

**Online English Courses During Covid-19: A Qualitative Study of
Exploring Rural Students' Struggle in Online Learning**

By

Nishat Sadia
19263008

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities
Brac University
May, 2021

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Nishat Sadia
Student ID-19263008

Approval

The thesis titled “Online English Courses during Covid-19: A qualitative study of Exploring Rural Students’ Struggle in Online Learning” submitted by

Nishat Sadia (Student ID- 19263008)

of Spring, 2021 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in English on 30th May, 2021.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

Dr. Md. Al Amin
Assistant Professor, Department of English and Humanities
Brac University

External Expert Examiner:
(Member)

Dr. S. M. Akramul Kabir
Assistant Professor of English, Directorate of Secondary and Higher
Education, Bangladesh

Departmental Head:
(Chair)

Professor Ferdous Azim
Chairperson, Department of English and Humanities
Brac University

Ethics Statement

This research is my original work and during the research no participants were forced to give any information. Privacy issues have been highly maintained. The real of the institutions or the participants have been kept confidential.

Abstract

This study aims to explore various barriers encountered by the tertiary level students in attending online ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. During this pandemic like many other students tertiary level students, especially students from small town and rural areas, are also attending online classes. This study, qualitative in nature, explores numerous barriers these students faced in attending online classes. Students from rural and small town often find it difficult to compete with the students from urban areas as students from urban areas enjoy various facilities. During this pandemic this situation becomes worse as rural students and students from small town are struggling to attend online classes for various reasons. However, in this study I focus only on the difficulties students from rural and small town faced in attending online ESL classes. Data has been collected through online interviews due to Covid-19 pandemic as it was not possible to arrange face to face interviews. The findings of this research reveal numerous barriers students face in attending online classes. This include lack of resources, difficulty in communicating with teachers, getting necessary feedback, poor internet connection and psychological pressure in attending courses. At the end, few recommendations have been proposed to overcome the problems.

Keywords: Online ESL courses, writing skills, speaking skills, tertiary level students from sub-rural areas.

Acknowledgement

All praises for almighty Allah who gave me the courage to complete this thesis. Secondly, my supervisor; Dr. Md. Al Amin, to whom I will always be indebted for helping me to complete this thesis. I am thankful to all my teachers from our department. Roohi Huda miss, Mohammad Mahmudul Haque sir, Lubaba Sanjana miss and Anika Saba miss helped me a lot from the very beginning of my Brac university life and with their guideline show me the path to reach to my destination. Last but not the least, my parents, who were always by my side and supported me in every up and down of life. Without their support, I could not finish my graduation and post-graduation journey.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The global pandemic disrupted many things in the world including education system in almost every country in the world. Bangladesh is not an exception in that case. Because of the pandemic all kinds of educational institution in Bangladesh, following the government directions, remain closed since March 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic, only a small number of educational institutions, especially, schools, colleges and universities in the big cities started online teaching and learning. The government of Bangladesh has taken many initiative to provide online education for students in different parts of the country. Although, students from city areas started attending online classes, students from rural and small town found it very difficult to attend online classes. However, a majority of the students of Bangladesh live in rural and small town. In fact, many of the students who study at school, colleges or universities in the capital or in any other mega cities in Bangladesh, went to their village or home town to stay with their family during this pandemic. They are also attending online classes from their home. In this study, I only focus on difficulties students face in attending online language classes at the tertiary level and how effective these classes are in developing students language skills.

In Bangladesh, the controversy over the status of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language) is still continuing, and no one can refute the need to speak English at the tertiary level of Bangladesh. Communicative language teaching method has been adopted to teach English at school and college level. Non-allocation of marks by NCTB and UGC (University Grants Commission) on speaking skills at every stage of English education, disoriented students of oral competence. There is a disparity in assessment strategy and implementation (Khan, 2010, as cited in Rani, 2020). At present, Bangladeshi universities are

offering mandatory English language courses and students from both Bangla and English medium students are participating together. Many of the students prefer to get a higher degree from abroad but when they have to study under English medium instruction in full length, they face difficulties in academic learning, especially in writing skill (Rahman & Hasan, 2019).

