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Online Instruction during COVID-19 at Public Universities in Bangladesh: Teacher and Student Voices

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Abstract

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted face-to-face teaching globally, educational institutions in Bangladesh adopted online instruction as the best available alternative. Since teachers and students were not quite familiar with remote teaching, it was deemed necessary to gauge their level of preparedness for online instruction. This study investigated the perceptions of teachers and students of public universities, and examined their views of online pedagogy, assessment and the major challenges faced. Data were collected from 158 teachers and 1468 students through survey questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions. Results indicate that participants had favourable attitudes towards online classes, but they expressed concern for students who they thought were marginalized due to lack of digital devices and poor internet connectivity. Inadequate teacher preparation, lack of familiarity with online pedagogy, limited know-how of online assessment and issues of affordability and equity were reported to be the major threats. Initial insights highlight the need for supporting the disadvantaged students as well as training teachers to employ appropriate tools and techniques for teaching and assessing online.

Keywords: *Online pedagogy, Online assessment, Access, Equity, Public universities, COVID-19.*

Transition to online teaching at higher education in Bangladesh

In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, educational institutions in most parts of the world were closed to protect lives and contain the outbreak of the virus. Many of them moved classes and assessments online – described as 'emergency remote teaching' – as a temporary measure to keep education going (Hodges et al., 2020). The primary objective of this emergency response, as Hodges et al. (2020) point out, has been "not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem, but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis" (para. 13). However, the sudden shift has revealed gaps in teacher preparation and training (Trust & Whalen, 2020) as well as resource constraints and structural inequities (Aguilera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020). Similar concerns were frequently voiced in the context of educational innovation in Bangladesh which prompted the current study.

Since the first cases of Coronavirus infection were diagnosed early in March 2020, the government of Bangladesh announced closure of all educational institutions from March 17 to March 31, 2020 as part of its lockdown measure to prevent the spread of the virus (TBS Report, 2020). Academic activities in all educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels in both public and private sectors came to a halt since the announcement. As the number of detected cases rose, the government extended its lockdown measures several times. While most educational institutions remained closed, in mid-April a number of schools and universities, mostly private, began teaching online. The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) on 7 May officially permitted the private universities to run online classes and conduct examinations online (Abdullah, 2020). Most public universities, however, remained closed. Discussions and debates in academia, the media, and online forums focused on the feasibility of starting online classes in the public universities. On 25 June 2020, the public universities decided to start online classes in a flexible manner (Kamol, 2020). It was during this time that the current study was designed and conducted.

At present, there are 46 public and 107 private universities in Bangladesh (UGC, 2020). The most marked difference between public and private universities lies in revenue sources and the cost of tuition fees. Public universities are funded by the state and have much lower tuition fees for students compared to private universities which are not state-funded and charge much higher tuition fees. Second, public universities usually have large numbers of students coming from rural and less-advantaged backgrounds while private universities typically attract students from wealthier and urban backgrounds. Because of the above differences between the private and public universities, it is possible that the perceptions of teachers and students to online classes would vary. Since the researchers are based in a large public university, they were interested in teachers' and students' perspectives of online teaching and learning in the public universities in the context of the pandemic. In particular, the study aimed to examine their readiness for online instruction as well as to solicit their views on access, appropriate pedagogical practices and assessment in order to provide preliminary insights into the implementation of remote online teaching. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Bangladeshi public university teachers and students in the Department of English gauge their readiness for online teaching in the COVID-19 situation?
2. What are teachers' and students' perceptions of online pedagogy?

3. What are teachers' and students' perceptions of online assessment?

Literature Review

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted educational institutions to move teaching online. The move has been seen as an 'emergency response' (Williamson et al., 2020) and 'an expediency, a reflex policy response' in the wake of a public health emergency (Persico et al., 2020). However, some believe that the move is 'for the long haul' (Williamson et al., 2020). The introduction to online classes has been justified on two key grounds: first, since the pandemic can last for an indefinite period of time, there is a perceived need to keep education going; second, many believe that young learners need to be "occupied, active, mentally stimulated" (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 108) during the lockdown.

The move to remote teaching was made 'in haste' and without much needs-analysis or policy processes (Persico et al., 2020), but it has implications for pedagogy, assessment as well as for access and social justice. This section reviews the literature on students' and teachers' access to online tools and resources, their knowledge and skills in using the resources, their readiness for online education, the challenges to pedagogy and assessment as well as affordances provided by educational technologies.

