LEARNING THROUGH ONLINE ENGAGEMENT AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at exploring how M Ed English (Master of Education) students perceive online learning amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The study has adopted online collaborative learning theory (OCL) as a theoretical stance for the study and employed a qualitative research design as a research method. Six M Ed students have been purposively selected as research participants, who were learning English in online environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. They were selected from two TU affiliated campuses located in Rupandehi district. In order to collect the data, a semi-structured interview technique has been used. The study uncovers that M Ed English students perceive online learning as an alternative way of learning during pandemic situation. It further depicts that through online learning, students improve their language skills, collaborative practices, and digital literacy. Besides these, the study demonstrates that inadequate skills of ICT in teachers and students, lack of internet and smart digital gadgets, learning anxiety, lack of peace zone at home are some challenges in online learning. The study contributes to the students' understanding of learning through online mode.

Keywords: Collaboration, Covid-19 pandemic, ICT, Perception.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, worldwide spread of Coronavirus or Covid-19 has interrupted almost every aspect of human life, and education is not the exceptional case. First identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, the Covid-19 has become a pandemic in a short time of seven months, spreading to 216 countries, areas and territories, infecting more than 10 million,

and killing more than 517 thousand people in the world (WHO, 2020) at the time I was writing this paper. This pandemic has compelled people to maintain social and physical distancing and stay indoors to be safe from being infected.

Many countries around the globe have announced to temporarily shut down schools and colleges to curtail the spread of the Covid-19. The Government of Nepal has also declared to shut down schools, colleges and universities until the situation becomes normal. In this context, online teaching and learning has become an integral and supplement to face-to-face teaching and learning environment. At present, because of the compulsory closure of schools, colleges and universities, teaching and learning method has been dramatically changed to e-learning. In this regard, Jena (2020) stated knowledge can be transferred virtually in this pandemic situation of Covid-19. Therefore, in this global pandemic, there is no other alternative way, except adopting online mode to help students complete their semester, term assessment, and deliver content and provide assignments on time.

Online learning, in Stern's (2018) words, is an e- learning that occurs digitally with the connection of internet. It is an internet-based pedagogy where teaching and learning takes place at own homes using synchronous and/or asynchronous platforms or applications such as Google classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, MS Team, Moodle, E-mail, Remind, Seesaw and so on. In the same context, Gonzalez and Louis (2018) argued that online learning is a way of learning that takes place with the assistance of electronic devices and internet connectivity when teachers and students are physically away. Recently, the most innovative endeavor that teachers are undertaking so far in this pandemic is to run their classes online using synchronous and/or asynchronous platforms. Web-based pedagogy has been considered as one of the most important factors to bring changes in the field of teaching and learning. First, it plays a vital role in creativity, active participation, interaction and collaboration in teaching and learning (Rico & Vinagre, 2000). In the same line, White (2008) affirmed that online learning has become popular all over the world as both teachers and students feel easier and more comfortable to teach and learn, and at the same time, they get opportunities to accelerate their digital literacy too. Besides, online pedagogy makes understanding better, long-lasting, and effective. Moreover, it gives teachers some knowledge about integrating ICTs in education that helps for their professional development.

Apart from giving opportunities to the leaners to get knowledge and learning materials, online mode encourages them to collaborate with their peers (Krish, 2008). It

also assists students to develop their self-efficacy and make them autonomous learners. As stated by Ally (2008) online learning provides students to access authentic materials, interact with teachers and peers for gaining knowledge and making meaning through their learning experiences. Therefore, online leaning is a crucial mode of learning to learn at ease being an autonomous learner.

In this global pandemic caused by the Covid- 19, online pedagogy has become crucial. Regarding my own experience of teaching online to the students of M Ed with major English under Tribhuvan University, what I have observed that students engaged in online for learning are getting benefits to develop their language proficiency. For instance, they are enhancing their writing ability. Now, they are writing correctly with minimal grammatical mistakes. They work collaboratively with peers that have uplifted their mutual cooperation. Besides, they are making themselves digital literate. They have become aware of using both synchronic and asynchronic platforms such as Google classroom. At the same time, browsing the search engines like Google, E-mails, and other sites, the students can get relevant learning materials, models and samples, and find the solutions to the problems. Thus, they develop their self-efficacy and the habit of working in collaboration. Besides it, teaching and learning environment becomes really amusing since it takes place in non-threatening environment including images, audio, video and collaboration amongst teachers and students.

