

Challenges and Opportunities for Teachers in Online ESL Teaching

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Abstract

The integration of technology into language classrooms is widely believed to enhance language teaching and learning, leading to improved language proficiency levels. Online teaching and learning have further accelerated this trend, offering flexible and accessible educational opportunities. However, the transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online teaching presents challenges. This research examines the opportunities and challenges faced by ESL teachers in utilizing online language learning technology tools, focusing on public universities in Sindh, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 ESL teachers to gain in-depth insights. Thematic analysis identified key themes. The findings reveal that online teaching offers opportunities for ESL teachers to become specialists in creating high-quality online teaching materials and fostering fearless communication and student engagement. However, challenges related to technological infrastructure, limited resources, and lack of formal support were significant hurdles faced during online teaching. Addressing these challenges and providing support and training will optimize the integration of online language learning tools, enabling ESL teachers to capitalize on technology-based teaching opportunities.

Keywords: Online language learning, ESL teaching, technology integration, challenges and opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

It is a widespread and strongly supported assumption in the educational arena that the integration of technology into language classrooms can lead to improved teaching and learning with a positive impact on language learners' proficiency level⁴. The online teaching and learning are not a new idea. It has been used for years to provide students in remote locations an alternative means of education. Although many factors were affecting the decision of stakeholders to adapt technology in online ESL teaching. In contemporary world, it becomes a bit difficult task in the context of modernization. With the passage of time, language teaching and learning has to be evolved in every perspective. Since the emergency declared globally, the teaching methods have become complicated due to the technological advancements and digitalization. Immediately after the spread of deadly virus, most developed countries shifted their teaching methods towards virtual/online learning. They shifted because of their digital advancement.

Third world countries faced problems in these shifting dynamics due to lack of technological advancements. The countries like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and many other faced the same challenges of digitalization. Specifically, Pakistan faced this problem from primary to university level. In this scenario, many of the students had left their studies and chose to work⁵. The major reason was lack of knowledge of technology from the both sides of learners and teachers because of the reason that no workshops have been conducted for online use of technology. Teachers and students both are unaware of using the modern technological tools and equipment. This problem is also faced by the public Universities of Pakistan during online teaching and learning. This study explored the challenges faced by teachers and the opportunities produced by the use of technology adaptation in bigger perspective. The researcher is likely to identify and investigate these problems and address them.

Being an ESL teacher and a student of linguistics, the researcher is highly concerned about modernization and acceptance of integration of technology in online language learning. It was noted that the online language learning or e-learning has always been facing challenges, due to which the all the stakeholders including teachers, students and institutes were not motivated to integrate technology at bigger level in Pakistan. Some of the institutes were trying to integrate technology in e-learning and some of them were shifting towards blended, hybrid/Hyflex modes of teaching. The acceptance of technology in language learning may provide different opportunities for the teachers resulting efficient language learning.

Research Question

Online language teaching has faced challenges especially in third world countries since with adaptation of technology in ESL teaching. Initial researches on adopting e-learning technologies into learning environments shows that there is a connection between traditional direct instructions

⁴ Hakim, Badia. "Technology integrated online classrooms and the challenges faced by the EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 9, no. 5 (2020): 33-39.

⁵ Mahapatra, Santosh Kumar. "Online formative assessment and feedback practices of ESL teachers in India, Bangladesh and Nepal: A multiple case study." *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 30, no. 6 (2021): 519-530.

and effective learning^{6&7}. Thus, this study highlighted the previous research gaps related to the study, language, online learning, online teaching, challenges, opportunities, technological infrastructure and other aspects as well.

- What challenges do ESL teachers face in using ESL teaching technology tools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Language Learning

In these modern times, society has immensely affected by the growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), throughout the globe, which readily include education in Pakistan as well. The incorporation of online teaching and learning can lead to an overemphasis on soft factors such as schedule flexibility and pedagogical challenges. These variables hold considerable influence in reshaping the overall teaching and learning environment. Thus, researchers emphasize that the successful adoption of online teaching and learning relies on several key factors⁸. Sufficient financial resources, well-designed training programs, wise allocation of resources, and the establishment of a strong technical infrastructure is recognized as the primary facilitator for integrating online teaching and learning methods.

Dhawan (2020) defines the online education that it is the ability to use electronic devices connected to an internet network by the learner, which enables to learner to learn at any time, in any anytime, rhythm, and from anywhere⁹. E-learning is referred to as the “synchronous or asynchronous environments learning experience using different electronic devices such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets, etc. with an accessible internet connection. In these environments, students can be independently anywhere to learn and communicate with teachers and other learners¹⁰.