Teaching a second language has always been a difficult task for the teachers around the world. Designing a second language course is as difficult as subjects like science, commerce or arts. Covid-19 has affected almost all the systems such as business, trade, education and so on. Both teaching and learning are now online based. Using technology in face-to-face classrooms is usually found in English medium schools and private universities in Bangladesh. Online classes and using technology have been increased during Covid-19 situation; especially in private schools, colleges and universities. Many of the institutions especially all the private universities started live classes using online platform such as Zoom and google meet. There are other universities who developed their own online platform where teachers can share their recorded lectures and students can listen to these at their own time. It is also possible to arrange various online assessments in those platforms. However, teaching language remotely is a challenging thing as in this kind of class often teachers work extensively with their students.

In our context, obstacles like load-shedding, poor internet connection, expensive internet data, financial crisis, lack of technological facilities in rural area etc. are common scenario. These problems are mainly the financial and technological problems. Moreover, online education during this pandemic has created other issues like stress, depression, heavy work-load and other physical and mental issues. From March 17, 2020 Bangladesh government decided to close all the educational institutions due to Covid-19 pandemic. It has been more than a year that all the educational institutions are closed and it is very difficult to predict when this situation will be improved. At the beginning of the outbreak of Corona pandemic, some institutions started to take online classes but it was not well organized and the students found it difficult the teachers

also faced some issues. At present situation has been changed and the practice of online education is being normalized now. University is a place where students are supposed to gain the education which is universally recognized. A student who is studying at tertiary level is expected to be more sensible with good communicative competence.

Technology is only an instrument to teach and online platform can be seen as a teaching and learning environment just like a teaching-learning environment in a face-to-face class. Technology cannot replace the teachers. Online or face to face classes cannot change the goals of the courses. There can be few changes in techniques and activities. Teaching and learning are the ultimate goal of any virtual or face to face class. Internet and technology have both negative and positive sides. It depends on the intentions of the users. After passing HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) Examination, majority of the students target to get admission in public universities; especially the universities located at Dhaka city. As in Bangladesh, job opportunities and other facilities are mainly capital city centered, students prefer to complete their higher studies from Dhaka. Nowadays if students fail to get chance in public universities, they try to get admission at top ranking private universities if they can financially afford it.

Whenever we think about the online education system in Bangladesh, we mainly try to highlight the negative sides and the positive aspects remain in darkness. As a developing country we tend to focus on our problems and limitations. Several studies have been conducted on virtual classroom in Bangladeshi context and the problems and mistakes have been described. The aim of this small study to fill up the research gap and bring out the perspectives of tertiary level students' towards online ESL speaking and writing courses. I have tried to explore their perspectives from different angles and to do so, I have focused both on the positive and negative sides. Moreover, I have tried to get information from the teachers who take these courses. In this paper, I have mainly focused on the tertiary level students who belong to small towns of Bangladesh and study in a private university located in Dhaka city. For my research,

I have mainly focused on the students belong to sub-rural areas as a huge number of students from these areas come to Dhaka city for their higher education. In Bangladesh, there are few metropolitan cities and majority of the areas are mainly rural, sub-rural or small towns. There are several researches on online education at rural areas of Bangladesh, so I decided to work on sub-rural areas.

1.1 Context

As all the educational institutions are closed till now, the study has been conducted virtually as it was not possible to visit the selected places physically. For this study I decided to select two well-known private universities located at Dhaka; the capital of Bangladesh. Various famous educational institutions are located in this city and at present Dhaka has become the center for better educational facilities in Bangladesh. This city is carrying the glorious history of some famous educational institutions of Bangladesh.

After the liberation war in Bangladesh, Dhaka became the most enriched center of education. The Private University Act, 1992 opened the doors for private universities. In Bangladesh, people have mixed attitudes towards private universities. Usually, students from higher and middle higher-class families, study in private universities. Tuition fees are high in private universities. On the other hand, government universities are run by the government taxes so, students of every social and economic class can afford to study in public universities. Public universities have limited seats so the competition is obviously is tough in admission tests. In Bangladesh, there is a myth or belief that only brilliant students get chance in public universities and private universities are nothing but business institution who sell certificates by taking money. This belief is mostly found among village people and people belong to small towns.

Nowadays, situation is changing; there are some private universities who are providing better education and are capable to give tough competition to the top-ranking public universities.