Access to online tools and use of educational technology

A major challenge in educational initiatives involving technology use has to do with the concern that a segment of the population might get excluded entirely (Petko et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2020). A number of studies have revealed that digital technologies can perpetuate inequalities. Mehta & Aguilera's (2020) study shows that online education can magnify or exacerbate educational inequities. Research also suggests that individuals from lower socio-economic status tend to use much less internet data and demonstrate much lower proficiency in using technological tools (DeMaggio & Garip, 2012; Stern et al., 2009; Witte & Mannon, 2010). Some have pointed out that students who are better off tend to reap greater benefit educationally or socially (Strayhorn, 2010; Williamson et al., 2020). If institutions cannot arrange for adequate educational technology resources for all, online education can end up reinforcing existing social inequalities (DeMaggio & Garip, 2012), which can also add additional pressure to the stress and anxiety many students face as they come to grips with transition to universities (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Therefore, it has been suggested that adequate levels of digital access must be ensured for all through the provision of affordable internet packages and appropriate technical specifications (Williamson et al., 2020).

Developing teacher skills for technology integration

Teachers play a key role in implementing any educational change (Hyland & Wong, 2013). In the context of remote teaching and learning, success in conducting teaching depends on educational technology integration on the part of teachers and learners. Many studies of educational change have focused on the role of teachers' knowledge and beliefs in implementing change initiatives including technology integration in teaching (Borg, 2015; Ertmer, 2005). However, the study by Kim et al. (2013) suggests that while having positive self-efficacy beliefs is important, there are other factors including prior experience and training that influence teachers' willingness to integrate technology in teaching. Negative affective

responses, the perceived risks against benefits, can also act as deterrents in adopting technology on the part of the teachers (Howard, 2013). Petko et al. (2018) argue that teacher readiness to integrate educational technology is based on teachers' beliefs, perceived importance of technology integration, goal clarity, and skills in using technological tools.

Since remote teaching has been imposed on the teachers by the extraordinary circumstances following the pandemic, the question is not whether the teachers are willing but how they are going to implement it. Palvia et al. (2018) point out the lack of understanding of online pedagogy and the lack of institutional support among factors that can doom online programmes to failure. For many teachers in Bangladeshi educational institutions, who are used to face-to-face modes of teaching, the use of digital technology represents a change of approach which calls for extensive training and technical support (Ivy, 2012; Shohel & Kirkwood, 2012). Petko et al. (2018) point out that appropriate training and support from institutional heads as well as formal and informal exchange among themselves enable teachers to make greater use of technology. Again, Hodges et al. (2020) stress the importance of the role of faculty development and support teams in ensuring instructional continuity and helping faculty develop skills to work successfully in an online environment. All these studies indicate the importance of training and support for teachers in order to conduct online classes successfully.

Learner engagement and perceived risks

Several studies have unveiled learner factors that can hold back an initiative to switch classes online. Husu (2006) points out two major disadvantages: first, pupils' inability to tolerate the electronic lack of intimacy; and second, the difficulties some pupils have with self-discipline and self-monitoring in the face of learning tasks in the virtual classroom. Studies have also revealed that academic malpractice and cheating may be facilitated in online education (Shek & Cheung, 2013). Taylor (2012) argues that the medium of the internet can lead to an information overload and students are likely to be confused separating useful materials from the not-so-useful ones. Further, Selwyn (2016) identifies four downsides of online education: distraction from studies, annoyance and disruption during classes, detrimental aspects of online technology on health and emotion, and diminished levels of scholarship and study.

Affordances, challenges and pedagogical strategies

Drawing on published research, Selwyn (2016) notes several affordances as well as drawbacks to online teaching. Affordances include flexibility in time and place, increased access to materials, and better access to communication with other students and teachers. Drawbacks mentioned include inconsistent use of the platform, technical problems, access to and lack of fondness for computers and lack of human contact among others. Cheating has been reported to be another challenge in remote tests (Arnold, 2016). Husu (2006) highlights the affordances provided by the digital media such as intellectual and social partnerships formed between the teacher and the students in the virtual classroom. He also notes that teachers and students come to realize that they need to alter their actions and behaviour and, consequently, learn to develop novel ways of teaching and learning. Zhu (2012) points out that online learning communities can facilitate information-sharing, negotiation and critical reflection through activities such as group discussions, debates, and collaborative written assignments. Kim et al. (2016) argue that strong social presence in the online community of teachers and students facilitates more positive learning experiences.

