English Language Teachers' Experience on Online Teaching amidst COVID-19

| Correspondence: | Prakash Bhattarai <pbprogressive46@gmail.com> | M.Phil. Scholar, Graduate School of Education, Tribhuvan University   English Language Teacher, Kirtipur Secondary School, Kathmandu, Nepal |

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic closed schools forcing adoption of online teaching in most of the countries of the world including Nepal. With the help of two secondary level English language teachers' experience on online teaching, this article aims to reveal the perceptions, challenges and the ways to overcome such challenges on online teaching. The data collected via unstructured interviews and informal conversations were analyzed using general inductive approach. The findings reveal that English language teachers take online class as both opportunity and challenge. Opportunity in the sense that they have got chance to experience something new and challenge in the sense that though they try their utmost, they are not able to make online class as interactive as face-to-face class. They make the guardians aware of their children's activities to cope the challenges they face. Moreover, online class can be a good supplement to face to face class rather than replacement to it.

Keywords: COVID-19, online teaching, phenomenological study, opportunity, challenge

1. Introduction

Novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19), first reported on 31st December, 2019 in Wuhan, China, is being a major threat to the world now. "The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global emergency on January 30th, 2020 and a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020" (Mailizar, Almanthar, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020, p. 1) as it has spread to almost all the countries of the world. The spread is really frightening and it is challenging all the aspects of human life. The world in general and the countries in particular are struggling against this pandemic to protect the life of their citizens and people. Due to this fact, world economy, tourism, health, education, trade and almost all other sectors are highly affected.

There are tragic consequences everywhere, and the education sector is one of the most affected ones due to school closure, leaving millions of students from pre-school to the university at homes (Poudel, 2020). Though the students are getting informal education at their homes from their parents and relatives, they are deprived of face-to-face formal education. This pandemic has not only left students at homes but also their teachers. Teachers are detached from their students physically. In other words, students and teachers are not able to have face to face class. In this scenario, teaching and learning is only possible through alternative means of schooling (Konig, Jager-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020). This unexpected context forced every stakeholder of education to seek some alternative ways so that students could resume their study. Giving importance to the alternative ways to revive education sector, experts and stakeholders of education suggested schools and colleges to run virtual class in general and online class in particular. This resulted in the largest "online movement" in the history of education (Kabir, 2020).

As in other countries in the world, virtual class is given due emphasis during this pandemic in Nepal too. Almost all the universities in Nepal are teaching students of different levels virtually. The universities have released virtual class directives to make such class effective. On the other hand, both private and community schools are too teaching students virtually as far as possible. Some of the schools started teaching students online before the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology released "Student Learning Facilitation Guideline through Alternative System 2020" (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoESaT, 2020, p. 1-12) which was to be effective from 15th June, 2020. This guideline suggests all the stakeholders of education to teach students virtually with the help of different means like radio, television and online class as per the resources available to the students (MoESaT, 2020). It has provided a number of alternative ways to facilitate students' learning amidst COVID-19. Regarding online class, the guideline states that Education and Human Development Centers, provinces and local levels should prepare online materials and make them available to the students who have access of both internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) devices and schools should run online class using such materials as well (MoESaT, 2020). As per the guideline, schools (both private and community) are running online class.

Teaching online has been a new experience for both teachers and students in developing countries like Nepal. Most of the teachers and students perhaps did not have such experience before. Arguing this as a new experience, Bryson and Anders (2020) write, "Teaching modules completely online has been a new experience – a different experience for both lecturers and students" (p. 13). It is both opportunity and challenge for teachers and students. Opportunity in the sense that they have got chance to take online class for the first time and challenge in the sense that they have to manage a great deal of necessities for the class. Both students and teachers may not have different ICTs like smart phone, computer and network facility to fully participate in online teaching and learning (Lederman, 2020). Likewise, online teaching requires more focus than classroom-based interactions and is more tiring and time consuming for teachers (Bryson & Anders, 2020). Teachers have to prepare power point slides and any other teaching materials in advance to teach their students and in course of teaching it is tiring to make the students concentrate on teaching and learning since they are physically detached. Teachers have to use various ICTs and resources to solve problems and implement new approaches to teaching and learning. There are not only challenges but also host of opportunities of online class for both teachers and students in this pandemic which are discussed under subsequent discussion.