Graduate and post graduate students from these universities are working in various prestigious sectors and going abroad for higher education. Peoples' perception towards private universities are also changing. Private universities give priority to ESL courses and encourages the students to communicate in English while taking participation in classroom activities and they draw the attention of the parents and students by highlighting their ESL courses.

The participants of this study are living in rural or small town and they are participating online language classes from their home. Most of them are studying private universities in Dhaka. The universities where they are studying offer graduate and postgraduate programs. They have departments like Law and justice, Economics, English, Engineering subjects, Business studies etc. Almost all the students have smart phones and laptops as they have to submit both the softcopies and hardcopies of the assignments in their face-to-face classes also. Many students are not from Dhaka city. They live in hostels or rented flats at Dhaka. Some of them are from small towns and village areas where internet connection is poor or not available. As all the educational institutions are closed till now, majority of the students are now in their hometowns. The universities are trying to improve their online resources. Online library, materials, help desk etc. have been reorganized to make the online platform easier.

For my research, I have selected undergraduate students studying in first or second year and they are from various departments. In these universities, English language courses are offered for freshers or first year students enrolled in bachelor's program. Some students may take the courses at second year if they had any issues in first year or got poor grades in first year. Ideally, they have to finish these courses in the first year. They have to take two or three ESL courses. The courses are on English speaking, writing, reading and listening. 60%-70% marks are allocated for speaking and writing and the rest of the marks are for reading and speaking. Writing usually gets more priority as in our education system, tests are writing based. Speaking

also gets priority in private universities as the students have formal presentations in their departments also and the oral presentations are held in English.

Ideally in each section of the courses have 40-45 students. Writing and reading part is covered by one instructor and speaking and listening is covered by another instructor. Students from both Bangla medium and English have to take these courses. There are individual tasks and group task so that students from different backgrounds can help each other. The universities have their own selected booklets for these courses and the courses are interrelated and there is a chronological order that has to be maintained by the students; that means after completing one course, the students can take the next one. There are some changes as online platform is now the only way to conduct the classes. The textbooks are same, chapters and contains are same but there are few changes.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this section, I have tried to explore some existing journal articles, books to find previous studies in this area. It is noticed most of the previous studies in Bangladesh focuses more on the problems and possible solutions to deal with those problems so I think that I can explore both the negative and positive sides of online ESL courses. Moreover, most of the studies talk about the ESL courses in other countries. Studies which have been conducted in Bangladesh mainly talk about the limitations of resources and other technological and financial problems but hardly there are researches on any specific issue of online ESL classes and the impacts on any specific factor of these courses. In order to make my research more specific I have decided to focus on writing and speaking competence of the students studying at tertiary level.

2.1 Importance of Developing Writing and Speaking Skills

As a writer conflict with phrase choice, sentence structure, and paragraph composition; the writer has to start thinking. It indicates that writing skill is associated with the development of

critical thinking (Rojas et al.,2020). One of the most utilized honorifics after speaking skills, writing serves as a device of human conversation by the means of conventional, agreed-upon indicators that represent language (Tüm, 2020). Writing is considered one of the outstanding abilities that learners need to master because it requires a more in-depth understanding of the grammar system and conventions of writing than other receptive abilities (Abdelmohsen et al., 2020).

About 85% of the research papers are now available in English language. Education, business, tourism, banking, media and newspaper, information technology, engineering, medicine; almost in every field knowing English is a must (Rao, P. S.,2019). It is a fact that both the productive skills are very important in communication, however speaking skills are used more than that of writing skills. In this fast and progressive world, the overall personality of a candidate is judged by the overall performance of his or her speaking skills (Rao, P. S.,2019). Learning a second language is dependent on the components like the knowledge of language and discourse, speaking skills, communication and discourse strategies and the learner needs to grow the ability to use these components in producing spoken language with accuracy, fluency and social norms. Learners' cognitive abilities play a vital role to function these processes (Buianovska, O.,2020). We genuinely have to admit that speaking is crucial to human communication. Only taking into account the amount of spoken exchanges we produce throughout a day compared to the written communication occurring at the same period of time, it is obvious that speaking prevails over writing (Sim & Pop, 2016).