A good number of studies on effective pedagogies for implementing remote education have presented various suggestions. Hodges et al. (2020) caution instructors and administrators to be mindful of the difficulties that students are faced with in the current context of emergency remote teaching and stressed the need for flexibility in pedagogical approaches as well as assessment. They suggested the adoption of asynchronous activities as well as flexibility with assignment deadlines. Regarding assessment, studies report on the use of oral tests (Akimov & Malin, 2020), and asking students to submit Test Ethics Pledge along with written tests facing the embedded camera (Lee et al., 2020) to prevent cheating and ensure fairness. Bao (2020) suggests six instructional strategies for improving students' concentration and engagement with studies as they transition to online learning: making emergency preparedness plans for unexpected problems, dividing the teaching content into smaller units to help students focus, emphasizing the use of (teacher) "voice" in teaching, working with teaching assistants and gaining online support from them, strengthening students' active learning ability outside the class, and combining online learning and off-line self-learning effectively. Proper instructional strategies, if employed in time, might help eliminate potential threats to the efficient execution of online classes and enhance the quality of teaching-learning experiences in online platforms significantly. Therefore, the adoption of appropriate pedagogical or instructional strategies is of paramount importance for effective implementation of online instruction.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design and collected data from students and teachers through survey questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to choose the participants in this study. The samples comprised 158 teachers (see Table 1) and 1468 students (see Table 2) of English departments from 17 public universities in Bangladesh. The teacher participants consisted of 57% males and 43% females. The teacher sample included participants from all positions from lecturer to professor, and their experience ranged from 0-5 to over 20 years. The students consisted of almost equal numbers of males (49.7%) and females (50.3%) from both undergraduate and master's levels. FGDs were held with 22 teachers (see Table 1) and 26 students (see Table 2) chosen from among those who expressed interest in the questionnaire response to participate in a follow-up interview. Each researcher conducted two FGD sessions, one with teachers and another with students, in groups consisting of 5-7 participants. The FGD participants were selected considering their availability, gender, experience (teachers) or level of education (students) and regional spread.

Table 1. Teacher Demographic Information (Survey & FGD)

Identifiers		Survey Details	FGD Details
Total Number		158	22
Gender	Male	90 (57%)	10
	Female	68 (43%)	12
Designation	Professor	34 (21.5%)	5
	Associate Professor	38 (24.1%)	6
	Assistant Professor	55 (34.8%)	5
	Lecturer	31 (19.6%)	6
Experience	Over 20 years-	27 (17.1%)	5
	16-20 years	27 (17.1%)	5
	11-15 years	24 (15.2%)	6
	6-10 years	35 (22.2%)	2
	0-5 years	45 (28.5%)	4

Table 2. Student Demographic Information (Survey & FGD)

Identifiers		Survey Details	FGD Details
Total Number		1468	26
Gender	Male	731 (49.80%)	12
	Female	737 (50.20%)	14
Level of Education	BA (Honours) 1st Year	419 (28.54%)	4
	BA (Honours) 2nd Year	339 (23.09%)	7
	BA (Honours) 3rd Year	286 (19.48%)	3
	BA (Honours) 4th Year	250 (17.02%)	5
	Masters	174 (11.85%)	7

Instruments

We used questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) with teacher and student participants to collect data for the study. Both teacher and student questionnaires had 2 parts. The first part comprised demographic information which included affiliation, designation for teachers, level of study for students, gender, and years of experience for teachers. The second part contained Likert-type, yes-no, and multiple response questions that dealt with 'preparedness of teachers and students', 'pedagogy and materials', and 'assessment'. Under

'readiness', we explored the participants' experience, skills, training, logistics, and affordability. Issues related to students' active participation, class engagement, monitoring students, group discussion, providing feedback, learning materials and teaching aids came under 'pedagogy and materials'. Questions that addressed aspects of 'assessment' include fairness issues, construction and administration of tests, test items, and grading. The teacher questionnaire contained 18 items while the student questionnaire had 17 items.

The FGDs were semi-structured and revolved around a set of guiding questions that further probed teachers' and students' views on prior experience, access and affordability issues, pedagogy and materials, and assessment.

Data collection and analysis

We collected survey data online via Google forms. We emailed the questionnaire link to over 200 English teachers in 17 public universities. We knew many of the teachers through professional networks and called them over the phone to ensure that they and their colleagues had received our emails and to check if they had any questions regarding the consent form. We explained that participation was voluntary and that we would appreciate it if they participated. We also assured them that their privacy and anonymity would be protected. We made follow-up calls to request returns if they wanted to participate to 'maximise response rate' (Cohen et al., 2017). We finally received 162 questionnaires. Of them, 4 were incomplete and therefore eliminated. We sent the student questionnaire link by email to teachers requesting them to share the links with their students. Links to Google Forms were also shared through Facebook and Messenger, and we received 1468 completed responses.

The survey and FGD questionnaires were first sent to four experts for review. Based on the feedback from the experts, specific changes to item selection and wording were made. For piloting purposes, the questionnaires were initially given to a group of teachers and students and were revised with the help of feedback received from them. Some items were deleted, and some were rephrased to remove ambiguity.

FGDs were conducted using the Zoom app and the sessions were recorded with prior permission from the participants. The data were transcribed, and the participant names were replaced by numbers (for example, Teacher 1; Student 2). The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data gathered through FGDs were coded, categorized and analyzed thematically.

Findings

Preparedness of Teachers and Students

Training and online teaching learning experiences. Regarding training, survey findings show that an overwhelming majority (87.3%) of the teachers did not receive any training on online teaching. Only 12.7% of them reported that they had received some form of training including self-initiated and institutional training. Again, regarding their experiences, nearly two-thirds (65.2%) of them stated having no prior experiences of online teaching. Similarly, findings reveal that 63.8% of the students had no prior experience of attending classes remotely. Thus, the data show that both teachers and students had little experience of teaching and learning online.

