

## Teaching English during COVID-19: Nepalese Teachers' Voices

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### ABSTRACT

Paradigm has been shifted from face to face to online teaching and learning. This paper is written with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind where it delves into the opportunities and challenges faced by Nepalese teachers taking virtual classes in the context of Nepal. The major purpose of this study is to explore the Secondary English teachers' experiences in teaching English during the pandemics. For this, we interviewed four teachers of the Kathmandu district who had been taking online classes. Their experiences were analyzed through a constructive approach. The findings suggested that the teachers were quite positive and optimistic towards teaching virtually despite the lack of adequate training, consistent internet services, regular power supply, and suitable devices. Further, it explored that the participants had taken the online mode of teaching as one of the best options as it opens several optimistic doors to both teachers and students though they realized that there were challenges to teaching virtually.

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### 1. Introduction

There is a pandemic crisis that has created a kind of terror almost all over the world. The terrifying situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all human activities in general and teaching English in particular. The entire world is being ceased where all the human chores are being postponed for an uncertain period. As more than 215 countries have been affected, Nepal too could not remain away from its dark shadow as its carriers are the humans that can fly countries to countries in a single day. Nepal is also one that has defectively been affected by the virus (Worldometer, 5th June 2020). These countries are being locked where the citizens are compelled to stay home as the virus is transmitted from people to people (Argenti, 13th March 2020).

Being a teacher and a student, there is always a kind of question dancing in our minds that 'is teaching and learning possible in such a pandemic?' This is not only our concern rather the same question is being asked by all most all the teachers, parents, students, and school administrators across the globe. In this note, Poudel (2020) reflects the tension of his classes that when the Government of Nepal announced a complete lockdown on 23rd March 2020 to prevent the spread of the Corona-virus infections, all his academic activities came to a standstill. Although most educational institutions are closed, a few universities are still being run without affecting their academic calendar (Poudel, 2020). They are challenging the pandemic and running their academic activities which have been possible only through virtual teaching. Online learning or e-learning is perhaps one of the hottest and most controversial developments in post-secondary education (Bates, 2003) and especially during and post-COVID situation. The virus not only opens the doors of opportunities for Nepali teachers but also invites many challenges in it. Therefore, the lived experiences of the online education of Nepalese teachers seem crucial to be studied. It has brought many optimistic doors as it has been witnessed as procrastinating ways of delivering the lessons in every nook and corner of the country. Every challenge brings a bundle of opportunities and changes the paradigms, and as a result, it has created situations where teachers can update themselves from face-to-face to online teaching.

From our experiences, we traced that the Nepalese education system has been designed to address unprecedented situations. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis made us speculate some alternatives of teaching and learning where we personally experienced that there is a good future of online or web-based education which includes both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning activities. As Bakia, Shear, and Toyama (2012) claimed that many schools, districts, and states are turning to online learning to improve education productivity in the United States; however, we experience various pedagogical challenges in shifting paradigms in the context of Nepal.

With this claim in mind, this study explores the Secondary English teachers' experiences in teaching English during the pandemics, and to meet it, we set this research question- 'what are the major opportunities and challenges of adopting virtual teaching in the context of Nepal in such a pandemic?'

## 2. Methodology

In this study, we adopted the inquiry-based interpretive approach as the methodological stance where the participants lived experiences on the research phenomenon were interpreted with the lens of the transformative theory. This theory believes that learning transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change (Mezirow, 2009). To collect the required information, we purposively interviewed four secondary level English teachers from the Kathmandu district using unstructured and open-ended questions. We also gave them pseudo names to protect their confidentiality. The information obtained in the Nepali language from the participants was first transcribed into English, coded them and then findings were drawn under six themes.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Online Education and its Effectiveness

Online education is controlled by the internet accessed computer and other ICT tools. Bakia, et. al (2012) claimed that "online learning refers to instructional environments supported by the internet" (p. 2). In the teaching field, online education is the electronically supported learning that relies on the Internet for teacher-student interaction and the distribution of class materials. Historically, the concept of Online/virtual class began between 1985 and 1987 by Roxanne Hiltz where it first experimented for the New Jersey Institute of Technology in the USA, and one of the first institutions to use online learning for completely off-campus students was the British Open University (Bates, 2005). Bates further stated virtual, hybrid, blended, mixed-mode, and distributed teaching and learning are the synonymous terms to the online class. With these historical flows and the meaning of virtual class in mind, we easily can predict some of its roles in teaching and learning.