2.2 Learner's Role in Developing Second Language Skills

Learners play active roles in learning language when they apply technology as they have to pick, receive and transcribe information to use it. Every learner has a different level of learning pace and tries to communicate with the other members of the society by updating the gathered

information and skills (Zamani et al., 2015). Another point is, learners' beliefs and strategies are two huge components in second language acquisition. Related to L2 needs and in the feeling of social collaboration, student esteems are reliably (re)shaped. From the socio-social view, movements of conviction reflect a system of remediation between the student and the L2. Learning atmosphere, showing the authoritative endeavors of the student to support (or desert) L2 targets (Yang and Kim, 2011). Beliefs are one of the issues among a few others (like age, affective states, skills, motivation and personality) to be thought of and are professed to in a roundabout way affect learning results by the decision of learning techniques by the student, or maybe an immediate one (for an endeavor at a far-reaching record of student commitments or attributes including beliefs, seen comparable to student activities and settings of learning) (Breen, 2001 as cited in Kalaja, & Barcelos,2012).

Language students hold beliefs about instructors and their part, about contribution, about themselves as students and their job, about language learning and about learning in general. Such beliefs can affect (and frequently restrain) the receptiveness of students to the thoughts and practices presented in the language class, especially when the methodology is not compatible with the experience of the students (Cotterall, 1995). Strategies for language learning are clear examples of how learners handle assignments or difficulties faced during the language learning process. In other words, language learning techniques, while in some situations not observable or unintentionally used, offer useful hints to language teachers about how their students interpret the situation, schedule, choose suitable skills to grasp, acquire, or remember new input presented in the language classroom (Hismanoglu, 2000). Alhaisoni (2012) conducted a research on 701 male and female students from Saudi Arabia to find out the types and frequency level of language learning strategies used by them and Oxford Strategies Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) was used with some modifications. The

results showed that the students prefer cognitive and metacognitive strategies; on the other hand, affective and memory strategies were least preferred.

Woodrow (2005) found in a study that high scorer students tended to adopt more informal strategies (such as reading for pleasure, watching television, and interaction with native speakers) than the average students and metacognitive strategies were the only strategies that correlated with oral performance. Oxford (2018) talked about the effectiveness of using L2 learning strategies and has shown that successful language learners often use strategies in an arranged way. For example, they can arrange the sequence of the required strategies to produce the language successfully.

Oxford & Crookall (1989) conducted a study on language learning strategies and the results showed that social strategy was strong but also the other strategies cognitive, affective, and compensation strategies had strong influence among the participants of their research. A positive relationship exists between raising metacognitive awareness and improving reading comprehension. In addition, metacognitive strategy training has been found to be efficient in increasing metacognitive awareness (Dabarera et al., 2014). Hong-Nam & Leavell (2006) conducted a study where English language learners enrolled in an intensive English program where they were conscious of their learning process and strategies and they preferred metacognitive strategies which helped them to direct, organize and plan their learning of languages.

Yang (1995) in his study found that the self-efficacy beliefs of language learners about learning English were closely linked to their use of all types of learning strategies, especially strategies of functional practices. The beliefs of learners regarding the importance and essence of learning spoken English were also closely related to their use of formal oral practice strategies. Belief-based indicators (also referred to as theory-based or knowledge-based indications) refer to what one actively feels about memory, such as "I learn by studying." Experience-based indications

include something that students can experience personally, like how recognizable a response sounds, how noisy a speaker speaks, how pronounceable a phrase is, and so on (Bjork et al., 2013).

Learner beliefs are naturally connected to learner's strategies; which indicate that a learner has certain beliefs about language learning and this belief is a outcome of his/her ways of learning a language (Wenden, 1987 as cited in Ghavamnia, Kassaian, & Dabaghi, 2011).

2.3 Some Previous Studies on Learners Perceptions of Online ESL Courses

Students who are regular users of MS Word Thesaurus and Online Corpora have been shown to be more likely to implement online writing checkers. It has been found that they find these tools more useful than those who don't regularly use them. Students also accept the resources available that provide immediate feedback. (Grami ,2020). Students feel comfortable and less stressed in their own learning space through immersive online learning experience and they become more active in English writing (Yacob & Yunus,2019).

Both traditional and online learning satisfy the majority of ESL introverted students who struggle with language skills, especially speaking in a specific context (Alkhouday ,2020). With the aid of online speaking activities in virtual classrooms, negotiation plays an essential role in the development of learning (Yeh, H. C., & Lai, W. Y.,2019).