2. Online class: What and Why?

The development of science and technology can help bring about new virtual learning environments in which students can learn even when they are literally thousands of miles away from a teacher or other classmates. In virtual learning environments, the students are physically separated but they are psychologically connected with their tutors and friends (Bhattarai, Ranabhat, & Sitaula, 2017). Virtual learning can

be termed as distance learning too. Distance learning encompasses any instruction in which the learner and the instructors are physically separated (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014). A number of ICT devices and printed materials can be used to teach students virtually. Computer, radio, television, internet, different blogs, websites, social media and so on are some of such devices to name a few. Virtual class can be in different modes making use of different means. Online class is one of such modes.

Online class can be defined as class conducted using the digital network for interaction, learning and dialogue. It is designed for convenient learning. Online class, here, refers to both online teaching and learning. Means et al. (2014) define online learning as the learner's interaction with content and/or people via the internet for the purpose of learning; the learning may be part of a formal course or program or simply something learners pursue for their own interests. Online teaching on the other hand is the delivery of a series of lessons on a web browser or applications which can be accessed anyplace. Online class enables students and learning facilitators or instructors to have real-time interactions (Bryson & Anders, 2020). Different ICT devices and applications are often used to run online class. Google classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google meet are some of the applications to name a few which can be used and school teachers in Nepal these days have been using for online class.

There may be different reasons to conduct online class being based on the context. The reasons may differ on the basis of situation, purpose, learner and very often institution. There may be other reasons of such class in other situations but the following list provides some reasons behind conducting online class during this pandemic (i.e., COVID-19).

- Connects those who are miles away from their friends, tutors, students and/or institutions.
- Treats students psychologically that they have got chance to resume their study even in pandemic sitting at their own place.
- Keeps the students in their track so that they cannot be far from their academic activities.
- Makes both teachers and digitally literate.
- Provides teachers and students the sense of control that helps them cope with anxiety engendered by the epidemic.
- Enables to have a paradigm shift from traditional ways of delivering classes.
- Enables teachers and students to take this challenge as an opportunity.
- Allows teachers and students to have social distancing and isolation.

The above points reveal that online class is necessary both for students and teachers during this pandemic. In developing countries like Nepal, most of the teachers and students did not have the experience of online class before COVID-19. This pandemic has provided opportunity to students and teachers who had just heard about online education somewhere to have the real experience of online class-teaching and learning.

The teachers who are to teach their students online must have three different knowledge namely: technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK in short). Defining TPACK, Harris, Mishra and Koehler (2009) write; "TPACK emphasizes the connections among technologies, curriculum content, and specific pedagogical approaches, demonstrating how teachers' understandings of technology, pedagogy, and content can interact with one another to produce effective discipline-based teaching with educational technologies" (p. 396-397). The teachers who lack any one of the knowledges cannot teach effectively to his/her students. Having the knowledge of content and pedagogy does not work since teachers have to handle different ICTs for teaching their students online. The teachers who are not technology friendly experience online teaching as a hard job.

