

Teachers' Perceptions towards Effectiveness of Virtual Classes in Teaching English for Secondary Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of virtual classes for enhancing communication skills in English. This paper analyzed teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of virtual classes for enhancing communication skills. The result indicated that teachers react differently to virtual courses, and their reaction is based on their proficiency in using ICT tools, support of school administration, and learners' manners during virtual teaching-learning activities. The major purpose of this study was to explore the secondary teachers' perceptions of teaching English online. For this, I interviewed three teachers who had been taking virtual classes. The finding suggested that the teachers were quite positive towards teaching virtually despite the lack of adequate training, consistent internet services regular power supply, and suitable devices.

Keywords: virtual classes, ICT tools, group work, cognitive issues, research paradigm

Introduction

This study aims to achieve two objectives. The first one is to obtain the perception of English teachers in virtual classes. The second one is to attempt to discover the effectiveness of using virtual classes in teaching English. With the new academic session of 2077, COVID-19 became a global pandemic and the academic sector of Nepal has ever experienced a huge challenge in running its teaching and learning activities as the massive spread of corona virus forced all the schools, colleges, and universities to close down. The government of Nepal announced to stop the teaching-learning activities in the academic institution with the physical presence of teachers and students. According to UNESCO (2020 as cited in Dawadi, Giri & Simkhada 2020) nearly nine million students were affected due to this pandemic. This newly emerged challenge made the country struggle hard to find a solution and continue learning.

With the view of continuing academic activities and engaging students in learning, the education, science, and technology ministry issued a new guideline. The guide legalized the online class, radio

television, and offline mediums for bringing these alternative mediums of teaching into the mainstream of education. It also stated to provide textbooks and other materials for students who are economically poor and with no access to technology.

Though online teaching requires the teachers to be updated and demands the teachers to be competent to use ICT, many private and some community schools started to teach students online without providing ICT training to the teachers. E-learning, online learning, virtual learning, and blended learning are the overlapping terms used in online learning (Kunwar, Poudel & Shrestha, 2020). Similarly, Gautam (2020) reveals that "Teachers had to make a big leap in their pedagogy and they were required to make a shift from face-to-face teaching to virtual and online teaching." Most teachers felt quite uneasy shifting into a virtual class from the traditional classroom. Lamichhane (2021) views that the smooth running of online courses is impossible in academic institutions in Nepal due to a 'lack of ICT infrastructure 'and teachers' incompetency in ICT. The teachers were supposed to make learning effective. Similarly, the students were supposed to devote their four hours of learning in the virtual classroom. The online class can be effective on if the teachers are qualified to use technology. ICT-qualified teachers not only deliver the lessons effectively but also encourage their students in terms of displaying confidence and producing a favorable learning environment (Singh & Yunus, 2021). ICT literacy is the most required thing to maintain the effectiveness of the online class.

Several studies have been done by experts to explore the effectiveness of online teaching on students' learning. Mishra (2020) explored that teacher teaching through teaching has a lot of control and the students have lost interest. The lower technology skills created technology anxiety for both teachers and students. When students do not get immediate assistance from their teachers at the time of need, then they get frustrated with the new way of learning.

There exist some challenges for maintaining the effectiveness of online classes in teaching English in the context of Nepal.

Handling students

The students in the online classes feel over freedom and some talkative students may create problems. It was very difficult to keep a personal connection with the students through online classes during the pandemic. Sometimes those students distract the attention and make teachers difficult to control the class.

Group work activities

Group work is the most important part of an online class. It encourages interaction and promotes the communication skills of the students. Students are not available in the class so engaging students in group activities is difficult. Swan (2017) reported that both teachers and students face difficulties in conducting group work presentations as they are not familiar with the new way of teaching. Similarly, Chang and Kang (2016) explored that conducting online group work effectively is challenging and complicated due to the lack of physical presence and human relations. The online class can be made effective in engaging the students in group work as it encourages the students to learn at their own pace.