The FGD findings are in alignment with the survey findings. The teachers stated that they had received little or no training. One teacher described his training experience as "negligible... it was not formal training per se" (Teacher 16). They were mainly self-trained through attending webinars, free online courses and watching YouTube tutorials. Similarly, students reported that they did not have any experience of attending online classes and needed training. However, one student emphasized self-initiative for learning:

> *We can become self-trained with the help of YouTube tutorials. If you cannot do certain things on your own, you cannot be trained for it is not possible to provide face-to-face training sessions for all. (Student 25)*

Technology skills, logistics and affordability. Nearly two-thirds (61.4%) of the teachers believed that they had technology skills for conducting classes online, and a huge majority (81.6%) of them reported having devices like smartphones and laptops. However, a high percentage (81.6%) of teachers thought that the students did not have the required logistics and devices, and another 86.1% believed that students would not be able to afford the cost of the Internet for attending online classes. Similarly, more than half (57.7%) of the students reported having technology skills for attending online classes, and just over half (52%) believed that their teachers had technology skills for conducting online classes. Regarding devices, an overwhelming proportion of the students (94.3%) reported having smartphones, but only a small percentage had laptops (25.2%) and desktop computers (9.2%).

In the FGDs, most teachers pointed out that they had the technology skills to teach online classes. A few stated that they would need training and help from colleagues. One teacher pointed out that she "would be able to manage it with a bit of help from colleagues" (Teacher 09). The teachers seemed to be more concerned about students who were not able to attend classes because of their "[not being] acquainted with the technological tools and lack of appropriate devices" (Teacher 22). Students also expressed similar concerns regarding this in the FGDs.

In terms of access to the Internet, an overwhelming majority (92.1%) of students reported to have access to the Internet, but internet speed was seen as a major challenge (see Figure 1). Only a small percentage of them stated that their connectivity was very strong (4%) or strong (17.2%). Most of them identified their internet connectivity as average (42.2%) and poor or very poor (36.6%). In the FGDs, students spoke about poor connectivity as a challenge. They were concerned that most of their classmates would face difficulties. One student pointed out:

> *Not all of us have strong connectivity. …. If only 25% of us can attend online classes, what will happen to others who cannot because of the very unstable internet connection? (Student 9)*

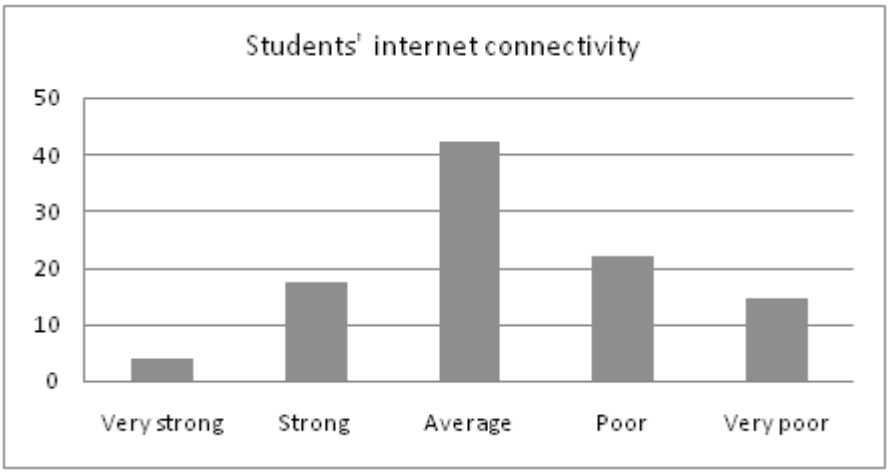

Figure 1. Students' Internet Connectivity

Apart from connectivity, high costs of internet data posed a major problem for many students. Nearly half (46.3%) of the students stated that they could afford the costs of internet data for attending online classes, while over a third (36.2%) pointed out that they would not be able to afford it. In the wake of the pandemic, many parents and students lost their jobs and income which affected their affordability to purchase devices and internet data. Some FGD participants also expressed concerns about students' lack of mental readiness. As an FGD participant pointed out:

> *Many of us used to support ourselves by giving private tuition, but now we do not have any income. When it has become very difficult to live a modest life, who will bear the cost of attending online classes? (Student 13)*

Although most of the participants had similar opinions regarding the lack of the required infrastructure, logistics, and support from their institutions, all seemed to be positive about beginning online classes. They were optimistic, but they emphasized the need for providing financial and logistic support to disadvantaged students, and thus making sure that all can join online classes.