A number of studies conducted so far have talked about the importance of online class/teaching, teacher well-being, teacher agency in super difficult circumstance, and students' perceptions and experiences on online class amidst COVID-19. Ali and Kaur (2020) had a study to establish how teachers were coping with online teaching and learning due to the closure of schools nationwide and the findings revealed that teachers were slowly adopting aspects of moving towards online learning or E-Learning. It further disclosed that apart from resources, staff readiness, staff capacity, confidence, student accessibility and appropriate online learning platform play crucial function in ICT integrated learning. In the similar vein, Kapar (2020) conducted a research entitled 'Online class amidst COVID-19 lockdown' to examine teachers' experiences and understanding of online learning amidst COVID-19 crisis in Nepal, pandemic impacts on education and future challenges of school and found the possibilities of utilizing various freely available ICT tools in teaching and learning particularly in urban areas but the majority of the students are unlikely to have such access in the rural areas. Similarly, Phyak, Sapkota, Achary and Shrestha had a narrative study of teachers in 2020 to analyze teachers' experiences during the COVID- 19 pandemic and discuss their implications in the post COVID context. The narratives of the teachers implied that teachers could play a critical role in addressing students' learning challenges created by the super-difficult circumstance of COVID-19. With a purpose to study students' experiences about online teaching during COVID-19 outbreak, Al-Mohair and Alwahaishi (2020) had a research and found that though the students are satisfied with the facilities used in online teaching and with the instructor's performance, they are not satisfied with their experiences with online teaching for different reasons as they have overload assignments. Chung, Subramaniam and Dass (2020) conducted a research to investigate if demographic factors make any difference in university students' readiness to learn, online learning experiences and intention to continue using online learning. It also examined their preferred methods of online learning and challenges they face. The findings showed that respondents were generally ready for online learning. However, more than half of the respondents indicated that if given a choice, they do not want to continue with online learning in the future.

These a few but important reviews reveal that the studies conducted so far have talked about the experience of both teachers and students on online teaching and learning during COVID-19 but very few have been conducted to explore school level English language teachers' experience on online teaching in the context of Nepal. Keeping all these things in mind, this study aims to: a) reveal English language teachers' experiences on online teaching, b) disclose the challenges they face and the ways they adopt to overcome such challenges.

3. Methodology

This study is a phenomenological study which is based on secondary level English language teachers' lived experience on online teaching amidst COVID-19. Defining phenomenology, Maruna and Butler (2005) write; "Phenomenology… simply refers to the description and understanding of lived, human experience through observable forms of immediate cognitive experience and reflective analysis" (p. 50). Phenomenological approach is viewed as the highly appropriate means to research human experience (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000).

In order to explore secondary level English language teachers' experience on online teaching, I selected two secondary level English language teachers (one from community and next from private school) purposively as the participants. Phenomenological samples are nearly always purposive (Clark 1998 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). One of the participants was from one of the renowned public schools in Kathmandu, Nepal and the other was from one of the renowned private schools in Dang, Nepal. They both teach their secondary level students via online mode as their schools are closed due to COVID-19.

After informing the objectives and confidential nature of the study, both of the participants provided their verbal consent to take part in this study. After the consent, I arranged time for interviews and took unstructured interviews from both of the participants. Talking about the nature of unstructured interview, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) state; "The unstructured interview is an open situation, having greater flexibility and freedom" (p. 354). Due to the flexible nature of unstructured interview, I selected unstructured interview as my research tool. Both of the participants were interviewed via Zoom meeting due to lockdown amid COVID-19 and the interviews were

recorded taking the permission of the participants. As informal conversation, frequent messenger chat and phone calls to the participants were made for data triangulation.

After the interviews, both of the recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed using general inductive approach. It is an approach which provides a systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings (Thomas, 2006). At first, I read the data intensively in order to identify text segments related to my research objectives. Then, I labelled the segments of texts to create categories. Those categories were checked and rechecked to reduce the overlap and redundancy among the categories. Finally, four main categories/ themes namely: online class as an opportunity, online class as the supplement to face to face class, challenges experienced and guardians' awareness is must were generated. These categories/ themes explore secondary level English language teachers' experience on online class amidst COVID-19 in terms of their perceptions, challenges and ways for overcoming challenges of online class. Though the interviews were taken in Nepali language, I translated myself the selected extracts to use them as verbatim to clarify the themes. I tried my best to make the translation as accurate as possible.

4. Results and Discussion

The data were collected under three main sub-headings: perception of teachers towards online teaching, the challenges and the ways they use to cope the challenges. The experiences shared by both the participants are discussed in four main themes below.

