




Teaching English Online to Learners of Bangladesh Open University: Expectations and Outcomes

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Abstract

This study investigated the anxieties and viewpoints associated with teaching English online to the students at Bangladesh Open University in the pandemic situation. The study analyzed the variables that impacted their adjustment to online education. An email-based survey was conducted among English course participants, using a questionnaire that included both open-ended and closed items. The poll focused on students' comprehension of online education, their perspectives and responses, the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing Zoom, learner engagement, and matters pertaining to learner independence. A focus group interview (FGI) was also conducted with four students from the sample. The study's findings indicated that online English education could be advantageous when thoroughly investigated, despite the initial difficulties. The utilization of online lectures, monitoring, and scaffolding had a significant role in fostering the development of learner autonomy and reflective practice. At first, learners encountered difficulties like as limitations in technology, inadequate data plans, unreliable networks, and fear or resistance towards technology. Nevertheless, they ultimately discovered the experience to be fulfilling and successfully adjusted to the online format. The findings also revealed the necessity of realizing the term 'ODL' (Open and Distance Learning) and its necessity and implementation resulting in positive outcomes on learners.

Keywords: English Language, ODL, Online Teaching, Educational Technology

Introduction

The world went stagnant with the advent of the recent corona pandemic that had taken a toll in all sectors including education. Apart from economy, the pandemic has its adverse effect on education in which almost 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries have converted face to face learning to the online mode of education (Azzi-Huck & Shmis,

2020; Shahzad et al, 2020). The new online platform includes, for example, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Google hangouts, etc. (Saxena, 2020). As the result of pandemic crisis, online education has evolved a pedagogical switch from direct mode to online mode of teaching learning, from real classroom to Google classroom, from personal to virtual and from conferences to webinars (Mishra et al., 2020). With the introduction of imparting knowledge from a distance, the learners seemed to be baffled and confounded at the beginning especially in terms of trying online learning situation however, sooner than predicted they started making attempts to balance the dire situation as it was called forth.

The subject of the study was the first online batch of Bangladesh Open University (henceforth, BOU) who had to get involved in different online platforms for the first time in their lives. This investigation primarily focused on issues and concerns regarding teaching/learning online, learners' understanding of the new situation, the learning expectations and outcomes connected to learner autonomy and growth.

According to Dhawan (2020), although some higher educational institutions used e-learning courses and taught online, for over two decades, however, under the pandemic situation, online education was the globally agreed solution as a teaching/learning platform for continuing the educational process. In this unique and unanticipated context, online teaching and learning was not an option, but a necessity, which ultimately became the only route towards education having some human interaction.

However, the study aimed at focusing on the following issues of interest, such as: (i) learners understanding of certain terms such as, distance education, open learning, and online learning methods, (ii) how far the learners' study got affected due to the pandemic, their internet accessibility, (iii) their expectation regarding online classes especially, English classes, (iv) their understanding of their own achievements by the end of the course, and (v) the impediments that had been encountered and solutions to those both from the sides of the teacher and learners.

Literature Review

Open learning is an approach rather than a system or technique. This approach is based on the needs of the individual learners, not the interest of the teachers or institutions; it gives students as much control as possible over what, when, where, and how they learn. As pointed out by Johnson (1990), it commonly uses the delivery methods that is disseminated through distance education and "the facilities of educational technology; [and] it changes the role of a teacher from a source of knowledge to a manner of learning and a facilitator" (Johnson, 1990, p. 4). In addition, distance education refers to the separation of teacher and learner, which is central to all forms whether they be print based, audio/radio based, computer based or satellite - broadcast. According to Holmberg (1974) the separation of teacher and learner distinguishes distance education from all forms of regular, traditional face-to-face, direct teaching and learning.

According to Stern (2019), online learning is education that takes place over the Internet. It is often referred to as ‘e-learning’ which is just one type of ‘distance learning’ - the umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance and not in a traditional classroom. Apparently, this teaching approach ushered the shift away from top-down lecturing and passive students to a more interactive, collaborative approach in which students and instructors co-create the learning process.