Tan, Fujuan; Nabb, Lee; Aagard, Steven; Kim, Kioh (2010) discovered in their study that online learning opportunities improve reading and writing skills in English because most indicated that online classes encouraged writing with concern for an audience, offering resources for updating and revising correspondence before uploading it to electronic classroom sites. In a paper, Syahrin & Salih (2020) discussed about a group of ESL students at a higher learning institution in Oman during the Covid-19, and they discovered that the students had less experience in practicing productive skills (speaking and writing). In a skill-based

pedagogy, the main goal is to make the students able to gain automaticity through intensive practice but in this case, practice of productive skills (writing and speaking) was hardly noticed and as a result they lagged behind in online classes.

2.4 Present Scenario of Online ESL Courses at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

A recent study shows that teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of computer in general but teachers are not well trained in Bangladesh (Mili, A.,2020). The most critical problem facing online classes in Bangladesh is that a large number of people living in rural areas are now unable to access the internet. The BD Bureau of Statistics Multiple Cluster Survey 2019 reveals that internet access is accessible to just 37.6 percent of households in Bangladesh. It is also established that only 5.6% of households have a computer. Some other issues are load-shedding, untrained teachers, insufficient fund from the government etc. (Salik, S. A., & Chowdhury, M. R., 2020).

The next chapter is the methodology part of the research which includes the nature of the research, background of the participants, instruments used in data collection, data analysis process and the ethical issues.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the nature of the research, data collection process, data analysis process, ethical issues and obstacles, selection of the participants, instruments which have been used to record data etc. Along with these parts; I have used two research questions which worked as a guideline of this research and through out the research I have tried to get the answer of these research questions which are mainly the final outcome of the research. These are the two research questions;

1. How does online ESL courses are impacting the writing and speaking skills of tertiary level students from sub-rural areas of Bangladesh?
2. What are the perceptions of the students from sub-rural areas towards online ESL courses in order to develop their oral or writing skills in English?

The main focus of my research is to find out the impact of online ESL (English as a Second Language) courses on the writing and speaking skills of the tertiary level students who belong to sub-rural areas and study in private universities at Dhaka. Moreover, I have managed to talk to two teachers who take these courses. I have already mentioned two private universities have been selected for the research. Both universities offer mandatory ESL courses and conducting online classes due to Covid-19 outbreak. As it was quite difficult to take face-to-face interviews in order to maintain social-distance during corona pandemic; I had to mainly rely on video calls or voice calls on social media platform but still I have tried my best to interpret the thoughts and perception of the participants of this research.

3.1 Research Method

For conducting my research, I decided to follow qualitative research method which focuses on the perceptions of the participants and make sense of their interactions to get a better understanding of the social realities of people. For getting data, there are several ways in qualitative research method. Interviews, diaries, journals, classroom reports and immersions; and open-ended questionnaires are used to collect, review, and classify data from visual and textual materials (Mohajan, 2018).

The main reason behind of choosing this method is as qualitative research is all about the perception or ideas of the participants and the researcher must have the ability to understand the point of view of the participants. That is why Aspers & Corte, (2019) have defined qualitative research as an iterative procedure where a researcher studies a phenomenon of a scientific community more deeply and make new significant distinctions. The main motive of this research is to find out the impact of online ESL courses on writing and speaking skills of undergraduate students from sub-rural areas and the perceptions of the students and course instruction. So, qualitative data can provide a detailed result for this research.

3.2 Data Collection

Creswell (2012), mentioned four ways to collect qualitative data; observations, interviews and questionnaires, documents and audiovisual materials. As all the educational institutions had been closed because of Covid-19 pandemic, I could not observe the classroom activities through my physical presence. Moreover, I was not present at Dhaka to take face-to-face interviews. As a result, I had to rely on voice calls or video calls to take interviews. I could manage to take few face-to-face interviews as some of the participants were from my family. My cousins and juniors helped to collect data. I designed 15 open ended questions along with some close ended questions. Moreover, some follow up questions had been asked to get more

clear clarifications. I took 12 individual interviews of 12 participants and they also helped me to get more participants. I emailed the interview questions to their friends or classmates and google forms were posted on some Facebook groups. Permissions were taken from the participants and privacy issues were maintained.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

For collecting data, I have followed the five stages of collecting qualitative research provided by Creswell (2012). The first of the five stages are to classify participants and study locations, as well as to develop a sampling strategy that will better help the researcher to understand his/her central phenomenon and the research question he/she is asking. The next step is to acquire permissions to gain access to these people and places. Third, after securing permissions, the researcher should think about what kinds of data would help answer him/her research questions. Fourth stage is to design protocols or instruments for gathering and recording the data at the same time. The final stage is to administer the data collection process, paying close attention to any future legal concerns that might arise.