However, my observation shows that very few students seem to be interested in taking online classes. In my class, out of seventy students, sometimes not more than thirty students join the class. And, those who participate in online class leave it before the time is over. Almost all students entered the ZOOM room with mute audio and off- video. When there is an evaluation or presentation time, many students leave the class without any information. Even they do not write anything on the chat window.

Later, by their friends, I am informed that he /she left the class due to internet interruption or expire of mobile data package. In addition, they barely use asynchronous platform such as Google classroom to upload their assignments. Is it because of their negative view towards online learning? Do they have problems with learning online? Is online class boring? These questions have created interest to explore how M Ed students perceive online learning during the global pandemic created by Covid-19. More specifically, this study attempts to deal with following issues: How do M Ed English

students perceive online learning? What opportunities do they receive from the online learning mode? What challenges do they face while learning in online environment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government of Nepal has declared to run classes through distance learning mode using radios and televisions. So, a few colleges and schools in city areas have begun to run classes online. Though online class is inevitable to carry out in this global pandemic as an alternative way to face to face learning, there are many challenges to implement it in the context of Nepal. Regarding this, Sharma (2020) discovered that very few parents and schools have access to internet as they cannot afford easily.

On the other hand, most of the teachers and students are not competent to integrate technology in teaching and learning setting (Pandit, 2020). In the similar context, Dawadi et al. (2020) exposed that the use of online mode brings inequalities between 'haves' and 'haves not' children. In fact, the children who can access to smartphone and internet can get benefits from the online classes, whereas those who cannot afford such expensive devices and Wi-Fi charge remain behind. In addition, most of the teachers are not so digitally literate that they can run classes on online mode. It means, they are not very familiar to integrate technology in their teaching and learning environment. To add to these, the challenges of online classes include time management, delay responses from the students, and some technical problems such as instability in internet service, browsing some relevant sites and so on.

Regarding problem of online learning, Vahid (2020) pointed out that some students are busy in taking care of their family members, and some others have no separate place to learn at home. Moreover, only very few of them have laptops and internet connectivity. Therefore, when they learn online, there often get disturbed by the noises from the family. In the same context, Shrestha (2011) argued many teachers and learners do not have access to internet and digital devices. On the other side, they are very costly as well.

Considering learning through online based environment, several research studies have been carried out. For instance, the empirical research of Mislinawati and Nurmasyitah (2018) showed that students enjoyed learning through web-based module as they found it making them autonomous in learning with high degree of motivation and interactions.

Similarly, Eldeeb (2014) also revealed that students liked online courses. In the same context, the research study by Mamattah (2016) demonstrated that students perceived e-learning positively, and agreed that students should be encouraged to e-learning. In the same line, the study of Girik Allo (2020) revealed that online mode of learning is considered as an alternative way of learning in pandemic situation even though there remain some problems like uneven internet access, financial issue, and smart digital devices.

Many research studies have been already carried out in the area of online learning, but those research works aimed at investigating the impact of online learning on overall education system. A research study (to the best of my knowledge) to explore M Ed level students' perceptions on online learning amidst the Covid – 19, the opportunities they attained and the challenges they faced is rarely found, especially in the context mid Nepal. So, it is necessary that the perceptions of M Ed students on online learning in the context of Nepal need to be explored. This study differs from other previous studies done in the same area in the sense that it followed qualitative phenomenological research design, and was carried out with the purpose of exploring M Ed level students' perceptions on online learning.

