

Hybrid-Flexible English Language Education in Bangladeshi Universities: Perceptions, Pitfalls and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This review article aims to focus on how the demeaning concept of remote online education was a welcome relief in Bangladesh during the unpredictable pandemic situation in early 2020. It presents some of my initial struggles as a university teacher to cope up with the total virtual education in the New-normal when it was imposed without any trial as a top-down approach by the university authority. Some challenges and their way outs are also discussed with reference to the context of Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) English Language Education (ELE) in Bangladeshi universities. It ends up with a prediction that the new system with fabulous combinations of instructional delivery will sustain its reign in the Next-normal. This essay investigates the policy reforms; finds out the challenges faced by organizations, teachers and students and their endeavours to get accustomed to the online education and talks about the future prospects of HyFlex ELE in Bangladesh. It is expected to assist researchers, teachers, students, policy makers and other stakeholders to understand the realities of the New-normal in order to frame a better ELE system in the Next-normal Bangladesh.

Keywords: Hybrid Teaching, Blended Learning, Emergency Education, Technology in ELT, HyFlex Education, Tertiary ELT in Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

We have been living in a strange situation since the emergence of COVID-19, when being social means keeping distance. The Bangladesh government, like most nations, closed all educational institutes from March 17 to 31, 2020 as part of its lockdown measure to prevent the spread of the virus (TBS Report, 2020). Even though education was disrupted, the system quite quickly responded to opportunities that digital technology offered in the form of online learning. The pandemic situation threw education at all levels into the remote learning mode. This new notion named Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is proposed by Hodges et. al. (2020) to describe this temporary shift of providing education by using alternative ways, due to crisis circumstances. Milman (2020) called it the ‘pandemic pedagogy’.

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) on May 7 permitted the private universities to run classes and conduct exams online (Abdullah, 2020). On 25 June 2020, the public universities decided to start online classes in a flexible manner (Kamol, 2020). With time, private and public universities resorted to learning tools like Google classrooms (Jodoin, 2020) and classes were taken through Meet and Zoom links. According to Farah and Ahmed (2014), Internet or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is spreading quickly and educational sector can embrace its blessings through online that may have multifarious names, like Virtual Learning, Remote Learning, Off-site Learning, Web-Based Learning (WBL), Web-Based Instruction (WBI), Web-Based Training (WBT), Mobile Learning (or m-Learning), Nomadic Learning, Internet-Based Training (IBT), Distributed Learning (DL), Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL), Distance Learning, Online Learning (OL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) etc.

TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIVERSITY TEACHING

English language teaching is a part and parcel of higher education in Bangladesh now. Every university

incorporated compulsory foundation/basic English course(s) in its curricula for all undergraduate disciplines as per the recommendations of National Education Policy (NEP)-2010 and the instructions of University Grants Commission (UGC). However, the teaching techniques and modes mostly remained static since teachers followed a ‘one size fits all’ model of teaching within the four walls of a classroom.

A teacher is like a rolling stone since s/he needs to get engaged in continuous professional development to avoid fossilization as a proverb goes ‘a rolling stone gathers no mosses’. In addition, s/he has to play multiple roles in his/her class that is a miniature community of students of diverse abilities, races and religions. At this point, Gail Godwin’s quote is noteworthy, ‘Good teaching is $\frac{1}{4}$ preparation and $\frac{3}{4}$ theatre’. William Shakespeare mentioned in *As You Like It* (Act-2, Scene-7), ‘All the world is a stage and all the men and women merely players. And one man in his time plays many parts’. The classroom, either physical or virtual, is a stage where a teacher has to play multifarious roles – a tutor, an instructor, a mentor, a facilitator, an organizer, a controller, a participant, an observer, an assessor, a guide, a counselor etc.

Since childhood, I observed my teachers imparting knowledge as lecturers face to face inside the classrooms only. My father, who was a college teacher of English, did the same but as his son, he taught me differently (teaching through playing, feeding etc.) at home. Even during my graduation and post-graduation classes in Dhaka University, my teachers followed similar didactic teaching with few varieties. They gave little time to us beyond the class hours and we were afraid of sharing our problems with them. When I became a teacher in 2007, I also borrowed my teachers’ in-class lecture mode with very minimum varieties where my role was mostly like an all knowing Sage on the stage (King, 1993) but with my kids at home, I play the roles of a father (a guardian), a friend, a guide on their side and above all, a teacher. This contradictory duality exists in our society where the teacher is regarded mostly as an omniscient authority and a dispenser of knowledge, not a guardian of a student.

