching and assessment. The students were familiar with many digital tools that their teachers could embed in the LMS but their teachers were not familiar with those digital tools, for example, integrating Online Quiz or Survey. The teachers continued to use the quiz feature of the LMS and used it to assess students' learning.

Learning for HEC and the Faculty

This study was conducted to support the HEIs and to support them in their digitalisation drive and updating their ICT infrastructure and making decisions about procuring the right digital tools. The students' experiences exposed a weakness in the use of LMS because it remained confined to a platform used to communicate course content, assessment tasks and submission of assessments. The students felt that HEI should rethink about the training of their faculty and train them to use all the features of the LMS (Ali 2020; Tokareva et al. 2019). The faculty used digital tools but did not think about the users, that is, the students, and their use of and choices of digital tools that could engage them with the content and classroom activities in online classes. The group work was never used and if used, it was poorly planned and students who participated in group work activities found them to be inadequately planned and executed. The students wished that their teachers would explore various digital tools before making the final choice of a digital tool to use during online teaching and assessment activities (Ricardo-Barreto 2020; Suleiman et al. 2020). The instructors used YouTube videos in every online session to explain and reinforce content, but the participants felt that the overuse of YouTube did

not produce the desired result, which is to make the online lessons interesting and engaging.

CONCLUSION

The study found that English instructors followed their HEI's policy and guidelines regarding the use of LMS and digital tools. Although the HEI's policies seemed to be based on their experiences but the experiences of students, a generation born into the digital age, the main player in the teaching-learning process, were hardly considered. The students, digital natives were learning from the digital immigrants, their teachers and the management of the HEI. The latter needed to explore and learn from the many available online learning platforms and digital tools and choose the appropriate ones keeping in mind the students, who are Gen Z learners. The HEI management and its Technology Office should research the educational technology market and choose the appropriate platforms and tools to be adopted by the HEI. The instructors lacked training and motivation to explore digital tools and they should be trained to embed them in LMS and in their online teaching classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that HEIs should study the needs of the learners, Gen Z and their preferences of digital tools and integrate them in the HEI's recommended and used LMS. The HEI must adopt and adapt the LMS after a careful analysis of students, the target population of LMS and digital tools. The HEIs should also spend some of their financial resources on upgrading their LMS and integration of different digital tools in the LMS. The instructors must plan their language lessons according to the digital preferences of their students and choose the digital tools that their students might like to work with and use after the teaching sessions.

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