As a theoretical stance, this study has adopted Linda Harasim's (2012) online collaborative learning (OCL) theory. The theory assumes that learners can create knowledge in a better way when they are encouraged and supported to work together in online environment. The claim of this theory is that knowledge is not individualistic; learners can have access to get different inputs from the network and collaboration that they get in. In the same vein, Harasim (2012) argued that if learners are exposed to online collaborative learning environment, they become more autonomous and innovative to conceptualize the knowledge that they intend to attain. As research participants in this study hold the belief that learners can construct knowledge through collaborative online learning, OCL seems to be an apt learning theory for this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological research design has been adopted in this study and it is qualitative in nature. Before selecting the sample, first the study piloted interview questions on twenty M Ed first semester students who were studying English in online environment in Covid- 19 pandemic at Tribhuvan University affiliated campuses in Rupandehi district, Nepal. Then non-random purposive sampling technique has been employed to select six of

them (three students from each campus) for this research based on two factors: whether they had a considerable degree of understanding in online learning; and their interest in participating in my research. Their online learning experiences ranged from four to five months during this pandemic.

Two round semi-structured interviews were conducted to uncover the views and lived experiences of the participants on online learning environment during the Covid-19 pandemic as Barkhuizen et al. (2014) stated that qualitative interview uncovers the worldviews of the subjects from their own perspectives. The average length of the first phase interview was about forty minutes and the second about thirty minutes.

The data were recorded electronically. In the place of participants' real names, I used P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 to maintain privacy of the participants. The interview was conducted in Nepali language so that the participants could express their views easily and explicitly. Later, their views were transcribed into English. Further, the associated codes were assembled, and the data were analyzed descriptively creating themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of the data obtained from the participants, the analysis of the study was reported in three themes: Students' perceptions on learning English in online environment, opportunities of online learning, and challenges of online learning in this global pandemic of the Covid-19.

Students' perceptions on online learning

Perception means attitudes, opinions or views of a person towards something. In this study, perception refers to the attitude, opinion or view of the M Ed English students toward online learning. Jackson and Helms (2008) stated, "The learner's or student's perception offers crucial information in assessing and defining quality". Therefore, there is a need to explore the quality of online pedagogy from students' perspectives.

Regarding learning English online, the participants showed positive attitudes. In response to the question 'How do you perceive learning English online during this Covid-19 pandemic?', all six participants opined that in this pandemic situation, online learning has made them connected with the teachers to share their knowledge, experiences and subject related problems. Regarding this, P1noted," I connect with teachers through emails,

Google classroom and ZOOM application to receive and share reading and learning materials". In a similar vein, P2, P3 opined that they enjoyed learning English on online mode. For example, P2 said, "I interact with teachers and peers without any hesitation." Likewise, P3 stated,"… there was no internet access in on- campus learning, no use of audio, video and image,… but online learning has made all these things accessible."

Like these three participants, their counterparts, P4, and P6 also stated they felt as if they were sitting in front of the teachers as in the physical classrooms. For instance, P4 expressed, "I often have interaction with teachers and peers about the matters, and I enjoy such class more…the environment is flexible and non –threatening". Similarly, P6 exposed her opinions that online learning has helped to divert her psychologically from the outbreak fear of the Coronavirus, and engaged her in reading and learning. She further reported, "virtual learning in this pandemic situation has become a supplement to face to face learning".

On a different note, P5 commented that online learning in case of university students is good, and essential to update them with the present digitalized era. However, it is not much justifiable to compulsorily conduct online classes in this global pandemic. In this regard, she revealed her views in these words:

> Many students in this pandemic are at their homes in the villages where there is no internet connectivity, even not good mobile networking. They cannot join virtual class from there. On the other hand, many students are not able to pay for internet connectivity and mobile data for each class every day, neither can they afford for smart mobiles or laptop. In addition, some students are not punctual, and serious to attend the classes.

As the data illustrates, the participants have positive attitudes toward online learning. It is clear from their views that online learning promotes collaboration and interaction between teachers and students. They share their task, knowledge and problems through email Google classroom and other synchronous and asynchronous platforms. Though students and teachers are physically away from each other in this pandemic, virtual classes to some extents have brought them in connection digitally to share their knowledge. The expression is in the line of Eldeeb (2014) who stated that students preferred web supplemented courses as there is non-threatening environment in web-based pedagogy.