4.1 Online Class as an Opportunity

Online class is an opportunity to experience something new for both students and teachers in the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Teachers who have a long experience in teaching, may not have experience of teaching their students virtually or in online mode. Teachers who have just heard about online teaching and learning especially in developing countries like Nepal have got chance to experience the real flavor of online teaching due to COVID-19. In a query in terms of the previous experience on online teaching and learning, one of the participants of this study Geetu (pseudonym), shared;

> Frankly speaking sir, I have got new experience i.e., online teaching and learning due to COVID-19. I had read in my course book about virtual class but never experienced before. Though there are challenges (…), it's great opportunity for me (Interview 1).

Teachers have not only got chance to experience something new but also have got chance to be familiar with different ICT devices and applications. They have been using ICT devices and applications like laptop, mobile, power point, Zoom, Google classroom, Facebook messenger which have enabled them to be familiar with such devices. These have not only promoted their digital literacy but also built their self-confidence. Sharing his experience, one of the participants of this study, Raj Kumar (pseudonym) recalled;

> I did not have ability to make power point slides previously but these days I can make very attractive slides and display those to my students via Zoom, Google meet and so on (Interview 2).

Teachers spend their time teaching their students and learning themselves related to the operation of different ICT devices. This has enabled them for their ICT enhancement. They have to prepare different materials to display their students due to which they are busy in academic activities even in this pandemic. In an informal conversation, Ram Kumar shared; "I think that I am busier these days. I have to prepare my slides for my presentation. Learn different technological issues."

Besides getting opportunity to experience something new and enhancing their own digital literacy, teachers are connected with their students who are miles away with the help of online class. Teachers who are always teachers due to their students are able to keep their students in the track of academic activities on one hand and cope with the anxiety caused by COVID-19 on the other. Talidong and Toquero (2020) state, "School closures, home quarantine, and social distancing implemented worldwide can cause a sudden anxiety even among teachers" (p. 573) and students. Online class is being perfect means to help students and teachers cope with the anxiety engendered by the pandemic. Taking online class as an opportunity to be connected with their students, both of the participants shared;

> I am connected with my students at least virtually which has helped me to overcome my anxiety of COVID-19. My students too are happy to take class (Interview 2).

> I engage my students in different activities during my class and provide them sufficient homework due to which they are busy doing their task. It has helped them to be in academic activities on one hand and forget their anxiety caused by COVID-19 on the other (Interview 1).

The experience shared by both of the participants reveal that teachers have got opportunity to experience what online class actually is on one hand and enhance their ability to operate different ICT devices on the other. In order to run online class, teachers are to be digitally literate. In this line, Konig et al. (2020) write; "Digital teacher competence and teacher education opportunities to learn digital competence, are instrumental in adapting to online teaching during COVID-19 school closures" (p. 2). This finding is similar to the finding, i.e., teachers are slowly adopting aspects of moving towards online learning or E-Learning of Ali and Kaur (2020). Moreover, the online class conducted has strengthened the relationship between teachers and students even in this pandemic. Teachers and students are able to overcome their anxieties caused by COVID-19 being engaged in online class.

4.2 Online Class as the Supplement to Face-to-Face Class

Online class is one of the supplements to face to face class rather than replacement to it. No doubt, online class can be as effective as face-to-face mode class that teachers and students have been practicing for long but teachers opine that face-to-face mode class cannot and/or should not be replaced by online class. In a query 'Do you think, online class can replace face to face mode class?', the participants of this study stated, online class cannot be as productive as face-to-face class, where both students and teachers are physically present in class, due to a number of barriers. Geetu stated her experience as,

> I take four classes daily. Only around 25% students attend class regularly due to their own barriers, may be. If students cannot attend class, how can we expect outcome sir (Interview 1)?

Since the devices and other necessities required for online class are not available to all the students, very few students have been taking classes due to which teachers have to repeat the same content and course of study after the schools are resumed in face-to-face mode. Only those who have access to such devices are benefitted whereas a large number of students are deprived of it. This finding is similar to the finding of Kapar (2020) which revealed that the students of urban areas utilize various freely available ICT tools in teaching and learning but majority of the students are unlikely to have such access in the rural areas. This scenario has created digital divide on one hand and the students who are deprived of online class due to their own constraints have got psychological problems on the other. In this line, Geetu shared her experience;

> I get frequent phone calls from my students who are not able to join online class due to their own problems. They are very much worried about their study. Sir, you know they even blame their poverty. Some of the students may have got psychological problems (Interview 1).