Challenges in Online Teaching

Online teaching and learning was supposed to serve stakeholders equally in most countries. While considering technology, Orlando and Attard (2015) have a view that “teaching with technology is not a one size fits all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum content being taught” (p. 119). The problems with a “one size fits all” approach is particularly highlighted in collaborative learning tasks (group work) where individual differences between and across cohorts can be highlighted¹¹. Regardless of mode, in addition to the typical

⁶ Grundmann, Oliver, Donna Wielbo, and Ian Tebbett. "The implementation and growth of an international online forensic science graduate program at the University of Florida." *Journal of College Science Teaching* 40, no. 1 (2010): 34.

⁷ Molenda, Michael, and Rhonda Robinson. "Educational Technology: A Definition With Commentary Edited by Januszewski and Molenda." (2007).

⁸ Sali, Pinar. "An analysis of the teachers' use of L1 in Turkish EFL classrooms." *System* 42 (2014): 308-318.

⁹ Dhawan, Shivangi. "Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis." *Journal of educational technology systems* 49, no. 1 (2020): 5-22.

¹⁰ Singh, Vandana, and Alexander Thurman. "How many ways can we define online learning? A systematic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018)." *American Journal of Distance Education* 33, no. 4 (2019): 289-306.

¹¹ Mahyoob, Mohammad. "Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners." *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* 11, no. 4 (2020).

challenges the online environment may cause additional challenges for the isolated and external learner particularly through considerations around their access, engagement, support and community.

Perrotta and Bohan (2020) conducted a reflective study on online teaching, shedding light on noteworthy difficulties faced in this context. The study highlighted challenges related to access to mentoring and professional-pedagogical training, as well as feelings of isolation from students and the campus community. Furthermore, issues concerning curriculum control and maintaining academic honesty were identified as additional hurdles. As the medical emergency unfolded, the availability and accessibility of online teaching in higher education institutions were reported to vary, adding further complexity to the challenges faced during emergency period.

Opportunities in Online Teaching

The transition from traditional in-person instruction to online teaching offers a valuable opportunity to educate future specialists in creating high-quality online teaching materials and enhancing the effectiveness of online teaching platforms¹². Embracing online teaching promotes open communication and interaction between educators and learners, fostering stronger collaboration among peers and between teachers and students¹³. The potential for increased collaboration in the online teaching environment. As a result, the potential provided by online teaching is acknowledged as crucial and indispensable in implementing technology-driven teaching methodologies. Hence, obtaining proper pedagogical training and expertise in utilizing ICT-based teaching tools and blended learning settings served as the groundwork for a smooth shift from conventional in-person instruction to online or distance teaching¹⁴.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To carry out the study, qualitative research design was used. The qualitative research paradigm allows researchers to interpret and comprehend the meanings and perceptions of people in social phenomenon. Qualitative research design is likely to give in-depth knowledge of the social phenomenon, and it can provide detailed data to understand the research questions and objectives effectively¹⁵. For this qualitative approach, phenomenological research design was selected in this study. Phenomenology can be conceptualized as "that which manifests itself," offering a genuine view of things in their fundamental essence. The exploration of consciousness structures from a first-person perspective. Often possessing a subjective character, it delves into awareness and delineates the intricacies of an individual's emotions, perceptions, and encounters.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews to learn about the challenges that teachers face in online ESL teaching and to identify the opportunities emerging at the same time. Thus, to recognize significant themes and derive meaning from them, one needed to explore their

¹² Dhawan, Shivangi. "Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis." *Journal of educational technology systems* 49, no. 1 (2020): 5-22.

¹³ Albatti, Hamood. "E-Learning for English Language Teaching in Higher Education Institutions in Saudi Arabia during Covid-19 Pandemic." (2023).

¹⁴ Hashemi, Aminuddin, and Si Na Kew. "The barriers to the use of ICT in English language teaching: A systematic literature review." *Bilgi ve İletişim Teknolojileri Dergisi* 3, no. 1 (2021): 77-88.

¹⁵ Agius, Steven J. "Qualitative research: its value and applicability." *The Psychiatrist* 37, no. 6 (2013): 204-206.

viewpoints, emotions, and encounters fully. The purpose was to make deductions based on the perspectives of individuals who encountered the phenomenon in this instance, online teaching and to display the challenges they faced from their standpoints. The researcher chosen semi-structured interview to collect the data. Semi-Interviews has been taken from 15 ESL teachers. For this study, 15 teachers are selected for semi-structured interviews from Public universities of Sindh, Pakistan who are specifically related to ESL teaching at Undergraduate level of university. The analysis of the data is done by using thematic analysis, which is followed by identifying main themes from raw unstructured data Thematic analysis, a method for classifying qualitative data, has been utilized. The researcher studied every transcript in order to establish a sense of familiarity.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Familiarization

In this foremost step, the data is filtered out as the data is collected by interviews and there must be irrelevant data present. To look for the related data, the researcher made familiarization of the data with the research actual topic. In this approach, the researcher listens to the original recordings repeatedly and also reread the data transcripts to understand the detailed concepts.