Moreover, the participants develop the culture of working in collaboration. Hence, learning becomes more effective, enjoyable and interesting if it takes place in online based

environment. Also, they feel themselves more responsible to find the resources for their need which makes them autonomous in learning. They depend on them and participate without shy. The opinions of the participants are in harmony with the view of Mislinawati and Nurmasyitah (2018) who stated that virtual classes help students motivate them for interactions with peers and teachers, and self- learning. Of six, one participant argued though online class is advantageous for the students from many aspects; it is not fair to conduct it until every student is in the reach of internet connectivity via mobile data or Wi-Fi.

Thus, online learning provides students to access for interaction with teachers and peers and creates self- learning environment. On the other hand, the collected data from P5 revealed that online learning in this pandemic might not be suitable for every student since they do not have internet accessibility in the rural areas where they are staying at the moment, neither a frequent and strong mobile networking.

Opportunities of learning English online

There are several opportunities of learning English online. In the same context, Moore (2001) argued online education enhances language proficiency, autonomy and collaboration in learning. While the participants were asked the question 'Do you get any opportunities of learning English online during this global pandemic?' they gave their own opinions. Their opinions have been discussed below.

Saving significant amount of time and money

Regarding the question related to the opportunity of the online learning, P1 shared his views that online learning has saved time and money. In this context, he stated, "I do not have to stay in the rented room in the city, neither have I to waste time waiting for a bus." Likewise, P2 expressed, "…we can learn from any corner if we have devices and internet connectivity." The other participants also had the similar view with P1and P2. For example, P3, P5 and P6 who had rented a room in the city to stay there for their study reported that they left the room and were taking online class from their own home in the village. In the same line, P3 and P5 noted,"…no tension of bus fare and room rent… no loss of energy and waste of money." Like these five participants, P6 stated:

> I do not have to commute in the crowded bus, put my life in risk, and waste time to wait for a bus. Now, I can manage enough time for my study than I could in on-campus learning. The entire classroom is right in my bedroom.

From the views of the all participants, it is evident that they were able to save their valuable time and expenditures because of the online learning. They opined when they did not need to go to the campuses, they had no worries about the bus fare and the rent of the room they had to pay in the city. Their views are in the line of Bijeesh (2017) who argued that remote/ distance learning helps students to save their time and money since they do not have to pay travel fare and wait for a bus or train to go to and return from college. Thus, the views of the participants revealed that the entire classroom is right in their bedrooms, and learning materials are on the computer screen in front of them in the non-risky zone at home.

Collaborative and autonomous learning

Discussing the opportunities of online learning in this pandemic, P 1 stated that he learnt the culture of working in collaboration. For example, he noted, "I share my assignments and other reading materials with teachers and peers through Google classroom." In the view of P2, online pedagogy developed his self-efficacy and autonomy in learning. He stated, "I tried to find the solution to the problem myself with the help of internet sources." Likewise, the counterparts of these participants also had the same views. To mention about P3's view, he reported, "I feel motivated, and do every activity collaboratively with my peers. …share my tasks…and ask for comments over them." P4 maintained her views in these words, "I send my work through email to my peers for feedback …no such culture in face- to-face classes." Likewise, P5 and P6 stated that they were working collaboratively for the first time in their university level, and they found it very effective to enhance their ability in learning. Regarding this, P5 noted:

> Teachers, along with peers work cooperatively in online class to share their presentations, audio, video and reading materials. This was not possible in our physical classrooms. We just relied on teachers' lectures and limited slides. I found no one at my side to help me in my on-campus study.

Additionally, P6 exposed, "In online class, I find students sharing their writings with others through emails or Google classrooms. …collaborate together in every activity."

The expressions of the participants revealed that online learning motivates them to work in collaboration and develop their self-efficacy. The opinions are also supported by Driscoll and Carliner (2005), who stated that online learning helps students construct knowledge of themselves. The views are in the theoretical light of connectivism that assumes learning is not limited to self, and learners can better construct knowledge when they are exposed to internet connection.

Moreover, the opinions expressed by participants showed that online learning helps them to access authentic materials, and motivate them to enhance their autonomy. The opinions of the participants are related to the view of Johnston et al. (2005) who mentioned that web-based activities actively engage students in autonomous learning environment.