> *In every house, there are COVID patients, but we cannot share it with others for fear of being abandoned or isolated socially. We don't know how people will take it. Even our classmates and teachers might avoid communicating with us if they come to know this. Therefore, we are not feeling confident and comfortable. (Student 3)*

Perceptions of online classes during COVID-19. Regarding shifting to online classes during COVID-19 pandemic, both teachers and students expressed mixed opinions. 46.8% of the teachers were positive while 31.6% were not sure and the rest were negative. 40% of the students opined that their department should shift to online classes during this COVID-19 pandemic while 30.7% opposed it and the rest were not sure. In FGDs, both teachers and students generally agreed that the decision to start online classes in the public universities was a step in the right direction. As the private universities had already started online classes, the participants suggested that the public universities should begin online classes as well. Despite being concerned about the students' readiness, one teacher noted:

> *I was initially scared as I had no idea about online classes. I can imagine the faces of my students as they are also not mentally, culturally and technologically ready, but I think gradually things will improve. We cannot keep sitting idle. (Teacher 6)*

As regards the quality of online teaching, the teachers were divided in their opinions. More than a quarter (26.7%) of the participants believed that quality education could be ensured through online classes, whereas half (50.9%) of them thought the opposite. Similarly, only one-fourth of the students believed that quality education could be ensured through online classes whereas nearly half (44.8%) of them had the opposite view. All FGD participants agreed that online teaching would not be effective, and quality education may not be achieved through online teaching if the right tools were not used properly. One student stated:

> *Online classes cannot be alternatives to face-to-face classes, so face-to-face review classes must be given once the university opens and before exams are held. Teachers should use those techniques, tools and platforms that are effective for us. …… Otherwise we cannot get a quality education. (Student 19)*

Pedagogy, teaching aids and materials

Teaching aids and materials. Regarding materials types, data reveal that teachers had the experience of using a range of materials and teaching aids. The majority (87.2%) of the teachers used printed materials, while 74.4% used online articles and 72.4% used PowerPoint slides for teaching purposes. 53.8% used video clips whereas only 26.3% used audio lectures. However, in the FGDs, participants pointed out that finding teaching materials would be extremely difficult as the university libraries were closed and the books and other materials that they had with them were inadequate. Highlighting the difficulties of using e-resources, one teacher commented:

> *It is difficult to get relevant articles and even if found these need to be purchased and stated that most students do not have the capability to buy these. …. a lot of free online materials are available, but it is time consuming and a lot of labour for the teacher to customize these for their respective classes. So, we can infer that online teaching may place extra demands on the teacher. (Teacher 20)*

Student responses were mixed regarding availability of online materials. Nearly one-third of them agreed having access to online materials while less than half (42.6%) disagreed. In the FDGs, students stated difficulties involved in finding study materials and expected their teachers to help them. They believed that recorded audio/video lectures would be useful for their preparation. As a student pointed out: "teaching materials should be given along with live classes so that we can study later at our convenience and direct our problems to the teachers" (Student 10).

Students' participation and engagement in online classes. A large percentage of teachers were unsure how to engage students in online classes. 75% of participants agreed that it would be difficult to ensure active student participation. An even higher percentage (77.2%) of them thought that they would not be able to monitor students during online lessons. Again, over half (53.2%) of the teachers thought that it would not be possible to have group discussions, but

51.3% thought that students would receive immediate feedback in online classes. On the other hand, two-fifths (40.6%) of the students believed that they would be able to ask questions and get quick responses from teachers in online classes and 38.1% believed that it would be difficult to participate in group discussions in online classes.

In FGDs, the respondents believed that it would be challenging to make online classes interactive; the teachers did not have a clear idea how to ensure interaction in online sessions. As one teacher stated, "I don't know how to make online lessons interactive, how to engage students properly" (Teacher 13). Others commented that the "real feel of the face-to-face classes would be missing" (Teacher 18), and that "it would be difficult to build rapport with students" (Teacher 11). Similarly, students opined that online classes cannot be "as interactive as face-to-face classes" (Student 2). Conversely, a few respondents believed that online classes can be interactive to some extent if teachers bring in variety in teaching techniques and use apps like Google Classroom.

Assessment

Both survey and FGD findings demonstrate that online assessment was a major concern for teachers and students. Less than one-third of the teachers believed that online assessment could be valid and reliable. Again, the majority (73.4%) of them stated that the construction of online assessment is difficult while a great majority (86.7%) thought that administration of tests and examinations online would be challenging. Only nearly one-third (32.9%) of the teachers agreed that through online assessment students' learning outcomes could be measured effectively.