Cognitive and emotional issues.

Cognitive and emotional aspects play a crucial role in the academic performance of the students. Riding and Cheema (1991) explored that students are affected by the presentation of the content and context. The content delivery way may determine whether the students have positive or negative thoughts towards it. Cognitive and emotional factors are important as they contribute to excitement and good performance (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2014).

It is essential to explore the association between e-learning and cognitive emotions as it helps to further understand the online context that may support the effective delivery of the content through online teaching. Similarly, Innes and Campbell (2012) report that students show their emotions during online teaching. According to them, students have either positive or negative emotions. Enthusiasm, excitement, pride, and contentment are the characteristics of positive emotions which encourage learning. Similarly, fear and are negative emotions that discourage learning. The cognitive emotion issues have generated new challenges in online teaching as they have a strong existence in the new way of teaching. Therefore, they need the appropriate response.

The significance of the study

The COVID-19 forcefully shifted traditional face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Recently, the computer has been made a part of the curriculum yet many teachers are unfamiliar with using the technical devices. According to Poudel (2021), 'Online education has become an effective means to run educational activities functional and prevent the possible loss of academic session.' (p.71). Online teaching supports enhancing the communication skills of the students (Al-Qahtan, 2019).

Although online teaching has got significant attention in major urban areas, there is not any empirical examination of the effectiveness of online language teaching. Thus, this study is significant as it provides a clear understanding of the factors that affect the quality of an online language learning system.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore the perception of English teachers in virtual classes and discover the effectiveness of teaching English online to secondary students.

Research Questions

1. How can the English language be facilitated effectively through e-learning platforms?
2. Is there any effective e-learning model for teaching English in the context of Nepal?

Literature Review

Effective facilitation of the learning

The teacher has the main role for facilitating students' learning effectively in online teaching. For this, teachers must have skills to use technology and knowledge about how to use learning resources (Khan, 2016). Online English language becomes effective if the teachers motivate the students with the systematic use of audio, video, and animation effects (Pun, 2013). There are many ways through which teachers engage students in learning. Salbego and Tumolo (2015) conducted research in Brazil. They obtained information about the teachers' and students' perceptions and suggested that virtual classes are effective in developing students' listening and speaking skills. Kaper and Bhandari, (2020) researched teaching English during COVID and concluded that the virtual class can be effective in teaching English 'with the collaborative effort between a teacher, students, parents, and school administration, p.80). Nassaji, (2014) reported that bottom-up skills in language teaching help the learners to recognize words based on knowledge of spelling, sound, structure, and meaning.

ICT-related Policies in Nepal

Making policies for the implementation of any ideas is very important. The effectiveness of any task depends on the policies. ICT implementation, ICT development, and ICT training play very crucial roles in online teaching. Joshi, (2017). He further reported that IT Policy 2000 first introduced information technology in Nepal, it was revised in 2010, p. 410". The main aim of that policy was to expand access to the Internet to all schools., coordinate and collaborate with national and international institutions, and implement

specific IT programs focusing on students, teachers, and schools (MoIC, 2013). Then after, the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) 2009-2015 was implemented which expanded the ICT-related teaching and learning activities and made an effort to develop ICT infrastructures in schools (MoIC, 2009) during that period. Department of Education provided 1,40,000/- amount for secondary schools to purchase 3 computers and 1 printer., Distance Education and Open Learning Division under NCED has been developing some mathematics, science, and English curriculum-related visual documentaries for a few years and broadcasting by Radio Nepal and telecasting by Nepal Television for the support of the students and teachers (Joshi, 2017). He further discussed the ICT policy developed by the Ministry of Information and Communication and emphasized the integration and deployment of ICT in education systems, e-learning, systems, and ICT-based teacher training integration of computer skills into the teaching and learning process.