Enhancing digital literacy

When the participants were questioned to evoke their lived experiences regarding the opportunity they had from the online class, all the participants reported that online class enhanced their ICT and computer skills. In this context, P1 expressed that online instruction gave him ideas on how to integrate technology and website in learning purpose. For instance, he stated, "…I am now able to use email and upload the materials in Google classroom." In the similar vein, P2 reported that he did not have any idea about the use of power point presentation; neither did he know about email use. He exposed his opinion in these words, "… I for the first time learnt how to create email ID and prepare slides for presentation." Like the other participants, P3, P4 and P5 stated that they came to know about how to search learning materials online, how to send and receive emails, prepare presentation slides, and use Google classroom for uploading the materials. In this line, P3 asserted:

> I never used Word and Power- point in my mobile because I did not know how to do it. Now, I am smoothly using it to create word file and give power-point presentation.

Likewise, P4 expressed, "I can use email, MS Word, Power point and online sources for my study that was not possible for me before attending the online class." The views of P5 and P6 were also in the line of P4. They asserted that online learning helped them to develop their digital literacy. Indeed, they were able to email others, give presentation with slides and shared their assignments online.

Challenges of learning English online

Despite the fact that online class has numerous advantages in learning English, it is not problem-free. Regarding this, Serwatka (2003) mentioned that the need of greater discipline, writing skills, and self-motivation, and the time commitment to learning are some of the challenges of online pedagogy. When the participants were asked the question 'Are there any challenges that you face when you learn English in online based environment?', they revealed various issues that created problems in their online learning. They have been discussed below.

Resource-related issue

Responding the question related to the challenge of online learning, all the participants viewed "lack of resources" as one of the main challenges of it. In this context, P1 stated, "there were not enough infrastructures such as ICT room and online class cell to control and supervise online classes from the campus admin". Likewise, P2 revealed, "internet access is not very good." Revealing his lived experiences, P3 noted that sometimes he could not attend the classes due to unstable internet of teachers and of his own. He quoted his experiences in these words, "I was unable to attend a very important class of phonetics as I had internet interruption on that day, and it did not come for three hours. I also missed other classes." In a similar vein, P4 exposed, "I even have problem to place my mobile device while learning online." Likewise, P5 expressed, "…frequent power-cut in my locality." The opinion of P6 was in harmony with P1. She noted that teachers could not take classes for full hours regularly due to the interruptions of internet and power cut. She further stated, "Students have to leave the class in the middle."

As the data illustrates, the participants were not getting required resources from the campuses such as ICT cell, and human resource to manage and systematize online classes. They opined that lack of resources hindered their learning activities to go smoothly. Their views were in the line of Searson et al. (2011) who argued that physical infrastructure is inevitable for successful use of digital technologies. Without physical resources, it is unlikely to use technology in teaching and learning arena (Hew & Brush, 2007). The analysis of the data showed that uneven connectivity of internet and frequent power-cut were the major challenges of online learning.

Technology-related issue

While asking the participants about the challenges of online learning in this pandemic situation, they reported that they lacked good skills of technology. Regarding this, P1 opined his opinion this way, "though I can join the class online, and share my screen while giving presentation, I still cannot perfectly use my device for learning purpose, such as for searching and downloading relevant materials online." Likewise, P2 stated," he could not find his grade and other materials uploaded in the Google classroom." Furthermore, he shared his bitter experience this way," I cannot perform well as my face-to-face classroom." In the same context, P3 quoted," I get confused,… feel difficult to upload my assignments, and give oral presentation." In the same way, P4 expressed her view in these words," … I was giving presentation with slides… suddenly another page opened, the participants asked

me to close it. They helped me to do it, but I could not succeed, finally I was compelled to shut down my device, I felt ashamed." Her expression revealed that she faced problems since she lacked sound knowledge of handling technology.

Additionally, in the similar vein, P5 argued that she was unable to submit her assignment on time. Likewise, P6 reported her problems in these words:

> I still cannot use Google classroom perfectly. As our teachers use Google classroom for giving assignments and marking them, I have not yet seen my grades of assignments. Sometimes, I also missed my classes as I could not join, and solve my audio problem in the device.