Parents who send their kids in private schools take online class as one of the means to raise fee by schools due to which some of them do not send their children to online class even they have access to all the necessities. They think that teaching online is not as good as face-to-face class. Regarding this matter, Ram Kumar shared an anecdote;

> Some students who were present in the initial days of our online class left their classes after three four days. I called their guardians to know their absence and they replied me that they cannot pay fee for the online class (Interview 2).

From the experience, anecdote shared by both participants what can be inferred is online class cannot be as effective as face-to-face class due to a number of reasons. Students' absence in online class due to lack of ICTs, parents' attitude towards online class and digital divide and psychological problem it has created among the students are some of such reasons. Therefore, it is concluded that online class can be one of the powerful supplementary means to face to face class rather than replacement to it in developing countries like Nepal.

4.3 Challenges Experienced

Teachers experience a number of challenges in course of running online class. Some of such challenges they experience are the problems of ICT devices on their own part and some are the challenges they face to make class interactive. Most of the teachers who are to take online class lack ICT devices like computer/laptop and/or smart phones. In course of interview, Ram Kumar shared;

> Sir, I did not have laptop. My school administration informed me about online class. I managed to buy a new laptop but we are not sure to get salary (he laughed for a while). This is all for our students (Interview 2).

Next problem teachers faced in the initial days is lack of mentoring. They were just asked to take classes without proper support and guidance. Most of the teachers had little or no knowledge on operating ICTs but school administration made them take class without orienting them on their use. In this line, in an informal talk, Geetu shared her experience as;

> My head teacher called me and told me to take online class from the next day. He told me the name of application that our school has been using i.e. zoom without any further orientation. Frankly speaking, I had no idea at all. Called one of my friends and he supported me.

Teachers experience challenges even while teaching. They are not able to make their class as interactive as face-to-face class though they wish to. They try their best to make class interactive but students remain salient. Some of the students show their network problems, some have real network problem and some other do not unmute their audio though teachers call their names time and again. Though trying their best, if the students do not speak, there is nothing that a teacher can do. In other words, teachers become helpless in such scenario. Stating the hardships that she faces to make her online class interactive, Geetu shared,

> I call the names of my students to make them speak but many of them do not speak. Some of them I think just switch on their devices and do not stay there. How can we know whether he/she is there if he/she does not speak when we call his/her name? (Interview 1)

Ram Kumar too shared similar type of experience regarding the challenges he faces to monitor his students' activities.

> I call the names of students' time and again to break one way traffic technique i.e., to make class interactive but students remain salient. Sir let me share one interesting anecdote. One day, I called name of one of my students of class ten time and again seeing him in participant list but he did not speak. Later on, I met his father incidentally on the way and talked about his son and came to know that he often opens his devices and gets lost somewhere (Interview 2).

The experience of both participants implies that teachers experience a number of barriers to make online class effective. Some of such barriers are their own personal and some other are caused by their school administration and students. Teachers lack different ICTs as students on one hand and they lack the knowledge of operating ICTs on the other. This shows that teachers lack one of the knowledges of TPACK framework i.e., technological knowledge in the initial days. Having the lack of technological knowledge, teachers face challenges. Next challenge, the teachers face is making their online class interactive. Teachers face main challenges in adapting to online teaching, and maintaining at least a minimum of communication with students along with supporting students' learning and development (Konig et al., 2020). This challenge is caused due to the students' lack of knowledge to handle ICTs properly, network problem and/or students' unwillingness to communicate with teachers. Though they experience a number of challenges, online class is possible due to their own readiness. This finding is similar to the finding of Ali and Kaur (2020) which disclosed that apart from resources, staff readiness, staff capacity, confidence, student accessibility and appropriate online learning platform play crucial function in ICT integrated learning.