Similarly, the Ministry of Education introduced the School Sector Development Plan in 2016 -2023 which has focused on the appropriate use of ICT, development of the human resources and integration of technology in the curriculum, and the use of ICT for the improvement of educational governance and management (MoIC, 2016).

Learners' Engagement in Online English Class.

After the emergence of COVID-19, the government of Nepal forced most of the institutions to abandon in-person instruction-based classroom teaching. The children stopped going to school with no choice but to prepare for the online class (Bidari, 2021). The children first time experienced online teaching. Therefore, the teachers, students, and parents faced new challenges regarding its effectiveness, especially in ELT classes. Dixon (2010) reported that effective online instruction, cooperative and collaborative, and active involvement of the instructor in their student's learning can make language classes effective.

Subramaniam, (2008) reported, that Asian students are less autonomous and more dependent on obedient learning. The researcher further claimed that the concerned authorities and teachers should prepare interesting online materials according to their levels. The students in Nepal need group support for learning. The online programs in Nepal are designed to target total learners' autonomy. The teachers and the Nepal government need to design courses that encourage the students to learn at their own pace.

Methodology

According to Connely and Clandinin (2000), teaching is an act of reflection and inquiry. I prepared this study with a narrative inquiry.

Rajendra Poudel, Dinesh Magar, and Ramit Dhungana (pseudo names) are teachers who have been teaching English for seven years at the secondary level. Rajendra and Dinesh are teaching in a community school while Ramit is teaching in a private school. I met two participants in December at the time of training. Sabina was a trainer and Dinesh Magar was a trainee. The province government Province number one had organized EMI training for basic level teachers. When the training was over, I offered them an invitation for tea, maintained the rapport, and started my inquiry.

During the inquiry process, we shared our family status, the teaching-learning activities of the students, teaching experiences, and memories of specific teaching incidents. Their stories became great resources for my research, I asked the following questions to stimulate our thinking.

From where did you pass your SL C? How were you as a student? How do you describe your school life and was it memorable? What is the English proficiency level of your students?

How did you feel at the beginning of the online class? Have you taken ICT training? Did your schools provide training about online teaching? Which device do you use to teach in an online class? What devices do your students use? Which app do you use to teach? Do your students have the skills to use the devices and apps? Do your students actively participate in an online class? What strategies do you apply to engage the students? What are some challenges you have experienced yourself or seen, with getting students to engage in assignments in an online class? What are some techniques that you can try to help students to interact in the virtual class? Did you experience any techniques that didn't work in an online context?

Research Paradigm

To explore the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of virtual classes in teaching English to secondary students; I have situated my study on the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretive paradigm describes how reality hangs or changes for effectiveness. This paradigm sees the reality through the eyes of the participants, not from outsiders. The reality is interpreted from the participants' perspectives. It is very useful to understand how reality goes on at one time and person and how it changes another time and place (Chone, Manion & Morrison, 2018, 8th ed.). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm is the most suitable one to describe my findings.

Data Collection

Data sources included teaching experiences, school and college stories, and autobiographical writing. The stories that I collected were based on my self-inquiry as well as open-ended interviews and conversation with the participants. The interview was held in the schools where the participants taught. Between the interviews, we met four times in two restaurants for lunch and tea where we shared our teaching experiences between us. The informal meeting facilitated the development of a relational understanding. Narrative inquiry is a relational activity that creates a sense of responsibility in both the researcher and the participant (Chan, 2017). Collaboratively, we shared our stories and analyzed and interpreted their meanings.

Meaning Making Process

I collected the data from the open-ended interviews, recorded the information, listened to it many times and it was transcribed into text and translated. I maintained the ethos while transcribing the information. I made some sort of coding and generated the theme.

Discussion

Narrative inquiry is a process of knowledge construction Through the inquiry into the narrative the participants have the opportunity to reflect on what they have experienced in their teaching career and they will also get new strategies that they can apply to teach their students. In this study, two research participants explained their life experiences and reconstructed the knowledge that informed their practice. Rajendra Poudel described their experience of teaching English in an online class and explained some strategies for making it effective.