The excerpts of the participants exposed that they had been facing challenges in online class since they were not perfect to play with the technology and its functions. As they stated, they felt more difficulties in using Google classroom platform which teachers were using to upload the materials and assignments, and grade their performance. It is also evident from their experiences that they also got nervous and confused when they had to appear in the online class. In addition, their level of anxiety increased when they failed to connect to the class and upload their assignments in the Google classroom. Therefore, the opinions showed that the learners required ICT trainings or orientation classes about how to use technology in learning purpose.

Learner- related issue

Discussing the challenges they faced, the participants released some problems related to them. Regarding this, P1 asserted, "I have no Wi-Fi connection at home. So, it is very costly to connect using mobile data every day." Similarly, P2 opined that he did not have a smart phone or laptop, neither had he Wi-Fi connection at home. For example, he noted, "I have to ask for my aunt's mobile when taking classes for my mobile does not have android system."

Like P1 and P2, P3 stated that he lacked digital literacy, and he was not regularly submitting his assignment via Google classroom. Likewise, P4 stated, "I often have anxiety to appear in the online class. I mostly remain silent, and turned my audio and video off." In the same context, P5 shared her experiences in the following excerpts:

> I hardly find peace zone at my home since my family members are around me talking to one another. I always have to keep my microphone mute, even the teachers ask me to respond.

Additionally, P6 asserted that she had similar views like her counterparts. She expressed that she did not have a separate room at home for learning, and she often felt nervous to appear on the screen. She further stated, "… as the first experiences of online learning, I often get confused while responding the teachers." She reported that she just joined the class, listened to the lectures and said 'bye sir' at the end of the class. She further affirmed," many students do not seem serious and punctual; they chat with their friends in messenger. Some join the class once in a week, and leave the class without any information before it end."

The above excerpts demonstrate that in online learning, the participants faced challenges like internet interruption, background noise, frequent power-cut, lack of sound ICT skills. Besides, some students did not have smart mobile phones or laptop. Moreover, the lack of confidence in handling the device for learning purpose, and unavailability of silent place at home made them feel uncomfortable and uneasy to join online classes. In the similar vein, Dawadi et al. (2020) revealed that implementation of online class in the context of Nepal is a big challenge during this crisis. Many parents cannot afford internet access and digital devices, and on the other hand, most of the teachers and students are not computer literate.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The study sought to explore the understanding about online learning during the Covid- 19 pandemic from M Ed students' perspectives. The findings showed that they perceived online learning as an alternative way of learning in this global pandemic. Online pedagogy has connected teachers and peers digitally to share their knowledge and experiences. Moreover, they enjoyed online learning because the learning environment is non- threatening along with audio video and images. Furthermore, the findings revealed that online learning develops students' language skills, creativity, and motivates them for collaborative and autonomous learning. Besides, it makes classroom environment interesting and entertaining too. The participants also revealed that online class assists teachers and students to enhance digital literacy. In addition, students do not have to be worried about bus fair and rent for a room in the city, and about the risk of life while travelling in a bus, or motorbike. Furthermore, online pedagogy has developed mutual relationship between teachers and students. And, the students, who remained silent in face-to-face class, seem to be active and interactive in online class.

This study also revealed that students have anxiety in online classes as they do not have sound knowledge of ICT. On the other hand, unavailability of peaceful and isolated zone at home also created problems in their learning. In essence, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of students toward online pedagogy amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study explored the perceptions of M Ed students with major English of education faculty towards learning online during the global pandemic caused by the Covid- 19. How school level students and teachers, in-service and pre- service teacher educators, students of other faculties view online pedagogy, the challenges they face by them and the strategies to manage the challenges of online teaching and learning can be other areas for further research.

This study had some limitations that the further research studies may consider to address. First, this was a small-scale study with only six participants and all of them belonged to the same faculty. Incorporating large sample randomly selected from different contexts may improve external validity of the findings. Second, this study used only interview as a research tool/ technique to explore the understanding of the M Ed students towards the phenomenon. Incorporating different types of research techniques such as questionnaires and observation following quantitative research design would be worth considering.

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