I have followed these stages. At first, I had chosen my participants and the institutions from where I could collect data, then the required permissions were taken, after that I decided to collect qualitative data. Moreover, I started to gather and record all the information and finally, I had taken some preparations to avoid any future legal issues; for example, I had to ensure the privacy of the participants and avoid any kind of clue in my paper that might hamper the prestige of any educational institution. I had to talk to them several times on voice call or video call if there were any confusion. I took notes about the interview and if any issue seemed unclear to me, they helped me to clarify their opinion or thoughts.

3.4 Data Analysis

After collecting all the data, I had to start analyzing it. For analyzing data, I decided to do thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) is a data analysis strategy that is widely used in all qualitative research. TA is often used in research studies and often classified as qualitative research without including the requisite information on how the study reduced the data into workable patterns and the findings that resulted (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018).

At first, I started coding the collected data. I listened to the recordings of the interviews for several times to ensure not even a single piece of information is missed. Then I noted down the important points. For coding, I mainly focused on the frequent words or phrases used by the participants and looked for the common sentences frequently used by most of the participants and after completing coding of the collected data, I could come up with some broader themes. I also did triangulation of collected data. After analyzing data, I show it to the participants to check if I had missed any point. Moreover, I asked them to check if I wrote any wrong explanation of their any statement as their perception is important and I cannot give my personal opinion to come to a conclusion. It often happens we transcribe an interview and we misinterpret the inner meaning; as qualitative data is all about the perceptions held by the participants, it is better if they check the data analysis or recordings of the collected data.

3.5 Selection of the Participants

Covid-19 pandemic has affected almost every aspect of human life and even research and data collection procedure are not out of it. Naturally, I had to go through this unfamiliar situation too. I had to select participants while keeping some issues in my mind. I had to select the participants who are close to me and active on social media regularly.

At first, I took the interview of my three cousins studying in the selected universities. Then I took interviews of my juniors who are familiar to me. They also talked to their friends to take participation in my study. I had contacted to those who agreed to help me. I could manage to

take 12 interviews on Facebook messenger. As every institution has some rules and regulations for the stuffs, only two teachers agreed to give interview. Both of them are experienced teachers and been teaching ESL courses for several years. However, my cousins could take part in face-to-face interviews. Rest of the data were collected through google forms. I listed the questions in a google file and posted on Facebook groups. 51 responses were recorded. All the participants who were students were undergraduate students of first year. 2 students were in second year and due to some issues, they took the courses late. The students were from sub-rural areas and they stay at Dhaka temporally.

The following table consists the background information of the 12 participants to whom I could manage to take interview through Facebook messenger and face-to-face interview. Apart from them, 51 students gave their opinion through google forms. All of them are first year students and from sub-rural areas. I did not publish their real names and used pseudonym to ensure the privacy issues.

Name	Age	Gender	Educational Qualification
Anika	20	Female	Undergrade 2 nd Semester
Farin	20	Female	Undergrade 2 nd Semester
Saba	21	Female	Undergrade 4 th Semester
Fahim	20	Male	Undergrade 2 nd Semester

Atique	21	Male	Undergrade Semester	3 rd
Sarowar	20	Male	Undergrade Semester	3 rd
Dipa	19	Female	Undergrade Semester	1 st
Mim	19	Female	Undergrade Semester	1 st
Tanha	19	Female	Undergrade semester	1 st
Jamil	21	Male	Undergrade semester	4 th
Santa	20	Female	Undergrade Semester	3 rd
Sabiha	22	Female	Undergrade semester	4 th

Information of the teachers who have taken part in this study;

Name	Gender	Educational Qualification	Years of Teaching
Sadik Hasan	Male	BA and MA in English from Jahangirnagar University	6

Nasima Haque	Female	BA and MA in English from Dhaka University.	11
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3.6 Instruments

To gather the collected data, I mainly relied on the recordings of voice phone calls and I also took small notes while talking to the interviewees. I used my notebook and pen to write down key points or the main ideas. For recording the conversation, I used my mobile phone both in face-to-face interview and interview on phone calls with the consent of the participants.

