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Urdu English Foreign Language Learners Voices Learning English Online During the COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented closure of institutions and schools due to the current epidemic has renewed interest in entirely online education. During the COVID-19 outbreaks, this survey aimed to discover how Urdu EFL students felt about online learning. Written reflections were used to collect qualitative data from 40 Pakistani undergraduate students majoring in English, with five of them selected for a semi-structured interview on purpose. Because it was regarded appropriate during the current epidemic, the student participants had positive attitudes toward online learning. However, according to qualitative data analysis, they preferred to learn English in face-to-face classrooms. In addition, an unstable internet connection, a lack of contact and teacher explanations, and potential distractions impeded their online English learning. Participants also made recommendations, and a debate was held on the educational implications.
Keywords: COVID-19, online learning, EFL learners, Reflections.

INTRODUCTION

The current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every area of life, including education. The majority of schools and institutions have implemented or proclaimed a shutdown. As a result, the relevance of online or distance learning revitalized, as most colleges and schools, over the world have migrated from face-to-face to remote or online platforms. In Pakistan, the management supports online education in COVID-19-affected regions to create physical separation and limit virus spread. English language education has migrated from in-person sessions to digital or online classes using Blackboard, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and other online platforms, with few exceptions.

This sudden shift requires both students and teachers to master digital learning (1). The epidemic has compelled both instructors and students to obtain technology in the teaching and learning process (2). Online learning technology is essential to the success of the teaching and learning process. Teachers must master internet technology to administer their classrooms throughout the epidemic, distribute course materials, and motivate students during virtual classes. Similarly, students must develop proficiency in using online platforms to aid their knowledge, which should be of paramount importance since students are now considered digital natives. Since childhood, people have been accustomed to using smartphones and being surrounded by internet programs. This phenomenon of disruption and change influences EFL students' attitudes regarding online English instruction (1). Despite several studies in many countries on learners' attitudes toward online learning (3,4).

English language teaching and learning in Pakistan has received little attention. As a result, Pakistani EFL students' voices must be heard. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by determining how Pakistani EFL learners perceive online learning throughout the present virus (1).

The following research questions are addressed in order to achieve the research objectives:
1. How do Pakistani language students see online English instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What potential obstacles do Pakistani language students face when learning English online?
3. What advice do Pakistani language students have for efficient online English study?

Literature Review: There has been an increase in the use of online education. extensively studied. Supports these claims by suggesting that scholars can teach each other spontaneously and learns via online digital gadgets. In other words, they could turn a teacher-directed, technology-based, non-individualized movement into a plan that reflected their comforts and perspectives while also demonstrating creativity and collaboration. In summary, online learning makes learning more engaging and pleasurable by providing unique elements that allow for improved engagement and a learning environment (5). Students' passion and interest will likely to improve when teachers employ technology in English language teaching and learning (6). Learners can not only participate in the learning process in real-time synchronously, but they can also participate in virtual classes asynchronously without being limited by time, location, or other factors (1).

Moreover, instructions delivered through using online platforms for language learning can be cost-effective or cost-saving (7). Speaking is one of four language skills in which many students place high importance on becoming fluent in English (8). They use their communication abilities to maintain a relationship connection, influence others, and win or lose discussions (9). Similar to how educational videos online are very effective, the Internet is a media that helps the educational process and has a significant impact on student achievement (10). Furthermore, teachers can use video in English class to educate and learn, and it creates interactivity among students, which encourages social pedagogy (11,12).

Nonetheless, there has been little empirical research on this topic in Thailand (1), Perceptions of online learning among Thai undergraduate students during the worldwide epidemic (13). A mixed-methods the study was conducted with the help of 315 students, who were invited to complete a survey and 15 students were chosen at random to participate in a semi-structured interview. According to the research, most favored face-to-face classes to virtual education. More significantly, none of them students exhibited an interest in future online learning. Nonetheless, they assumed that their teachers would be willing to help and provide helpful comments throughout this spending time online (13). The success of their students should be the primary priority of EFL instructors in terms of English language training that shifts from offline to online. The lecturer must keep the students in mind when planning and programming lessons in mind. During the COVID-19 epidemic, this study intends to investigate the students' perspectives and preferences regarding English instruction via e-learning deployment. This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive method design, involving 106 students from three Aceh, Indonesia, higher education institutions. In data analysis, comparative and thematic analyses are utilized. The results revealed that half of the participants were inappropriate with their internet linking, that there was a strong demand for internet quotas, that learning resources and explanations were limited, and that

social media impacts were prevalent. Another 59 per cent cited advantages of e-learning employment, such as more flexibility and charge savings (14).