With this stereotypicality acknowledged and finding ‘*delight in discipline*’ (face to face teaching, sit-down tests etc.), English Language Education (ELE) continued but the Coronavirus outbreak forced all institutes to resort to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) where teachers required ‘*delight in diversity*’ (online, and hybrid-flexible approaches in addition to offline teaching).

Concern for Multimodal, Humanistic & Holistic Teaching

“Your mind is a garden. Your thoughts are the seeds. You can grow flowers or you can grow weeds!” – I think education is the instrument to plough the garden (the mind) and a teacher trains the students to apply self-cultivation (the development of one’s mind or capacities through one’s own efforts). First, the teacher needs to be strategically and pedagogically sound to grow flowers in his/her own garden. If the teaching involves multi-modalities and various methods, the seeds (thoughts, knowledge etc.) will germinate soon into beautiful fragrant flowers (good humans). However, age-old mechanism (traditional top-down teaching) may sometimes result in bad seeds (bad persons) which ultimately may allow weeds (negative ideas) to grow more in the garden. After COVID, multi-mode teaching seems to be more important than single-mode teaching. A multimodal teaching approach incorporates different semiotic modes — “linguistic, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural meaning and interactivity that requires students to use different sensory modalities (i.e. listening, speaking, viewing, gesturing, touching, etc.) to understand the content.” (Multimodal Teaching, 2022).

Ilich (1970) argued for the abolition of school system since it had the ‘factory system’ of the ‘industrial era’. According to him, returning to a simpler, pre-industrial life or moving ahead towards a similar post- industrial one will enable people to reclaim their essential humanity. I believe that abolishing schools in a busy society is not a remedy now. Rather, setting up the home-teaching atmosphere where the teacher becomes the guardian (father/mother) for each student (like his/her own child), may ensure an environment of humanistic education. Duchesne and McMaugh (2016) posit that humanistic teaching takes into account students’ cognitive, social and emotional needs as parents try to do at home.

When online mode was incorporated, I felt for the first time that health was the highest priority even during teaching. In every class, I became more concerned of my students' health. If anyone was sick and not attending classes, I tried to know more about him or her even beyond the class hours. Sometimes I talked to the guardians who shared valuable insights about their children. This new information about my students helped me develop their personality maps. Hence, the holistic way of teaching (an approach where educators address their students' emotional, social, ethical, and academic needs) appears to be in practice after COVID.

THE PRESENT CONTEXT

In Bangladesh, except for Open University, there was not much distance education (through TV/radio programmes), let alone online education which was considered as a demeaning concept before the COVID-19 pandemic. After COVID, total online education was welcomed by all higher education institutes. At this moment, after nearly two years of the pandemic and three doses of vaccination, we can see hopefully the signs of the coronavirus subsiding. There is a heightened concern among educationists regarding the nature and mode of teaching and learning in the post-vaccine era. I have already seen that almost all institutes in Bangladesh adopted HyFlex/blended education by combining the online and face to face learning. Some universities where both teachers and students were vaccinated passed orders for actual face to face classes. Yet they have kept the Google Classroom for each course teacher to upload materials for students' asynchronous learning. Almost all top private universities in Bangladesh bought domains from Google to use Google Classroom with Meet link. The UGC has purchased ZOOM and provided free accounts to public university teachers who can now take large classes and arrange live meetings of 300 participants at a time.

Rationale

Drucker (2012) rightly pointed out, "One can't manage change. One can only be ahead of it" (p.62). In today's landscape, change is like the air we breathe. In this whirlwind of change, we have to keep updating ourselves. Research is a powerful tool for professional development. I can notice a paradigm shift and this research may help me obtain the pedagogic merit to understand this transition and perform better.