4.4 Guardians' Awareness is Must

School students are not that much conscious on their study due to the factors like motivation and age. They think online class as the waste of their vacation. They enjoy activities other than academic one. If teachers cannot monitor them due to a number of factors as stated above it is guardians' (teachers at home) turn now to monitor them. Guardians should be made aware of the importance of education in this pandemic in general and online education in particular. The participants of this study shared how they make guardians aware of their children's study. They take help of the guardians to make students regular in class and monitor their activities. In an informal conversation, Geetu shared; "I frequently call guardians of my students. I especially call them if their children are absent. I ask the reason." Ram Kumar too has similar type of experience. He shared,

> Before starting online class and these days too I make frequent call to guardians and make them aware of the importance of online education in this pandemic. I encourage them to provide their devices to their children for class. (…). I request them to monitor the activities of their children during and after the class (Interview 2).

The experience shared by the participants suggests that guardians' awareness helps students to be in right track on one hand and take regular online class on the other. Students can learn with the help of other means like radio/ television program even though they have no access to internet and ICT devices like laptop/ mobile. For this too, teachers should make guardians aware of these facts. Student Learning Facilitation Guideline through Alternative System (2020) too suggests that guardians should be encouraged to motivate their children for their learning via guardian education (MoESaT, 2020). If the guardians are made aware of the importance of online class in this pandemic, they encourage their children to take class regularly. They even monitor them to keep them in right track which helps teachers solve some of the challenges (absence of students, lack of interaction) mentioned above. This infers those teachers face different challenges in course of teaching their students online but such challenges can be overcome making the guardians aware on one hand and teachers being active themselves on the other.

5. Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic has not only brought threats but also host of opportunities which have enabled us to broaden our horizon of knowledge. As in other sectors, it has an unbearable impact on schools, students and teachers. But at the same time, it has forced us to come up with different innovative ideas. One of such idea's schools have been forced to, is online education. It is one of the unexpected experiences that teachers and students have got due to COVID-19. To the same concern, a qualitative study with phenomenological design was attempted to unravel the experiences and challenges that the schools' teachers experienced during COVID-19 pandemic. As this study revealed, it is both opportunity and challenge for teachers. Most school teachers in Nepal got the experience of online teaching for the first time and teachers and students are connected virtually due to online class even in this pandemic due to which this is regarded as an opportunity. Challenge in the sense that teachers experience a number of challenges to make online class effective. Some of such challenges are caused due to their own problems whereas some other are caused by school administration and students. The challenges are caused due to geographical diversity, lack of sufficient infrastructures, digital illiteracy, socio economic condition of both students and teachers and some other psychological factors. Online class is not as interactive as face-to-face class which may make learning environment monotonous. Additionally, some students may find it more difficult to sustain their motivation online than in face-to-face class. Despite these challenges, online class can be made effective making guardians aware of their children's learning during pandemic. First and foremost, they should be made aware of the importance of online class. Secondly, they should be encouraged to manage all the necessities for online class as far as possible. Finally, they should be asked to monitor their children at home.

All the stakeholders (federal government, provinces, local levels, school management committees, schools, teachers, parents and students) should take the responsibility of their part to make online class effective. The class should not be made compulsory rather optional. Optional in the sense that those who can afford the necessities take classes and others should not be compelled. If they are compelled to do so, it may create many other problems. The online class under this pandemic should not only focus on course of study but also focus on life skills which are essential in the life of students. Moreover, such class should be based on the contents that make students psychologically strong to cope this pandemic.

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Appendix

Interview Guidelines

Both interviews were based on the following guidelines.

1. Some background questions to ease the interviewee
2. Experience on online teaching
3. Information about previous experience on online teaching
4. Why online teaching
5. Tools/applications used for online teaching
6. Management of such tools/applications
7. Students' attendance and motivation
8. School administrators' role and support
9. How are you teaching and managing tasks in online teaching Opportunity?
10. Challenges faced?
11. Ways adopted to address challenges