Previous studies indicate some factors affecting the online classes for higher education Demuyakor (2020), Bao (2020), Khoshaim et al. (2020), Kauffman (2015), Hung et al. (2010), Nguyen (2015), and Swan et al. (2000)). The significance of the regularity of communication in making online classes is also explained by Hung et al. (2010). It is also found that lack of immediacy in getting answers to their queries was also found to be a challenge in online education (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). It is thus evident that special care needs to be taken on the part of the instructor to keep students attentive towards a positive outcome while conducting online sessions. A study carried out by Islam et al. (2020), among learners from private and public universities of Bangladesh, revealed that students encountered problems to join online classes because of poor internet connections, and many could not attend online classes because of unavailability of devices. Shifat et al. (2021) also found similar results. Moreover, students believed that online assessment was not useful as compared to classroom assessment, and also that online classroom was not as fruitful as a face-to-face classroom.

BOU has been offering education since 1994 through open and distance learning mode. The study materials included print media which are accumulated and written especially for the distant learners. They are supposed to study at their own pace and time and can always resolve matters face to face, if necessary, with the help of their assigned course tutor/ instructor. However, they are to take initiative and responsibility for their own learning and make use of group discussion and discussion with the tutor while they visit their respective study center, usually on a weekend. Television and Radio programs are broadcast as teaching aids to facilitate their learning process. Although they are distant learners, yet they were not introduced to online classes before the pandemic.

Methodology

The researchers used a mixed-method approach to conduct the study. According to Frankfort and Nachmias (1996) the research design is the “blueprint that enables the investigator to come up with the solutions to the problems and guide him in the various stages of the research” (p. 99).

Sample and Participants

The participants of this study were the students of English 101 course at BOU and

the first/debut batch students to take part in online courses during the years of recent pandemic. They were the most challenging ones to teach English online, whereas it was already difficult to handle the subject while teaching face-to-face. It was hoped that the findings of the research would be a great source of practical solutions to problems that could be implemented for a better teaching/learning atmosphere, especially online. The students belonged to the age group between 18 and 55. Some of them were regular in their study, and some had long years of study break due to personal circumstances. The English course, English 101, Code BEN 1301 is a compulsory foundation course which is handled face-to-face during weekends on normal days. They are from all walks of life, having different societal, financial, and educational background.

The study focused on the learners doing BA (Hons.) in Bangla who did not have to deal with any other textbook written in English. To teach this group posed serious challenges as their background of study is totally Bangla medium. Initially, a Facebook page was a necessity where students were asked to join, share views, discuss, and solve problems themselves in groups or take help from the course teacher as Demir (2018) considered Facebook as a beneficial online assessment tool. The students made posts there and could also communicate via email among themselves and with the teacher (the first author).

Data Collection and Instruments

Questionnaire survey and focus group interviews (FGI) were the tools of data collection for this study. Anderson and Arsenault (1998) pondered that a properly designed questionnaire can swiftly and cost-effectively gather trustworthy and valid data. The closed items in the questionnaire generated structured, precise, and similar responses. Open-ended items, despite being time-consuming and sometimes discouraging (Allison, 2002), yielded a wide range of facts and perspectives. Respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments for closed issues, which helped alleviate any annoyance caused by the limited response options and allowed them to express their priorities and perspectives. A Likert scale was utilized to assess the level of agreement or disagreement with various topics, employing number values for responses (e.g., 1-4) to determine response patterns. A survey was administered to 50 students of English 101 course utilizing a questionnaire that included both open-ended and multiple-choice items. The assessment evaluated their comprehension of concepts such as open, remote, and virtual education, their perspectives on the online course, and their anticipations. The survey lasted for a duration of 20-25 minutes and the questionnaires were promptly returned within the next 24 hours.

After the course, an FGI was conducted with four out of the 50 enrolled students. FGI aims at collecting high-quality data in a shared context (Patton, 2002). The participants engaged in a comprehensive discussion regarding their perspectives on online classes, attitudes, encountered difficulties, techniques for managing these issues, preference for in-

person classes, opinions on online assessment, and overall academic success. In order to assure the accuracy and credibility of the study, the researchers utilized the method of triangulation, as advocated by Denzin (1970).