One-fifth (19.4%) of the students perceived that online assessment would be fair whereas more than two-fifths (45.1%) of them had no opinions regarding this issue. More than half (55.3%) of the students believed that their exam grades would be affected through online assessment. In FGDs, one student pointed out:

> *Our grades will be affected because we won't have enough preparation; we don't have books with us; we can't use the seminar library; After all, we are not habituated to studying online. (Student 14)*

Regarding cheating, both teachers (50.3%) and students (55.1%) believed that online examinations would encourage cheating amongst students. This fear was echoed in the FGDs as participants expressed concerns over students resorting to cheating and plagiarism. They also believed that online assessment would be less fair or transparent compared to traditional tests. One teacher stated:

> *It would be very difficult to prevent cheating. Teachers have to set separate questions for many students and test tasks have to be designed based on higher-order thinking skills so that students cannot cheat. (Teacher 15)*

On the other hand, a few teachers in FGDs opined that it would be possible to assess students' performances effectively online and assessment could be fair if proper measures were taken. They suggested using "software packages (for example, Turnitin) to check plagiarism" (Teacher 16), and "oral exams where students could be asked to defend their assignments" (Teacher 4).

In terms of test techniques, 62.4% of the teachers and 57.1 % of the students were in favour of written assignments; further, 63.7% of the teachers and 38.4% of the students supported quizzes. Teachers and students differed on the suitability of oral tests and presentations. Although two-thirds of the teachers favoured oral tests (63.1%) and presentations (56.1%), less than one fifth of the students considered these formats suitable for online assessment. The FGD participants were also uncertain about the test formats suitable for online examination. A few teachers cited the examples of GRE and TOEFL tests to argue that online assessment could be effective while others were unsure if strategies used by international tests can be replicated for large student populations. Online assessment was generally considered to be the most challenging task for teachers, and emphasis was laid on the need to formulate online teaching policy and redesign the curricula including teaching materials and assessment system to make these suitable for online teaching-learning.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored the preparedness of the teachers and students of the public universities in Bangladesh for online classes, their perceptions of online pedagogy and assessment, and access and issues of equity in an emergency COVID-19 situation. The following section discusses the findings along with implications.

Teacher and learner preparedness for online instruction

Training and prior experiences. The data reveal that the majority of the teachers did not have any training, and a small section received either self-training or institutional training. Similarly, a large segment of the students reported that they had no exposure and no experience of attending online classes. Participants who reported having attended webinars, MOOCs and free online courses were mostly self-trained. This study also found that just over half of the respondents reportedly had the necessary skills for online classes. This suggests that the Bangladeshi public universities have a long way to go in providing training to teachers and students and enabling them to use technology for remote teaching. The gap between training needs and existing infrastructure and resources has long been recognized as a barrier in teachers' technology integration in Bangladesh (Khan et al., 2012). The sudden shift to online classes under an emergency has accentuated the gap which demands, as Petko et al. (2018) note, institutional support as well as informal individual collaboration to help teachers make greater use of technology. This suggestion was echoed by some of the participants in the FGDs. One respondent said, "We, teachers, need to develop willingness and a positive attitude to using technologies. If we want, we can learn many things on our own as well as learn from our colleagues" (Teacher 06).

Access, affordability and equity. Survey results reveal that most of the teachers and students had smartphones to attend online classes, but only one-fourth of the students had laptops. Data also show that most of the teachers and students had access to the Internet, but their internet connectivity was average or poor, and many students could not afford the costs of internet data for attending online classes. FGD findings strongly corroborate these survey findings.

It is to be noted that a student can join online classes with the help of a smartphone, but to actively participate in live sessions they need uninterrupted and strong internet connectivity. Moreover, in order to fully engage themselves in online classes, students need to find and read online materials, submit homework and assignments, take quizzes and examinations. To accomplish these tasks, they need notebooks/laptops or desktop computers, but this was not the

case with most of the students in this study. Many of them could not even afford the cost of internet data packs as a large segment of the student population in public universities of Bangladesh hail from villages, and it has been reported in the news media that many parents have lost income due to the pandemic (Jasim, 2020). Therefore, the findings indicate that the students' lack of proper devices, lack of access to strong internet connectivity and affordability to bear the costs of internet data pose serious threats to their participation in online classes.

FGD findings also reveal that the participants were concerned about some students being disadvantaged due to their inability to attend classes. Like teachers, some students expressed their concerns that they would "feel selfish if some of our friends can't join the classes" (Student 2). Citing similar reasons, another participant commented that "live classes are not possible" (Student 9). This finding suggests that online classes would create 'a digital divide' (Gorski, 2005) between the rich and the poor students, between those who can attend online classes and those who cannot. Nevertheless, both survey and FGD findings reveal that most of the respondents were willing to start online classes despite their concerns regarding some of their colleagues and peers. They also stressed the need to provide financial support to the poor students to make sure they could join online classes.

Materials, teaching aids and online pedagogy. Regarding materials and teaching aids, it was observed that teachers were far more used to printed materials, online articles and PowerPoint slides than to video clips and audio lectures for teaching purposes. In the changed circumstances, the FGD participants laid stress on the use of recorded audio or video lectures in conjunction with shorter live classes along with other traditional materials. They emphasised that if students missed classes, they would be able to listen to the recorded lectures and read the study materials at their leisure and ask questions to the teachers later. This partly aligns with the recommendation for asynchronous teaching made by Hodges et al. (2020) in the context of emergency remote teaching. It was clear that teachers would have to bring considerable changes in their current practice about their mode of delivery and the use of materials to suit remote teaching, which would certainly require substantial investment in time and effort.