COVID proved the claim of Whitehead (2019) that every teacher has "a living contradiction" and needs to reflect upon the question "How do I improve my practice" (p.3). According to Miller (1996), there are three views of teaching – (i) transmission (teacher as a *'sage on the stage'* and the final evaluator), (ii) transaction (a constructivist perspective in which teacher as *'a guide on the side'* assists learners in knowledge construction to solve real-world problems) and (iii) transformation (interdependent perspective of creating conditions to transform the learner on multifarious levels like cognitive, emotional, social, intuitive, creative, spiritual etc.). Transformational teaching enables teachers and students to unleash their capabilities as social beings and develop more nurturing human beings capable of perceiving the interconnectedness of all human, plant and animal life (Narve, 2001). Hence, what type of post-COVID teaching of English exists in Bangladeshi universities and "how can we move from the individual to the universal?" (Whitehead, 2019), deserve to be researched.

In this fast paced digital environment, we have developed a 'Hurry Sickness' (Easwaran, 1989) and are exposed to 'the universal folly of Fast Life' (Holt, 2002). Teachers hurry to impart knowledge and publish results while students try to pass as quickly as possible. According to Holt (2002), fast education creates fast schools (result of institutional indigestion) geared solely to the product, test results and not to the process of creating educative experiences (p. 268). He favours slow education – a more flexible approach to learning with time and pleasure. It is a type of holistic education where compassion and love are among the ultimate aims. Tilson's (2018) book 'Go Slow To Grow Fast' emphasizes on having patience for a better performance and thriving in a fast paced world where leaders (teachers) must have a roadmap. I wish to see how we are keeping pace (moving fast or slow) with the transition as teachers.

Bangladesh commits to fulfill SDG goals by 2030 as stipulated by UNESCO. After COVID, quality education (SDG Goal-4) can't be thought of, without health and well-being (SDG Goal-3). Consequently,

the acronym ELE might get replaced by ELES (English Language Education for Sustainable Development). That's why, I intend to know the pros and cons of this transition through my research lens.

The insights may – be an eye-opening call for other teachers to get used to the newly evolved post-pandemic education system, contribute to the knowledge of existing educational paradigm (s), unravel the effective strategies of tertiary ELE, open avenues for policy makers to reform the existing policies, inspire other stakeholders to drive their vehicles systematically towards their destinations and provide guidelines to boost up teachers' confidence, help them adapt to the changing scenarios and develop effective programs (Gkolia et al., 2014).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

My face to face on-campus teaching experiences of one and a half decades were of limited use in case of total virtual classes and later Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) teaching because these were completely unexplored domains for me. Initially I found myself like a hyacinth floating in a vast ocean yet to be explored. I felt like being stranded in an Island of Despair like Robinson Crusoe. After the pandemic, a few questions started to lurk in my mind, “Will teachers have a sigh of relief and go back to the classroom to pursue their previous usual ways of face-to-face classroom teaching?, will authorities and teachers opt to adapt to the ‘New Normal’ by venturing into the new mode of teaching?, and how will the teachers get training to get accustomed to this transition period?”.

Though a small training to conduct online classes was arranged by my university, I faced problems like not making my classes interactive, no control on ever-silent students while the teacher talk continued the whole class, lack of proper materials and resources, challenges of administering tests reliably, no monitoring tool during tests and so on. Not only that, sometimes I couldn't take my classes without a laptop and when I was disconnected due to power cut or WiFi drop, I felt helpless. Even when I rejoined after a while, I found many students absent from the class, taking my sudden leave as an excuse. What was more, I couldn't see all students on screen at a time and when I shared my screen, I couldn't see anybody. By reviewing the existing literature in this field, I tried to get a few solutions of these questions.

Initial Perspectives and Pitfalls

Initially, the sudden transition from offline to absolute online education was a traumatic change for teachers, students and the concerned authorities. The shift to remote teaching was made in haste and without much needs analysis and policy processes (Persico et al., 2020) and therefore, is beset with difficulties and inadequacies, most significantly, in the matter of insufficient access to internet connectivity. Moreover, this sudden change has revealed gaps in teacher preparation and training (Trust & Whalen, 2020) as well as resource constraints and structural inequities (Aguilera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020).