Coding/ Indexing & Generating Themes

The codes are generated from the raw data. At this stage, categories are made to denote main themes. Those themes can be data that an interviewee has explicitly states that it is important or it may have surprised the researcher, reminds of a theory or a concept. These categories can be activities, objects, processes, or anything. The researcher will extract the themes as much as possible.

Table 1
Themes / Theories

| No | Themes / Theories |
|----|---|
| 1. | Teachers use variety of tools to incorporate in ESL online teaching |
| 2. | Teachers face a myriad of difficulties while teaching online |
| 3. | ESL learning can be enhanced by using accessible and engaging online learning tools |
| 4. | Teachers can overcome difficulties with training and effective implementation of personal/professional skills |

Technological Infrastructure and Resources

This theme is based on participants responses who elaborated the infrastructure available to them is based on the location, if for suppose they are at the institute where they teach at, they would have all the resources including, internet connectivity, software applications, laptop and IT department support. In addition, all the resources are easily available if the teachers and students belong to the urban areas. The participants belonging to rural areas will face many challenges while online ESL teaching for both students and teachers. This theme emphasizes on the varied

availability of the resources. Participant (n=4) shared that he had all the modern technology available at work place while participant (n=14) said that the participants with different financial backgrounds either will have complete, partial, or zero infrastructure in their teaching and learning process.

It is further seen from the responses that the technological infrastructure is high-low for teachers as well as student, as students may have financial constraints and might not have internet, devices, or satisfied learning environment. Moreover, one participant (n=15) shared that he works at different places and all the places have different technological infrastructure depending on the credibility of the institute/university. It was further noticed that all the teachers had different technological infrastructure at different times, while in the university/institute, home, and at the time of teaching ESL if outside the work place.

Challenges in Online ESL Learning Environment

This theme is based on the challenges faced by the teachers in online ESL learning. Participant mentioned that there are numerous challenges in online language teaching, all the stakeholders are involved in teaching and learning process. For effective teaching and learning process can only be achieved when all the stakeholders are cover these challenges. All of the participants showed concerns on undoubted technological infrastructural challenges including inconsistent internet connectivity, load-shedding, and limited access to technology in some areas, and lack of digital literacy. In addition, some of the students may not have access to the required technology or may not be familiar with the online language-learning environment. Some other participants (n=1) had concern over software glitches, equipment malfunction, and limited resources of technology.

Participant(s) (n=3) and few others highlighted challenges like lack of technical support from the institute/university to both teacher and students. In addition, the students who are enrolled in online language courses or degree programs in virtual universities are likely to face more challenges as the students use their own technological equipment such as laptop, mobile, tablets, or a desktop. It was also noted that the participants also discussed the standardization of online platform as each university, institute, teacher, and student were on different platforms and were trying to mitigate the challenges faced by them on individualistic level. The standardization of platform can solve many problems as the teachers and students will now the basic requirement before any online language class or course is started.

Support and Collaboration for Effective Online Language Teaching

Theme is concerned about the formal/official support for the teachers in different universities/institutes. Many of the participants 7 out of 15, who belong to universities which offer virtual language learning programs/courses agreed that they have received formal support from the university/institute. Participant (n=2) shared that he has received workshops, training on online learning. The IT department and technical staff also facilitate them. While other participants (n=15) are of the view that they have not received any training or workshop regarding online teaching and learning. Therefore, there is lack of knowledge and technical support that is not addressed by any technical staff or IT team. One of the participants shared a motivated approach towards language teaching, “no child should be left behind and should be given equal opportunities

to learn and grow. So, I find myself the alternatives like sometimes I allow them to do the task offline”.

Participants shared that they are learning technical skills by their own experience and practice. As they have received minimal formal support in term of technology usage, digital literacy, availability of technological resources and integration of technology in classroom. However, participant (n=7) shared I have been able to effectively resolve any issues that arose by relying on my own problem-solving skills and resources available online. Through self-guided learning and research, I have successfully overcome various technological challenges that I encountered during my online ESL teaching journey.