In the COVID- 19 pandemic, people are not even getting enough food to eat, and getting opportunities to run regular classes without affecting schools' academic calendar is good enough to tell the effectiveness of Virtual class. In academia, taking virtual classes has multiple advantages where face-to-face classes are not possible. In this note, the Nepalese teachers also have their perception of the online class. Similarly, getting involved in virtual teaching, they have experienced both opportunities and challenges.

In this study, we explored that online classes are only the options that teachers can opt for to run teaching-learning activities in such a pandemic situation. In an interview, Mr. A commented:

*"In the beginning, I was much afraid to run virtual classes. I didn't have any knowledge of online classes, but slowly I learned it through some training and collaboration with more technologically skillful colleagues and even with some students".*

Online education is only the alternative of the pandemic situation where the teachers shared that the cost, effort, and burden can be minimized in general, time effectiveness in particular. The findings were similar to that of Bakia, et al. (2012) who stated that it increases the availability of learning experience of those who cannot attain traditional schools; it assembles and disseminates instructional content efficiently, and it increases student-teacher ratio while achieving learning outcomes equal to those of traditional classroom instruction.

Online classes offer multiple advantages to both teachers and learners. In the interview with Ms. B stated: *"I feel secure from being infected by the Corona Virus when teaching online, and ...I don't need to worry about traffic congestion. And, my students also don't make gossips like in face-to-face class."* Online education provides learning opportunities without any risk of being affected by the Corona Virus and makes teaching and learning faster and cheaper. In this vein, Crystal (2020) justified that virtual class does not require any building to be built and logistics to be arranged. A similar experience was explored

from Ms. C as well, she shared, *"My students can work individually on their own, and they enjoy sending me the tasks through emails."* The students' autonomy was explored to have been respected by providing learners' convenience and choice of learning.

E-learning does not require any formal classroom, and both the teachers and learners can conduct their teaching-learning activities as long as there are a device and connectivity. In this regard, Ms. C. commented, *"I can even take classes even when I am at my parents' home."* Ms. C. further added, *"I am enjoying teaching online, and I don't need to worry about my attire, make-ups... it takes long to time for female teachers to prepare for face-to-face classes."* Here, the findings are supported by Underhill (19th April 2020), in his paper presentation on ITEAL Webinar, stated that the virtual classes can be run from teachers' kitchen by sitting at their kitchen table. In an interview, Mr. D stated, *"I think online learning will be cheaper to the students as it doesn't require classrooms, building, and even playground."* He again added that teaching virtually makes students psychologically free from their learning burden by creating a kind, positive as well as a motivating learning environment. Their responses are more than enough to reveal the effectiveness of taking classes virtually.

### 3.2 Initiation of Virtual Classes

Though e-learning is not new, most Nepali teachers and students were almost unknown to the online mode of education. Those schools which were equipped with ICT tools began to train their teachers to teach virtually as soon as the COVID-19 effect began, and it rapidly expanded throughout the nation like in other countries. For Chaney (2010), virtual learning is a rapidly expanding environment that allows users the flexibility of operating outside of the constraints of time and place (as cited in Gilbert, 2015); it passionately drew the attention of the Nepalese teachers and students. In this regard, the participants of this study also shared similar experiences regarding their online classes. Mr. B shared his experience of teaching online in a more positive way. To put it in his words, *"teaching online brings a lot of new opportunities where I experienced the use of virtual tools and online materials"*. Further, he stated, *"this pandemic opened many doors of learning new paradigms of teaching in my life"*. Although COVID-19 has affected almost all aspects of life, teachers and students have got time to learn new technologies to support their profession. It was also explored that e-learning creates opportunities for teachers to develop and design some virtual teaching materials where they gain real tests of designing online materials.

Discussing the bitter experiences with virtual teaching, Mr. A commented, *"I only learned to teach through zoom when my school provided training. But I was very nervous when I knew even the parents were sitting with their children in my class."* Similarly, Ms. C also shared that online classes were totally different from face-to-face class, and said, *"I found it really difficult in making my students follow online netiquettes in general and minimizing classroom noises in particular."* With his line, Murgatroyd (2015) shared that students' engagement is one of the major challenges of online teaching in which he claimed that not all the students will get engaged in their class, and they trouble the teachers by doodling, annotating, playing music in the background, and staying silent, generally with the less competent teachers in ICT. In support of this, Mr. B said, *"A few of my students sometimes write unnecessarily on the screen and don't speak even when I call them many times."*

The findings also suggest that teaching online requires teachers' activeness, punctuality, dedication, and teachers' presence in their classroom. In this regard, Ms. C commented, *"Online teachings have made me more active and alert that I need to pay more attention in preparation and delivery."* She further stated that the unreliable power supply and frequently disconnected internet in my area have caused unprecedented hardship to me in online classes.