Survey findings show that ensuring students' active participation and monitoring them during online classes was perceived to be a challenge by most teachers. Facilitating group discussion was also seen as infeasible. The FGD findings also supported these survey findings and revealed teachers' concerns about these perceived hurdles to online pedagogy. It may be noted that teaching-learning in public universities has been mostly done through face-to-face lectures (Huda, 2013), and teachers are therefore more used to pedagogical approaches suitable for those classes. Their lack of experience and exposure and little or no training might have caused anxieties, apprehensions and low self-efficacy beliefs. Given such uncertainties about online pedagogy, it is imperative that teachers be provided with training as well as guidance and continual support. Training could focus on classroom strategies such as flipping the class to make classes more interactive (Zawilinski et al., 2016), facilitating peer collaboration and the use of self-assessment tools (Tai & Adachi, 2020), creating virtual online communities to enhance learner collaboration and virtual teacher presence to motivate the students (Kim et al., 2016). Teachers also need guidance in setting practical and achievable goals and in developing flexibility in their teaching as well as in their expectations of students.

Online Assessment. As the study findings show, a large segment of teachers and students had concerns about the validity, reliability and fairness of online assessment in the pandemic

situation. Only a third of the teachers believed that online assessment would be valid and reliable. Similarly, the majority of the students expressed apprehension about online tests. Over a half of them thought that their exam grades would be affected through online assessment. Only a small percentage of them believed that online assessment would be fair. Such perceptions of teachers and students underscore considerable lack of trust in online assessment in Bangladeshi public universities in this critical emergency situation.

The data suggest that both the construction and delivery of online assessment are perceived as major challenges. The same note of concern was reiterated in FGD findings and participants pointed to cheating and plagiarism as possible roadblocks to successful administration of online assessment in the ongoing emergency. Most importantly, teachers in FGDs opined that holding or replacing semester final exams online would be impossible in the current situation. Likewise, students in FGDs voiced concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of online assessments. Similar concerns about cheating and fairness have been voiced in different contexts (Arnold, 2016; Lee et al., 2020). There is a need for dialogue and discussion between teachers and higher authorities to allay teachers' fears and devise appropriate strategies. Teachers in FGDs emphasized the need to formulate online teaching and assessment guidelines and to redesign the curricula including teaching materials and activities to make them suitable for online teaching-learning.

Regarding the effective use of test techniques in assessing students' learning, written assignments and quizzes were most popular among the participants of this study. In FGDs, however, teachers shared a concern that over-dependence on short questions, quizzes, assignments, and presentations would not yield enough information on learners' performance or achievement. To prevent plagiarism, they suggested using software packages and arranging oral exams requiring students to defend their assignments. These findings indicate the need for tailoring the existing assessment practices to accommodate learner needs in the light of contextual exigencies.

Conclusion

This was perhaps the first large-scale study that attempted to document the perceptions of teachers and students from the public universities regarding online instruction in Bangladesh. From this study, several important insights can be gleaned. First, there was a consensus among teachers and students in favour of online classes despite the constraints of that mode of instruction. Second, the study findings indicate that a considerable number of students from underprivileged backgrounds and remote areas would be left behind and thus this mode would be disadvantageous for populations without access to technology. Third, teachers need to adapt current pedagogical practices to specifically suit online classes. Fourth, all online assessment-related activities were generally perceived to be difficult by teachers. A large majority of students were concerned and anxious about online assessment and believed that a revised and more flexible approach was needed. Finally, special attention needs to be given to address challenges such as lack of access to stable internet connections, affordability of internet data, issues of equity, fairness in assessment, and the enhancement of teachers' digital skills through training.

The findings of this exploratory study depict one positive aspect regarding online English language instruction at public universities in Bangladesh. It was revealed that most of the teachers and students, although apprehensive about the new phenomenon of remote teaching,

were ready to take the plunge using available knowledge and resources. They generally agreed that they had to move ahead amidst the constraints and that there was no better choice than to start online classes. This sentiment or spirit was mainly shaped by the understanding that education cannot be at a standstill for long and that students need to be engaged in the process of learning. It was heartening to note that the apprehensions and concerns shared by the participants for students who may be victims of a digital divide demonstrated their humanistic stance and consideration for those less advantaged.