In Saudi Arabia, during the pandemic reported that EFL learner' attitudes toward learning English via mobile devices. The data has gathered from 50 students at Qassim University who were asked to participate in a questionnaire survey. Because it promotes physical separation, flexibility in learning pace, and learner motivation, a numerical analysis revealed healthy and good ratings of online learning. During COVID-19, however, several complaints were made concerning the internet connection, a lack of prior experience with online learning, and teacher-student interaction (15Suadi (4) investigated EFL learners' impressions of the use of Zoom and WhatsApp, and other English-learning aids. An online questionnaire has used to collect data from 53 undergraduate students. Despite some complaints about the internet connection, the students overwhelmingly favored online applications since they were convenient in terms of time, location, and cost. Furthermore, Students believed that two web-based platforms assisted them in improving their language abilities and reducing their timidity during virtual class interactions.

In Thailand, however, there have been few empirical studies on this topic. Nonetheless, Imsa-ard (13) study is one of just a handful that can be demonstrated here. His research explored Thai undergraduates' attitudes toward online learning amid the global pandemic. Three hundred fifteen students were asked to complete a questionnaire as part of a mixed-methods study, and 15 of them were purposefully chosen to engage in a semi-structured discussion. The data revealed that most respondents favoured traditional classrooms over online education. Furthermore, none of these students expressed an interest in learning online in the future. Despite this, they believed their lecturers were willing to help and provide constructive feedback during the online period.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to address the research goals. This study used written student comments and a semi-structured interview to get insight into the challenges of online English learning.

Participants: Due to the convenient availability of the students, the participants in this study were chosen using a practical selection technique. Because the researcher was also a student in the academic year 2022, she was assigned to instruct the students. Because of this, a total of 40 language students specializing in English at a private language center were quickly recruited, with five of them selected to contribute in a semi-structured interview meeting.

Research instruments: In this qualitative expressive research, Pakistani EFL learners' perceptions of the quality of language teaching and learning through digital technologies were elicited. The objective of descriptive qualitative research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of a given occurrence (16). For this purpose, written replications and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data regarding the observations of online English-language learners. Written reflection is a written story template consisting of guided questions or/and instructions and blank areas where participants are invited to write their comments (17).

This type of instrument allows researchers to acquire detailed and meaningful data descriptions since participants are free to write down their ideas and feelings about the reflection. The following questions were used to accomplish the research objectives: 1) How have online classrooms influenced English learning? 2) What are your thoughts on studying English virtual throughout the pandemic? 3) What possible obstacles have you encountered while virtual education? Furthermore, 4) what suggestions do you have for improving the effectiveness of online English learning? To keep human interaction to a minimum during the epidemic study's reflection job was made public via Google Form. A semi-structured interview was also employed to get further information on the participant's perspectives. This type of interview

allows researchers to construct a new topic or question in response to the interviewee's responses (18). Both instruments were chosen following a thorough analysis of their properties for this investigation.

Data Collection: The link to the reflection sheet was emailed to 40 Line users at the end of the academic year 2022 in a web-based poll using Google Form. The researcher had to wait five days for the responses from all of the student participants. Five of them chose to participate in semi-structured online interviews. They are being elaborated on their fascinating sections and descriptions as they expressed themselves in their reflections. Each interview lasted about 25 minutes and was conducted individually via Google Meet. They have asked to expand on their response in their reflections using examples and current difficulties in online English teaching and learning.

Data Analysis: The investigator meticulously analyzed data from both written reflections and semi-structured interviews to undertake data analysis. As a result, the data were evaluated based on developing themes and any redundant or superfluous material removed during the coding process. The same procedure was used again for all 40 written reflections until achieved saturation. The researcher then compared, examined, and combined the emergent themes from the written thoughts and semi-structured interviews to arrive at the final data analysis and conclusion. Two academics have been invited to test the instruments for validity and reliability to complete The data is coded before the final results can be agreed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
This section collects students' responses to research questions. The most representative responses from, both written reflections and interviews are presented verbatim in English to clarify the findings.

1   How do Pakistani language students see online English instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?
When questioned about their thoughts on learning English through online platforms, all participants agreed that, given the current epidemic, online learning is the best way to continue their studies because it fosters physical separation. They did, however, prefer traditional classroom learning over online learning. The examples below demonstrate this point of view:

Because it helps limit the number of infected cases, online learning is excellent for continuing my studies during this rough period. Although I miss my classmates and classroom studying, online learning can support bodily separation and limit the risk of the infection spreading outside. (Written reflection by Student A)

Whether we like it or not, during the pandemic, I feel the policy on online learning is sufficient. It is the best alternative during this pandemic because studying from my home is considerably safer. Nonetheless, I'm hoping for a rapid reappearance to normal because I choose face-to-face preparation to online schools. (Interview with Student B)

During this time, I feel that learning online is the best way to learn anything, not just English. I'm frightened of catching the illness if I leave the house. Learning online also maintains government policy, and I believe this is a common practice in many countries around the globe. However, I hope we do not make the same mistake again. Since classroom learning is considerably superior, I am referring to online learning. (Student C: Interview)

This outcome is consistent with the results of a study conducted by Rahman (15) and Rakhmanina, Martina, Halolo, Syafryadin, and Noermanza (3) on the efficacy of virtual education in terms of its ability to continue bodily distance. Students prefer face-to-face classes over online learning (13).