### 3.3 Features of Online Education

As online education advocates having classes virtually through ICTs tools along with the Internet, it has several attributes in academia. The eLearning is witnessed as highly beneficial and effective these days around the world. In the interview, my participants have shared verities of good attributes of online classes with the experiences of this pandemic in mind. The participants said, *"The online teaching and learning seems a number of good features of online teaching and in the context of Nepal."*

In the interview, Mr. A and B shared that online class is much cheaper than classroom teaching. While there, they exemplified that the virtual seems as if the class does not require a huge infrastructure comparison to a physical class. They further add, *"The virtual classes can also be conducted even from home"*. With their line, Underhill (2020) metaphorically states that virtual class is the kitchen table teaching where a teacher can conduct his/her classes from his/her Kitchen by on the table. The Kitchen table teaching is one of the alternatives of traditional classroom teaching in the context of Nepal where there seems a huge type of Flexibility in conducting classes. In this note, Whitehead (2020) declared that the entire world became

online now, so are the schools too. One of the best features of the online classes in the COVID-19 crisis is, the regular classes can be conducting without affecting an academic calendar of an academic institution.

Similarly, Ms. C says that teaching online means upgrading our students for their future betterment. In the area of ICTs, it helps us teaching with the demand of the students in mind. In supporting the words of her, Mr. D shared one interesting thing regarding virtual teaching i.e. the online teaching makes updated like water in a river where our curriculum gets modified from time to time. Yes, these are the major attributes of the online teaching shared by my participants.

### 3.4 The E-learning and its Requirements

Taking virtual classes seem fascinating to be conducted in the Nepalese context; however, some crucial elements need to be embraced to make an online class meaningful. In this regard, Mr. A commented, *“Running online classes need electronic devices (laptop, smart-phone, etc.) along with highly stable internet service.”* The inaccessibility to these technical things is taken as a challenge for both teachers and students in taking their classes electronically.

In the vein, Mr. B stated that virtual class requires three basic layers of stability, namely, Physical, Psychological, and Social stability to achieve academic stability in such a pandemic crisis. He further added, *“Until we make our students psychologically prepared, we cannot run online classes successfully.”* In this note, Dr. Gnawali in his talk session taken by KU (16<sup>th</sup> April 2020) states, *“humans must be wellbeing from three different dimensions such as; social, mental, and physical well-being that lead them to the intellectual well- being.”* Here, three things seem central before embarking on the journey of virtual teaching.

The selection and use of ICT tools in teaching English virtually depend on different factors such as the electronic literacy of the teachers and students, the subject area, availability of the tools, etc. (Acharya, 2014). The study also explored similar findings and added that a supportive environment is crucial for a successful online class. For Gnawali (April 20, 2020), a peaceful learning environment can only make a virtual class meaningful. Technological skills were explored to have been given due importance for successful online classes in the study. Giving importance to technology in online classes, all the participants shared common experiences that they were first trained to use the Zoom and the Google classroom before they had started actual teaching. With this view, Mr. D added, *“At the same time, I also learned to send emails and handling other technicalities.”* The pre-set information and training helped teachers to handle the online classes effectively. The learning environment and technological skills seem crucial to run online classes in the context of Nepal.

Apart from these, some additional things also seem mandatory to be considered before beginning the online classes. In this connection, Phillips (2020) recommended five things that all teachers should consider when dreaming smooth online lessons. First, the teachers need to focus on learner needs before setting the learning objectives for the students. Then, the relevant content and purpose of the lesson should be considered to make online teaching-focused. Similarly, they should consider combining teaching, learning, and technology to bring smoothness in teaching. Again, consideration should be made on understanding the teaching context and condition including infrastructure and accessibility for effective virtual classes. Finally, since online teaching is a new paradigm, the teacher needs to make a clear plan.

The findings suggest that the preparation and practice are two major keys along with the workable availabilities of ICT tools in making virtual teaching successful. As one size does not fit all, teaching students virtually need to modify their teaching methods (Prabhu, 1999) as per the needs, interest, and level of the students.

### 3.5 Virtual Class as an Alternative to COVID-19

The COVID -19 pandemic has created a situation where people are compelled to stay home to prevent its transmission. In such a situation, the only alternative to face-to-face classes is virtual teaching. In this note, Poudel (April 2020) said,

*“I do not know how many more will get infected and lose their life, and how long the lockdown will go by the time I have concluded this write up, along with my university colleagues, I decided to go for online classes”* (p. 2).