Mitigating Challenges to Improve ESL Teaching

This theme is created to share the mitigation of challenges in online ESL teaching and learning process. The data shows that the teachers are motivated to do their best in online teaching of language on various platforms with many challenges. Most of the participants shared that they are solving their problems on their own by adopting several strategies in teaching methods. Teachers have learnt to become flexible and patient when dealing with technical issues, and have developed alternative lesson plans or activities to use in case of technological disruptions. Teachers provide additional resources and support to the students who are struggling with online learning environment, also the teachers have learnt to become flexible and adaptable to the situation of individual student and the technology available. In addition, participants mentioned that they do not use only one platform for online language teaching but teachers have adapted a variety of online tools and resources that are accessible across different devices and internet speeds. Moreover, efforts have been made to communicate more frequently and clearly with the students, providing regular updates on course materials and schedules, and offering alternative modes of communication for students who may not have reliable internet access.

Participants mentioned that strong communication helps to create effective language learning environment. Alternative mode of communication and access to multiple learning material is helping students to learn a language effectively. Also, participant (n=15) shared that alternative offline tasks through social applications is an effective approach to overcome the challenges in online language learning as one of the participants told (n=8) ‘I ask them (students) to watch one YouTube videos on how to use canvas very well then after adding them I generate discussion boards, posted announcements for upcoming class, assignments and ppts/pdf files for their ease’.

Discussion

The data sheds light on the challenges faced by teachers and students in the online ESL teaching context. Participants mentioned technical issues, concerns about cheating and plagiarism, limited internet access, and difficulties in maintaining continuity and providing timely feedback. These challenges have a negative impact on learning outcomes, student engagement, and equal learning opportunities. This theme aligns with previous studies highlighting challenges related to technology, access, and the need for support and training to overcome these obstacles¹⁶.

¹⁶ Selwyn, Neil. "In praise of pessimism-the need for negativity in educational technology." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 42, no. 5 (2011): 713-718.

It further explores the negative impacts of the challenges mentioned in the previous theme on learning outcomes. Participants noted that frequent disruptions, disengagement, and limited access to resources hinder student progress and participation. They also mentioned the difficulty in providing timely and detailed feedback, which is crucial for student learning and improvement. This theme highlights the importance of addressing these challenges to ensure optimal learning outcomes for ESL students. Data also identifies the enhancement the effectiveness and accessibility of online language learning tools. Participants mentioned the need for training programs, collaboration opportunities, user-friendly tools, and access to online resources. They highlighted the importance of professional development, online communities, and assessment tools for automated grading and instant feedback. This theme emphasizes the role of support, training, and user-friendly tools in maximizing the benefits of online language learning.

In summary, the identified themes provide valuable insights into the experiences of ESL teachers and their perspectives on online language learning tools. The themes shed light on the challenges and limitations faced by teachers and students, as well as the need for support, training, and improved infrastructure to overcome these challenges. Moreover, the themes emphasize the importance of empowering ESL learners through interactive and customized approaches, fostering a learner-centred environment, and promoting collaboration and multimodal learning. These findings are consistent with existing literature that emphasizes the benefits of online teaching and the potential of technology tools to enhance language learning outcomes^{17&18}. They also align with studies highlighting the challenges and considerations associated with online language learning, such as technical issues, access limitations, and the need for effective training and support¹⁹.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to identify the challenges teachers faced while using language learning technology tools in ESL teaching through a semi-structured questionnaire conducted from 15 ESL teachers. The findings from the thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with ESL teachers reveal valuable insights into the use of online language learning tools and their impact on teaching and learning experiences. The themes identified highlight the challenges, and potential of integrating technology tools in the ESL classroom. The themes of challenges and limitations in using online tools shed light on the difficulties faced by teachers and students in the online ESL teaching context. Participants mentioned technical issues, concerns about cheating and plagiarism, limited internet access, and difficulties in maintaining continuity and providing timely feedback. These challenges align with previous studies that highlight the obstacles related to technology, access, and the need for support and training.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for ongoing support, training, and infrastructure improvements to optimize the integration of online language learning tools in the ESL classroom. While the benefits and opportunities are significant, it is essential to address the challenges and ensure that all students have equal access to technology and support. The findings also highlight

¹⁷ Lim, Doo Hun, and Michael Lane Morris. "Learner and instructional factors influencing learning outcomes within a blended learning environment." *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 12, no. 4 (2009): 282-293.

¹⁸ Yim, Soobin, and Mark Warschauer. "Web-based collaborative writing in L2 contexts: Methodological insights from text mining." (2017).

¹⁹ Selwyn, Neil. "In praise of pessimism-the need for negativity in educational technology." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 42, no. 5 (2011): 713-718.

the importance of a learner-centred approach and the customization of online tools to meet the diverse needs of ESL learners.

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