Findings and Analysis

To address the contextual queries, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted. The questionnaire mainly focused on 2 areas of investigation. Section A dealt with questions on Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Section B focused on eliminating data on Online Education Platform and doing English 101 online.

Findings from Questionnaire Survey

Section A

The majority of learners (65%) were introduced to the BA (Honors) program on the BOU website, and the remaining from friends who did courses at BOU. Most individuals (85%) received information about online courses through email communications from their instructors. 80% of respondents interpreted open learning as courses that are available to everyone, regardless of age or time constraints, and may be studied from home. 72% of respondents perceived distance education (DE) as a method of learning that takes place remotely. Merely 15% were able to accurately articulate the concept of 'distance learning' as a form of virtual education that overcomes physical separation through the use of technical platforms such as radio, television, and the Internet. The remainder did not provide a definition for it. Regarding 'ODL,' 65% of respondents were unfamiliar with the acronym yet comprehended the concept of studying from faraway regions.

At BOU, learners do not have the option to choose courses, but they have the flexibility to study at their own preferred speed in order to obtain a degree. English 101 students engage in remote learning, but they have the option to schedule face-to-face sessions with tutors in Regional Resource Centers and Tutorial Centers over weekends. Amidst the lockdown, the course was conducted through online means, which was a novel encounter for both educators and learners, necessitating the use of an Android phone for active engagement. If students are unable to participate in online classes, they have the option to engage in individual study and complete the final exam at a later time.

Section B

Regarding the previous online learning experience, from Q1, Q2 and Q3 revealed that the majority (86%) did not do any online courses before. Although an absolute majority of the learners were regular Internet users and knew about Zoom but did not have much

idea about the use of Zoom platform. Their Internet usage was limited to the use of Facebook, Messenger, Imo or WhatsApp mainly for chatting purposes. Among these majority Internet users only 30% had a hands-on experience or idea regarding Zoom Application. Only the serious job holders had to attend official Zoom meetings on a minimal level. However, they were keen to learn about the Application and thought that Zoom would be the most suitable one because of its ease of use and accessibility to almost everyone.

At the completion of the course (Q4: Zoom Satisfaction), 85% of students expressed satisfaction with Zoom, despite initial technical difficulties, due to the instructor's email instructions. A minor fraction (15%) continued to express dissatisfaction. Students utilized the English 101 textbook in the form of an electronic book. At first, 64% encountered challenges in downloading it, but they were able to overcome these obstacles with the assistance of their classmates. Access to the text, class lectures, and video clips was crucial for individuals who were unable to download them. These resources were made available through a restricted Facebook group. Regarding their expectations (Q5: Expectations from participating in the online course), all students (100%) expressed enthusiasm about interacting with their teacher online, which served as a source of motivation for them, despite their fears regarding examinations. 86% of the participants encountered obstacles throughout their classes (Q6), such as disruptions from classmates and internet connectivity problems. Background noise from unmuted microphones added to the disorder. The instructor ultimately implemented a centralized system to silence them, encouraging students to raise their hands and use chat comments instead. The initial apprehension over the English language was alleviated by employing a combination of Bangla and English, gradually diminishing the students' anxieties over time.

The majority of students expressed high agreement regarding the benefits of online learning, as indicated by their responses on a Likert scale (Q7-Q14: Agreement with claims about online learning benefits). According to the survey, 90% of respondents found it beneficial during the epidemic, 76% appreciated its adaptability, and 68% chose it over in-person learning because it lowered anxiety and provided opportunity for multitasking. 88% of respondents expressed the belief that online learning resulted in time, energy, and cost savings, indicating support for its continuation beyond the pandemic. Nevertheless, 96% of respondents acknowledged that internet usage is expensive (Q11), although it is considered cost-effective in general. Additionally, 90% of participants highlighted the significance of teacher delivery (Q12), emphasizing the advantages of group work opportunities. Although 76% of students experienced anxiety during testing and evaluation (as indicated by Q13), they nonetheless acknowledged the advantages. 66% of respondents expressed strong agreement, while 26% agreed, that online classes effectively fostered group conversations and the sharing of experiences (Q14). Additionally, 86% of participants praised the safety of studying from home, and 90% liked the convenience of