2   What potential obstacles do Pakistani language students face when learning English online?
Because many of the students in the research environment were from the provinces, the participants generally complained about problems with inconsistent internet connections. Student A, for example, discussed her difficulties in enrolling in online programs.

I have had an issue when attending online classes because the internet connection is occasionally bad or inconsistent. It is because I reside in the highlands, which may be contributing to the problem. My family is unable to afford a more expensive WIFI plan. (Student A's written reflection)

Some students also stated that online classes are not as beneficial as studying English in a traditional classroom and that they diminish teacher-student connection. Some examples of this style of thinking are as follows:

The problem is that it's difficult for me to improve my communication skills while learning English without meeting face to face. I believe that online learning does not stimulate interaction in the same way as in actual life. (Student D: Written reflection)

Because I have trouble keeping up with the lessons, I believe that studying English online is challenging for me. I also shortage knowledge of the instructional resources, together with a lack of teacher explanation of my right or incorrect language use, particularly in my writing. (Interview, Student A)

Surprisingly, some students confessed that online learning reduced their motivation to learn. Due to a lack of teacher control and leadership, their peers' lessons are sluggish students. The following response is of this view:

The issue I've seen in online English classes is that, in comparison to on-site classrooms, internet classrooms can only provide a fraction of the teacher's supervision. I believe this is a significant disadvantage and a barrier to my learning English and my classmates. Slow learners like me require the most advice and clarification from the educator, which I cannot get from an online course. It prepared me want to abandon my goal of improving my English. (Interview with Student E)

Online learning, in my opinion, is not as enjoyable as in-person learning.

Worse, most of my students do not pay attention to the teacher during online sessions, which I believe focuses on the rest of the class. I do not want to do any more online education in the upcoming. (Written reflection by Student C)

Learning online is difficult for me because many students do not pay attention during lectures, which irritates me. I do not want to participate if no one answers the teacher's questions. Furthermore, online education necessitates the use of computers and other modern gadgets. For me, this implies a great deal of distraction. These temptations tend to make commitments slack when contrast to learning playing the game or using social media will be even more significant, especially in a boring class. (Written reflection by Student C.)

As observed by students, unpredictable internet connections appear to be a widespread issue in various scenarios. This supports the research conducted by Tanjung and Utomo (19), Rakhmanina, Martina, Halolo, Syafryadin, and Noermanza (3) and Rahman (15). When their classmates do not participate in online learning, they are demotivated and disinterested, according to the findings of this study, which revealed some surprising and forthright reactions.

3   What advice do Pakistani language students have for efficient online English study?
When asked for tips on how to study English online efficiently, the vast majority of students said the instructor should do all necessary to keep the lessons interesting and enjoyable. Students B and D, for example, submitted the following:

I believe the educator must maintain a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom. Perhaps giving learning materials in the procedure of tournaments, such as an English word guessing game or other activities, so that pupils are not bored. Students may become more acclimated to hearing English words and pronunciations if English songs have played during a short break. (Student B: Written reflection)

I recognize that dealing with our teaching and learning during COVID is difficult for both teachers and students. However, I believe the teacher should devise engaging instructional media to keep our attention. One teacher integrates activities into each class, which assistances maximum scholars focus on the online lesson and makes the course more enjoyable. More essentially, it piques the interest of those bored students. (Student D: Interview).

The data indicate that to retain students' interest and motivation in online English learning, the teacher must develop something engaging, such as games and music. This is supported by research conducted by Nartininggrum and Nugroho (20).

CONCLUSION
This study looked at the perceptions of Pakistani EFL students on online English learning. This study looks at students' perspectives on studying English online, the challenges they face, and solutions for creating an effective online classroom. The results revealed a broad spectrum of viewpoints. The majority of students stated that online learning is the best approach to study during the COVID-19 pandemic since it helps to maintain physical distance and postpone virus spread while also reducing virus contact among students. Nonetheless, as the student participants stated no intention to learn online in the future, some people expressed a preference for face-to-face training. Most students encountered comparable difficulties while learning online, including a poor or unpredictable internet connection, a lack of enough feedback and direction from teachers, and communication. Furthermore, several students complained that taking English education online had lost their interest and motivation. Many of their classmates did not participate or engage in the lesson. Another problem was distractions such as social media impact. Furthermore, students indicated that the teacher should prepare engaging lectures and materials to keep their interest and excitement in online classes.
Implications and Suggestions: The following are some of the study's instructional implications:
1.   EFL teachers must ensure that their students have enough internet access and technology resources before beginning their classes. If they did, their lessons might be better conceived and executed.
2.   Unlike in face-to-face classes, monitoring whether all students can keep up with the lectures in online classes can be difficult for EFL professors. Present some quizzes or comprehension checks as a possible solution after each item or course. During or after class, the teacher should be prepared to address questions from pupils. Students who are demotivated and falling behind because they cannot keep up with the pace of the lessons can benefit from this.

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