Ela et. al. (2021) noted that tertiary level students at a public university in Bangladesh faced mental pressure and frustration due to the disruptions in educational activities. The tertiary level EFL teachers found that learners' uneven access to e-learning, callous attitude, low motivation, poor comprehension of the teaching contents, and irregular electricity supply, limited ICT resources, unstable internet connections, costly internet packages, teachers' lack of technological competency, and inadequate training on online teaching were the main challenges of online teaching. Studies with university teachers and learners in Bangladesh by Khan et al. (2021) also reported related challenges along with teachers' limited knowledge of online pedagogy and assessment.

One fact was that most of the teachers were not given any financial help from their respective institutions for buying the required technological tools (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). Again, the learners' poor socio-economic conditions did not allow them to buy devices for online classes (Alhumaid et al., 2020; Ela et al., 2021).

Additionally, the learners' falling interest was substantiated by their poor attendance in online classes (Efriana, 2021; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020) which ultimately made teachers lose their motivation for teaching. The learners were not interested in playing an active role in classes, as well (Efriana, 2021; Lukas & Yunus, 2021; Tarrayo et al., 2021). Teachers, especially those who were working in the nongovernment educational institutions were usually poorly paid in Bangladesh during the pandemic. They faced financial hardship as they had to buy different technological tools and expensive data packs with their personal fund (Chiatoh & Chia, 2020; Nashir & Laili, 2021), and their salaries were reduced. Furthermore, as all the stakeholders – teachers, learners, guardians, and officials – were exam-driven in Bangladesh, lack of online testing schemes could explain the learners' poor interest and participation in online classes. Teachers also had poor knowledge of online assessments (Khan et al., 2021). Therefore, continuous assessments and tests were confined to offline assignments and take-home tests only (Efriana, 2021; Lukas & Yunus, 2021; Nashir & Laili, 2021). The negative impacts on teachers' mental and physical health highlighted the fact that they must be more careful about digital wellbeing.

Sarker et al. (2019) mentioned that there were a number of constraints such as: insufficiently designed learning materials, weak internet connection and unavailability of equal online as well as technological scopes to all teachers and learners; and to solve these issues and ensure an unquestionable flow of e-learning, coordinated endeavors by all stakeholders, such as students, lecturers, administrators and policy makers are a must in order that the design and implementation of online education conform to the need, desire and expectations of each and every individual in it.

UGC Policy on Blended Learning in Bangladesh

Since its birth in 1971, Bangladesh got several education policies and the latest one is National Education Policy-2010. Recently, University Grants Commission (UGC) has circulated a Policy on Blended Learning for Bangladesh (Approved in the 161st meeting of the Full Commission held on 27/02/2022) which has a link with the existing education policy. The manifesto of Vision-2021 that was later extended to 2041 to spark a spectacular progress of making a Digital Bangladesh has already emphasized on the integration of information technology (IT) by higher education institutes. Furthermore, the Strategic Plan for Higher Education (2018) has instructed organizations to create an advanced e-learning environment much earlier than the pandemic strikes. Therefore, it has been easier in the pandemic period to integrate IT into the teaching-learning' environment by building infrastructure capacities and experiences. However, to incorporate blended learning, an octagonal framework (Khan, 2005) is prescribed. This framework consists of eight dimensions – (i) Institutional dimension: the organization's preparedness in terms of administrative and academic matters and student services, (ii) Pedagogical dimension: consistency between course content and the learners' needs and method to deliver the content, (iii) Technological dimension: aspects related to infrastructure planning as well as accessibility to necessary hardware and software, (iv) Interface design: look and feel of page, site, and content design, and navigation that enables learners to use and switch between different delivery methods, (v) Evaluation: assessing the learners as well as the instruction and learning environment, (vi) Management: maintaining the learning environment and managing content delivery, (vii) Resource support dimension: online support and the resources required to create meaningful learning environments and (viii) Ethical considerations: cultural and geographical diversity, etiquette, equal opportunity, and legal issues. Seven broad policies are also proposed to introduce blended learning into universities – (i) Readiness of universities to incorporate blended learning, (ii) Adopting appropriate pedagogy for blended learning, (iii) Necessary technological infrastructure, (iv) Effective design, (v) Proper assessment strategies, (vi) Developing and maintaining infrastructure and (vii) Considering ethics, culture, equality, and legal issues

ACHIEVEMENTS

In Bangladesh, during pandemic, one big achievement of spreading internet revolution has been made possible by the mobile phone operator companies like Grameen Phone, Bangla Link, Robi, Teletalk etc.