nighttime classes. The online assignments and feedback were highly regarded, with 96% of participants finding the feedback beneficial for their language development and resulting in improved participation in online sessions. In response to the question on future preferences (Q15: choice for online learning post-pandemic), 92% of respondents expressed a desire for at least 50% of classes to continue being conducted online after the pandemic which necessitates the blended learning as proposed by Khan (2021). This choice is driven by the value placed on flexibility, ease of communication, and the ability to access recorded lessons. Regarding the overall experience of completing English 101 online (Q16), 78% of participants reported finding the course enjoyable due to its ability to maintain their engagement, alleviate feelings of loneliness, and enhance their technology abilities. The camaraderie among classmates and the instructor deepened, resulting in reduced apprehension among students regarding absences caused by recorded courses. Regarding future classes (Q17: Recommendations for future online English 101 programs), students proposed the importance of keeping adaptable timetables, proficient educators, and thoroughly prepared resources. They emphasized the necessity of professional instructors who can effectively engage various classrooms. The main disadvantage was the absence of direct interpersonal communication, but they hoped that collaboration may alleviate this problem.

FGI Findings

This study presents the FGI results with four students who aimed to gather insights into their encounters with online classes amidst the pandemic. The discussion was conducted to comprehensively understand their opinions, attitudes, difficulties, and recommendations regarding online learning. The students' identities were obscured to ensure anonymity.

Consensus was reached among all participants that online classes were the sole feasible substitute for in-person education amidst the pandemic. They admitted that the transition was not seamless due to their little prior familiarity with online learning. One student (S1) commented that despite the difficulties, online classes have shown to be successful in maintaining students' engagement with their studies and have introduced new opportunities for incorporating multimedia technologies into traditional in-person classes. Another student (S4) indicated a longing for increased physical engagement, asserting, "I yearned for more physical interactions with the teacher and classmates, believing that offline discussions would be more comprehensive, particularly for English."

The first reception of online classes was ambivalent. S2 reported that their initial attitude towards online classes was not particularly favorable. A significant number of us lacked experience as frequent Internet users, leading to doubts about our proficiency in effectively participating in virtual classes. Nevertheless, the majority of us eventually succeeded in adjusting to the alterations and ultimately came to value the benefits of virtual

classrooms. The students observed that online classes facilitated multitasking, although they did not specify if multitasking had an impact on their focus.

Multiple difficulties were emphasized during the conversation. S1 highlighted that the primary challenge encountered during online classes is self-assessment of one's own performance. Managing and comprehending multimedia tools like PowerPoint presentations while maintaining focus on the lecture proved to be challenging. Every participant unanimously acknowledged that the presence of ambient noise caused by unmuted microphones and interruptions from peers were substantial concerns. S4 expressed that they encountered challenges in actively participating in group discussions during online classes. When an individual activated their microphone, the presence of ambient noise frequently rendered the continuation of the activity unfeasible.

Students observed a variety of tactics implemented by their teacher to ensure the effectiveness of online classes. S2 noted that the lecturer instructed us to maintain our cameras in an active state at all times and admonished anyone who deactivated it. She provided an incentive by warning that anybody who did not turn on their cameras would not be permitted to attend the upcoming session. The instructor employed PowerPoint presentations, audio-visual aids, and shared hyperlinks to captivating websites to ensure the active involvement of the pupils. S3 stated that she provided regular updates on upcoming meetings through our Facebook group and resolved issues that could not be addressed during class time.

There was a divergence of opinions on the favorability of in-person versus virtual classes. Two students expressed a preference for in-person classes due to the enhanced opportunities for contact and involvement. However, all students agreed that not every subject required face-to-face discussion. S2 expressed a strong preference for in-person classes as opposed to online instruction. However, all considered online learning as an exciting and enjoyable platform that matches the findings of Asma-ul-Ferdous et al. (2023). In addition, online programs have the advantage of saving time, energy, and money.