This cross-sectional study was conducted at a point in time when the public universities in Bangladesh were just starting online classes and it, therefore, does not provide much information on what transpired since online classes began. Follow-up studies could examine possible changes in teachers' and students' perceptions of online teaching as they gained experience of teaching and assessment. Future studies could explore what aspects of online education teachers and students have found effective and would like to incorporate into the face-to-face mode of teaching and learning once the pandemic is over. Studies could also explore the perceptions of other stakeholders, for example, administrators and parents regarding the learning outcomes of online instruction.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Teacher Questionnaire

Part 1

Demographic information

Please provide necessary information/ choose the appropriate option.

i. Institutional Affiliation: _____
ii. Designation: _____
iii. Teaching experience (in years):_____
iv. Gender: Male/Female

Part 2

Please read the following questions/statements and choose the most appropriate option(s).

1. Do you think your department should shift to online classes during this COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

2. Have you received any training on online teaching?

- Yes
- No

3. I think all students of our department have the required logistics (smartphone/laptop/internet) for online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

4. I think all students of our department can afford the cost of internet connection for attending classes online.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

5. I have the necessary skills for conducting classes online.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree

- Strongly agree

6. I have the necessary logistic support (laptop/smart phone/wifi) for teaching online.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

7. Which of the following do you use frequently for teaching purposes? (You can tick more than one.)

- PowerPoint slides
- Online articles
- Audio lectures
- Video clips
- eBooks
- Printed materials
- Other(s):

8. It is difficult to ensure active student participation in online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

9. Group discussions cannot be ensured in online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

10. Students can receive immediate feedback on their queries in online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

11. It is difficult to monitor students' activities in online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree

- Strongly agree

12. Online assessment can be valid.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

13. Online assessment can be reliable.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

14. Construction of online tests is more difficult compared to traditional pen and paper tests.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

15. Administration of online assessment is challenging.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

16. Which of the following techniques can be used for online assessment? (You can tick more than one.)

- Quizzes
- Written Assignments
- Short questions
- Oral tests
- Presentations
- Reading tests
- None of the above
- Other(s): Please specify _____

17. Student learning outcomes can be effectively measured through online assessment.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure

- Agree
- Strongly agree

18. Cheating is facilitated during online examination.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Thank you for your time!

Appendix B: Student Questionnaire

Part 1

Demographic information

Please provide necessary information/ choose the most appropriate option.

i. Name of University: _____

ii. Programme:

- BA (Honours) 1st Year
- BA (Honours) 2nd Year
- BA (Honours) 3rd Year
- BA (Honours) 4th Year
- MA

iii. Gender: Male/Female

Part 2

Please read the following questions/statements and choose the most appropriate option(s):

1. Have you ever attended any classes/courses/programmes online?

- Yes
- No

2. Do you think your department should shift to online classes during this COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

3. All teachers of my department have technology skills for conducting online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure

- Agree
- Strongly agree

4. I have the necessary skills for attending online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

5. Which of the following devices do you have? (You can choose more than one.)

- Laptop
- Smartphone
- Desktop Computer
- Tablet
- Notebook
- None

6. Do you have access to mobile internet/WiFi at present?

- Yes
- No

7. If you answered 'yes' to Question no 9, how strong is your internet connection (for example, download speed/signal strength)?

- Very strong
- Strong
- Average
- Poor
- Very poor

8. I can afford the costs of using internet data for attending online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

9. I can ask questions and get quick responses from my teachers in online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

10. I will feel comfortable in group discussions during online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

11. I can find study materials online.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

12. Which of the following techniques do you think will be suitable for online exam purposes? (You can tick more than one.)

- Quizzes
- Written Assignments
- Short questions
- Oral tests
- Presentations
- Reading tests
- None of the above

13. Do you think online assessment is fair?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

14. Quality teaching and learning can be ensured in online classes.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

15. Cheating is encouraged during online examinations.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

16. My exam grades will be affected if we are assessed online.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree

- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

17. I will be at a disadvantage if online classes are introduced in my department.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Thank you for your time!

Appendix C: Teacher FGD Questions

1. Do you think you are ready to start online teaching during this COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, why? If no, why not? Do you think your students are ready for starting online classes?
2. Do you think a segment of our student population will be at a disadvantage if we start online classes? If yes/no, why? In what ways can this issue be addressed?
3. Do you think online classes can be interactive? How can you make your online classes interactive?
4. Do you think teachers need training for online teaching? What kind of training do you think will be useful? Do you think students need training?
5. What are your views on online assessment? Do you think online assessment is fair? Please explain.
6. Do you think 'cheating' is an issue in online assessment? How can this be addressed?
7. Do you think scoring and grading can be a problem in online assessment?
8. What specific challenges might you face in conducting online assessment?

Appendix D: Student FGD Questions

1. Are you ready to join online classes? If yes/no, why or why not? What are your views regarding your internet connectivity?
2. Do you think you will face problems in online classes? Please elaborate.
3. Do you think you will be able to ask questions and take part in discussions in online classes?
4. Do you think online assessment will be fair? If yes/no, why do you think so?
5. What are your views of online assessment?
6. What kind of challenges will you face if online assessment is introduced?
7. What can teachers do to help you to be successful in online classes?

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