Smartphones powered by Android and other latest sophistications along with Applications (apps) are quite available among learners of Bangladesh to learn English language (Hossain, 2018). It is believed that blended online pedagogy would combine face-to-face synchronous learning (such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Flipped Classroom etc.) with asynchronous learning to offer opportunities for cognitive participation allowing students to process and reflect on the learning. Sarker et al. (2019) found that e-learning attained considerable acceptance among most of the students who routinely spent time on internet and electronic devices regularly learning through online arrangements, like lecture videos, course information, postings of the fellow students in the forum and comments and suggestions of the teachers.

To accelerate educational service and activities, academic institutions in Bangladesh are resorting to web-based tools in growing amount since many institutes have developed academic portals where teachers upload the virtual forms of their lectures and instructions, and students can join the portal to learn ubiquitously (Chowdhury, 2020). Since the users of internet technology in Bangladesh have comprehensively grown in number in the recent years and are increasing swiftly, the country is obtaining vivid progress of digitalization which is gradually being utilized in creating an ever-existent ambience of active learning (Chowdhury, 2020). Additionally, the LMS the organizations created works as a disciplined database which they want to keep for future teaching/ learning.

Almost all organizations have now digital identities as Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) mentioned that the wind of change turned into a storm of innovation by forcing institutes to move their presences to digital environments to create new digital identities. In creating a digital presence, a digital twin needs to be birthed. So, we can see the *Digital Twin* of every tertiary institute since physical campuses have reproduced their digital versions in Bangladesh.

Future Possibilities and Way Forward

From my point of view, hybrid or HyFlex learning with fabulous new combinations of instructional delivery will sustain its reign in the Next-normal when education will no longer be bound to the tradition of one-way linear teaching. Following the framework of 5Rs – retaining, reusing, revising, remixing and redistribution (Wiley & Hilton III, 2018), many open educational resources (OERs) and open educational practices (OEPs) will be developed to keep this type of education going (Wetzler, 2020). The copyrighted hard copy materials will be of lesser use than these newly developed ones. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) predict that care and empathy-centred approaches should be the default mode applied in education in the Next-normal. This type of education will give more autonomy, control and independence to learners who can pick and choose the path of life through teamwork and collaboration either virtually or face to face to liberate their minds and hearts from the captive style of the ‘factory model education’.

To keep pace with the New-normal and step effectively into the Next-normal, digital skills are mandatory for all stakeholders of education. More focus has to be given to make training modules for all to navigate digital tools without troubles; create digital-friendly content and curricula, IT infrastructure, flexible but output oriented instructions of tasks and activities; apply new cutting-edge technologies for the ‘digital natives’; explore cost-effective models of blended learning; provide access to all students including those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, students in poor environments; build public–private partnerships (PPPs) e.g. partnerships with telecom companies for connectivity to bridge the digital divide and allow universal access to education. On top of everything, approving a budget for materializing changes, reengineering education with proper policy reforms, nominating skilled manpower, building institutions of excellence with state-of-the art facilities to accelerate quality education, establishing strong institutional quality assurance cells and a powerful national accreditation council, adopting eclectic pedagogic approaches in case of ELE and overall creating motivation for lifelong education for the greater good of the humanity are a dire need of the time. Every teacher and student needs to master soft skills and emotional intelligence in addition to their hard skills to be a transformed shield that is unbreakable against any odd. In this regard, Reich (2021) claimed that teachers won’t be able to use technological tools and teaching platforms effectively unless they are given adequate training. The following quotes from Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) are worth mentionable:

‘COVID-19 pandemic has been a crisis for everyone, yet we can turn this crisis into an opportunity by reimagining, redesigning and recalibrating education to make it accessible, equitable, and inclusive, to free knowledge, democratize societies, eliminate inequality, inequity and injustice, and give agency and independency to learners so that they can navigate, traverse and pollinate multiple paths, dimensions and layers of a true learning ecology, where learners can find their true selves (p. vii)’.

CONCLUSION

All the required renovations regarding policy, curricula, training and content for future hybrid education need to be context- based and through proper needs analysis and their nationwide faster implementation process must be ensured. Only then, we can get a human capital out of our future generations who will be responsible citizens and manpower for the nation.

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