The students engaged in a discussion regarding their personal and their peers' achievement in virtual classes. S2 observed that while self-assessment can be beneficial for industrious students, a significant number of them either did not actively engage in self-assessment or resorted to copying from their peers. S4 stated, "Based on my personal experience, there is no substantial disparity in academic achievement between students in online and offline learning environments." Diligent studying is crucial for acquiring knowledge, particularly when it comes to learning a language.

The teacher utilized a range of methodologies to evaluate and analyze student work. S2 noted that the teacher designated a student to serve as the class representative responsible for maintaining records of assignments and attendance. S3 stated that the teacher provided comprehensive feedback on assignments and used slides to highlight typical errors, which were also shared on our Facebook group.

The students highlighted the flexibility of time and space as a major advantage of online classes, along with the effective use of multimedia tools. However, they also noted challenges such as internet accessibility and unfamiliarity with online tools. S1 stated, "Online classes allowed me access to a multitude of resources that are often not practical or prudent to use offline." For future online teaching strategies, the students recommended familiarizing both teachers and learners with educational apps and ensuring appropriate study materials for online classes.

The FGI revealed a balanced view of online learning, highlighting both its advantages and challenges. While students appreciated the flexibility and resource access of online classes, they also faced significant challenges in terms of engagement and technical issues. Future strategies should focus on improving technical support and familiarizing both students and teachers with online tools to enhance the effectiveness of online learning.

Discussion and Recommendation

The results obtained from both the survey and FGI shed light on various essential facets of students' online learning experiences during the Covid-19 epidemic. The initial unfamiliarity with online platforms such as Zoom was apparent, as 86% of students had no previous exposure to online courses. Although there were some initial technological difficulties, 85% of students ultimately considered Zoom to be easy to use, which supports Stern's (2019) observation that online learning transitions from passive to interactive learning settings.

Students valued the adaptability of online classes, as it enabled them to handle several tasks and efficiently manage their time, hence alleviating stress associated with transportation and punctuality. This corroborates Bao's (2020) claim that online education has the capacity to be customized to meet the specific requirements of individuals, hence improving the results of the learning process. Nevertheless, the absence of instant interaction and physical presence presented notable difficulties, which align with the concerns expressed by Muthuprasad et al. (2021) regarding the lack of face-to-face involvement in online environments.

According to the data, the majority of students (92%) expressed a preference for the continuation of online classes even after the epidemic, with a specific desire for at least half (50%) of their classes to be conducted online as Khan (2021) proposed also. This desire aligns with Kauffman's (2015) emphasis on the significance of flexibility and accessibility in online education. Students emphasized that online learning resulted in time, energy, and cost savings related to commuting, aligning with the conclusions of Islam et al. (2020) regarding the practical advantages of online education in Bangladesh.

Notwithstanding these benefits, obstacles such as problems with internet connectivity and lack of experience with digital tools remained, aligning with the conclusions

stated by Demuyakor (2020) and Shifat et al. (2021). The implementation of effective management tactics by instructors, such as the utilization of multimedia technologies and consistent communication through social media groups, played a vital role in addressing these difficulties and improving the overall learning experience.

In summary, the study highlighted the importance of providing thorough training to both teachers and students in order to maximize the advantages of online learning. When properly supported by technology infrastructure and pedagogical practices, the shift to online education can greatly improve the learning experience.

Conclusion

The study concluded with the concept that teaching online could be very effective in teaching English at BOU. It can instill enthusiasm and motivation among learners habituated to deductively 'receiving' to simply pass term examinations. They rely heavily on teacher-provided suggestions, and on memorization. Online lectures, monitoring and scaffolding are likely to develop learner autonomy and reflective practice. The findings of the current study revealed the necessity of realizing the term 'ODL' and its necessity and implementation which can have a positive impact on learner-aspects. The learners are supposed to be self-learners who are motivated and confident to carry on their studies according to their time and pace. Learner autonomy is the key to learning.