I am an English teacher. I teach from class 9 to 12. Online teaching was my first experience. Amid school activities, in the beginning, I did not have ideas, the school also did not provide training about the use of ICT. I am pursuing my MPhil from Open University from where I had got some technical skills and it became very helpful during the online class.

I did not calculate the percentage, but out of 90 students from the 9 to 12 class, almost 98 percent used mobile, and only two percent used laptops.

Many problems were created during online classes because more than 50 percent of students did not have the skills to use teaching tools. They did not have a good internet facility. Only 20 percent of the students had wi-fi access, remaining students depended on the data for online classes.

During the online classes, I faced lots of challenges; so, my teaching became ineffective. The problems were: Students did not follow the netiquette though I gave orientation before I began the class due to the lack of virtual culture in students. The class could not be interactive since the students made the class noisy and I had to silence them. They could some of them enjoy the class in video-on mode, so I could not know whether they were actively set for learning or engaging in other activities. Therefore, the first phase of online classes could not become effective and fruitful. Inconsistent network added another challenge.

The delta COVID also forced the government to announce a nationwide lockdown in 2078 B.S. My school also published the online routine and I got the opportunity to teach in a virtual class for the second time. That time I applied some new ideas for making my class effective.

I called the parents and students in school and provided orientation about netiquette. I requested the parents to inspect their children's learning during class hours. I gave them an assignment and asked them to submit it physically once a week. Likewise, I invited an expert and conducted a workshop about using the devices and learning tools properly. I took the parents' phone numbers and delivered the learning activities of their children time to time.

I motivated the students to learn and administered the test fortnightly.

Theme one: His story provides me with a great insight into online teaching. For making the English class effective in online, the teachers should have good command over content, context, and technology. Teachers need to be flexible and allow students to decide their learning. Similarly, teachers should encourage the learners' autonomy, and independence and address the cognitive and emotional factors of the students (Carrio- Paster, 2019).

Another participant described his perception:

I taught an online class for the first during the lockdown period. In the beginning, the students seemed quite interested. But, when it began, many students became anxious about the online class. They did not have proper ideas about using the devices and applications. They switched off the videos and engaged in games and Facebook. Sometimes students and teachers from other schools joined the class from my students' identity asked irritating questions and used nonsense words. On the other hand, network and power problems were adding fuel to the fire.

That situation made me worried and I talked to the school administration. Then, my headmaster called all the students at the rate of 20 students at a time. We provided some ICT training and oriented the virtual code of conduct.

I made the class effective by implementing the following ideas:

I took the attendance of the students at the end of the class. Assigned the group work and asked to show their class work from each group either in a notebook or in PowerPoint slides. I kept making the video mandatory. I gave them an assignment and informed their parents when they failed to submit it. I made the class interactive asking related questions to the teaching topic during the teaching hours. I demanded pre-information from the students in case they could not attend the class. To be sure, I would call their parents. I equally focused on all the language skills.

Theme two: Learning becomes effective when the students are actively involved in learning, for, teachers have to focus on the new words, engage the students in collaborative learning, and critical thinking, and administer the test to assess the learning (Carrio-Paster, 2019).

Conclusion

Teaching in online classes was not easy for language teachers. Most English teachers in Nepal lack technological skills. Like classroom teaching, online teaching requires a clear plan; and teachers also require to have good ideas to engage students in online classes. School administration and government need to take responsibility for both teachers and students. Teachers must maximize the benefits to the students by selecting a suitable application. In the future, online classes will be utilized excessively, educators should prepare for both online and onsite teaching. The online teaching of English can be effective if it is implemented blended which combines the mixed methods of instruction, it formally combines face-to-face learning and distance learning by incorporating technology to facilitate the learning process (Olapiriyakul, & Scher, J.M. 2006).

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