The study findings suggest that online class is only the alternative ways of teaching around the world in general and teaching English in particular.

The participants shared their views on the pandemic and the ways of teaching and learning in different ways. Mr. A and B experienced virtual teaching as the best approach of teaching in this pandemic since it allows teachers to teach their students from where they are. Also, they further claimed that people were not allowed to go to attend face-to-face classes. In this situation, Mr. A claimed that physical teaching was almost 99% impossible, so both teachers and students needed to go for

virtual teaching and learning. Ms. C shared similar responses that she claimed, "Virtual classes can be conducted from home avoiding physical contact. In the same way, Mr. D shared that until the anti-corona vaccine is invented; online mode is only the alternative to physical teaching. Therefore, taking classes virtually is witnessed as the only option for this pandemic.

### 3.6 Challenges Invited by the COVID- 19 Pandemic

Every challenge brings a bundle of opportunities, and this applies to the virtual class as well. In this pandemic situation, teachers have been trained to take online classes effectively; however, the study explored some challenges, too. As Nepal is under the circle of developing countries, even most of the schools do not have well-equipped internet access (Poudel, 2020). Not only that, but there are also many other areas; our teachers and students are not well trained, teachers in the rural side of the country do not have enough facilities of ICTs as well as stable internet connectivity. In this connection, Rana (2020) claims, "The majority of people live outside the range of broadband internet" (p. 02). As a result, the majority of the schools in Nepal are not ready (mentally, physically, economically) to run classes electronically. This creates challenges in adopting virtual classes; however, some schools and teachers have initiated online classes.

Sharing the difficulties while teaching online, Mr. D shared that the first and the most challenging task was class management. He further said, "*Only teacher training is not enough, but students should also be trained to use ICT tools and maintain netiquettes.*" Adding to his experiences, Ms. C added, "*My students sometimes stay connected to my class, and they start chatting in their own messenger group, which I came to know from a student.*" The participants expressed that they were not enjoying the virtual classes as much as the physical classes. For Johnson (2017), the virtual classroom cannot replace the traditional classroom because it is by its very essence or nature not completely 'real.' Therefore, providing a real taste of teaching to the students also could be one of the challenges in the virtual classes. Likewise, Mr. D shared similar types of challenges, they said, '*हातले खाने बानी भएको मान्छेलाई चम्चाले खानु पर्यो भने खाना त खान्छन र पेट पनि भर्छन तर सन्तुस्ती आउदैन'* (Finger feeders may eat the meal with a spoon and quench the hunger, but they cannot get complete satisfaction).

The study results suggest that online classes cannot provide as much satisfaction to the teachers and the students as in on-campus classes. With this line, Poudel (2020) claimed that one of the greatest disadvantages of an online class is that it misses the original charm of meeting teachers and co-learners. However, Ms. C and D experienced online classes as only the alternative to face-to-face classes during this crisis. Rana (2020) elucidated that running schools online in the COVID-19 seem challenging as the majority of teachers and students are outside the range of broadband internet. In support this Rana's view, the participants commented that most of the students were from rural areas outside the Kathmandu Valley and they faced difficulty in getting connected to the internet. With his sound, MoE Nepal (2020) decided to run virtual classes throughout the nation through three different layers of delivery such as; Ratio teaching, Television teaching, and Internet teaching. In spite of the aforementioned challenges, the participants used some potential technologies like television and the radio for delivering their sessions to bridge this pandemic.

### 4. Conclusion

The world academia issued strict restrictions like physical distancing and lockdown to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. E-learning has become the only alternative to on-campus teaching and learning during this situation; this forced both teachers and students to use ICT tools.

This study explored both strengths and challenges of adopting online classes from both secondary level English teachers and students' experiences in the context of Nepal. We explored that the participants perceived e-teaching and learning as the necessity of the time though they experienced many difficulties in learning ICT tools initially. They also experienced that the classes were less satisfactory and less interactive (Poudel, 2020) because of the lack of their proper skills in using those tools, frequent power cuts, and unstable internet access to both teachers and learners. Despite these difficulties, the participants took the online mode is one of the best opportunities and only one alternative to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. However, it requires a collaborative effort between a teacher, students, parents, and school administration for successful virtual teaching and learning, and the proper use of technology assists in this. For Mezirow (2009), daily life practices open the doors for multiple transformational learning opportunities, and technology has changed the world, and we will learn to adapt, it will be as normal as our physical classes because we will adapt as time passed. This study has some potential limitations. The results are based on the lived experiences of only four English teachers who were selected purposively. Thus, the study purposes a way forward to develop students and teachers' skills to employ technological tools in teaching and learning English through training.

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