Some learners still chose classroom classes over online classes because of many challenges they face when taking online classes, such as lack of motivation, understanding of the material and decline in communication levels between the learners and their teachers and their feeling of isolation caused by online classes. Disrupted Internet connection broke lowered down the level of uninterrupted communication that triggered anxiety and worry in the learners. Further research scopes may include the well-being of the students on a similar setting.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

The Covid-19 situation has changed the scenario around Bangladesh. Receiving education became a big challenge, and online platforms were introduced to keep imparting education throughout the country. Please answer the questions below keeping in mind we are facing in our education sector. The information provided will be kept confidential and used for research purpose only.

Thank you.

KEY to rating: 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-agree, 4-strongly agree

Section A: Questions on Open and Distance Education at Bangladesh Open University

1. How did you come to know about the BA/BSS (Honours) program offered by the Bangladesh Open University?
 (a) Newspaper b) Internet c) Friends d) Other sources
 _____.
2. How did you come to know about BOU offering learning opportunities online?
 (a) Newspaper b) Internet c) Friends d) Other sources
 _____.
3. What is understanding of ‘open learning’?
 _____.
4. What is your understanding of ‘distance education’?
 _____.
5. Were you familiar with the term ‘ODL’ – Open and distance learning method before?
 _____.

Section B: Questions on Online Education Platform and doing English 101 online

Circle your answer as appropriate

1. Did you take courses online before? Yes/No
2. Which of the Internet Application (s) below is/are familiar to you?
 a) Zoom b) Skype c) WebEx d) Google Hangouts e) Messenger rooms
 f) others ____.
3. Which application is most suitable for you to use? Give reasons.
 _____.
4. What is the level of satisfaction of using Zoom Application?
 a) Very satisfactory b) satisfactory c) indifferent d) unsatisfactory e) very unsatisfactory
5. What were the expectations from doing English 101 online?
 _____.
6. What are the impediments that you experienced during the course?
 _____.

Rating Scale Statements [1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-agree, 4-strongly agree]
(Please, rate your agreement or disagreement level beside each statement from 7 to 14.)

7. Online courses are very helpful during the pandemic period.
8. Online courses are helpful even when normalcy returns.
9. Access to online learning is better rather than having face-to-face lectures.
10. Learning from a distance saves time, energy, money and travel hazards.
11. Internet usage is expensive to continue learning online.
12. The instructor can offer plenty of group and pair work opportunities online.
13. Issues regarding testing, examination and evaluation are matters of anxiety.
14. Online classes offer better learning because:
 - a) learners can join relevant groups set online for them to discuss and study.
 - b) they can discuss issues of importance there.
 - c) they can interact on one-to-one basis through email or messages.
 - d) they can share experiences regarding impediments that hinder their studies.
 - e) students feel safer without the fear of getting contaminated by the virus.
 - f) classes are held in the evening so working learners can continue studies.
 - g) the atmosphere is almost like offline classes as it happens in real time with real people including the instructor.
 - h) doing assignments and uploading them is less time consuming and easy.
 - i) feedback on assignments is helpful in developing language skills.
 - j) attendance is better than attendance during face to face classes.
15. Do you want a significant portion (at least 50%) of classes be held via online platform even after the pandemic? Yes/No. Give reasons.
_____.
16. Your overall experience regarding completing English 101 online.
_____.
17. Please suggest how to make English 101 more interesting and effective if offered online.
_____.

Thank you once again for taking part in the research.

Appendix 2: Questions for Focus Group Interviews (FGI)

1. What are your perceptions about online classes?
2. What is your attitude regarding online classes?
3. What are the problems that you faced studying online?
4. What management strategies did your teacher use in turning the class into an effective one?

5. What are the devices that your instructor used to keep you interested and motivated towards learning English?
6. Would you prefer face to face classes over online ones or vice versa?
7. Your overall comments regarding your own and your classmates' performance online.
8. What are the strategies that your instructor used for student work evaluation?
9. Your final comments on the positive and negative sides of attending online English classes.
10. Any recommendations that you might have for future online teaching strategies.