3.7 Obstacles

The main obstacles that I had to face while conducting the research is internet problem. As I belong to a sub-rural area and my university was closed; I had to come to my hometown. Broadband internet speed is slow here and while taking interviews on Facebook messenger, often the voice calls used to get disconnected. These are mainly the technical obstacles. Another problem was I could not observe a physical class that it why I could not analyze the results from practical experience. Moreover, majority of the students did not fill up the google forms. Apart from these issues, those who are not so close to me were not agree to say negative things about their university. So, I faced few problems. However, I tried to be friendly and took individual interviews to make them feel comfortable. The interviews were casual and semi-structured in nature and after some time they also started to talk more comfortably.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

For maintaining ethical issues, I followed the suggestions provided by Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). I clearly described the purpose of my research to the participants. They

were not forced to take participation. Moreover, I did not compel them to sign any consent paper. The real names of the institutions were not exposed. To keep their privacy, I used pseudonyms instead of their real names. All the information is real and there are no false or made-up statements.

Apart from these suggestions, I had maintained other issues; I did not ask any question which may hurt their ego, I maintained a respectful tone to ensure them I will not expose their names as they may face problems in their university. I ensured them everything would be confidential. I took permission before recording any conversation on my mobile phone and promised them I would not expose those recordings.

In the next five chapters I am going to discuss the results of this study.

Chapter 4

Misuse of technology

After collecting all the information, the most important fact that I have found is the implication of technology in practicing speaking and writing. After talking to the participants and reading the responses of google forms, I have realized that students' intention is a major issue in their learning process. Using technology or different software is not a new concept but it is true that online mode of learning is totally dependent on the honesty of the students.

For example, one of my participants informed me that he and many of his friends use google translator for writing their response papers and essays. They write the Bangla sentences and translates in English. They can take such type of help sometimes when they are really suffering to write but if they use it all the time without even trying by themselves; it will not help them in the long run. Another point that I have found is students plagiarize with the help of paraphrasing apps. As plagiarism is strictly prohibited, students copy from online articles and paraphrase it with the help of these apps. In Microsoft word, auto correction can help to avoid grammatical and spelling mistakes; it is an extra benefit but not intentionally cheating; but in our education system, as we depend on written examination system, spelling, learning new vocabulary, grammatical rules are very important as we have to get marks dependent on our own memory and skills.

However, some participants said that they are having problems in developing an argument in a formal way in an academic essay. Apart from these problems, one important point has been described by all the participants and that online ESL courses are discouraging the students to enrich their vocabulary. Saba stated that

We have so many apps like online dictionary, google translator etc. that we do not need to work hard on our vocabulary. When we used to sit for traditional exams with pen and paper; we had no option and had to learn new vocabulary. It is not a good practice as vocabulary is important even in taking part in any conversation.

Both the teachers informed that due to time limitation sometimes they have to ask the students to record their presentation and upload it on Facebook groups of the courses. As a result, most of the time, the assessment is not fair as the students do not perform in live classes. Even in live classes, though the cameras are turned on, but students still manage to keep chits in front of them and read out. From the responses of the participants another interesting point that I have found is usually we see that students are advised to watch videos with good contents to improve their English, but in online courses some students are so much dependent on video contents and watch YouTube videos that they forget the focus on the formal language as they are required to use it in academic performance. Most of the time they do it unconsciously, but when they used to attend the traditional classes, they could listen to their teachers and other classmates who have good command on English and it helped them more.

Moreover, oral presentation is not only about fluency and accuracy but it also depends on body language, gestures, eye contact with the audience, turn-taking etc. and both the teachers were also agreed with the fact that students are not able to practice these things in online classes. Even the students mentioned these points. From the google forms and interviews I have found

that the students think they will suffer in future courses at their university life as well as in their career as they are deprived from practicing these things.

Chapter 5

Students' Reluctance to Attend Online Classes

Anika, Farin and Jamil are my cousins and as they are from my family so I could easily take face-to-face interviews. I talked to them to take their permission and describe them about my research. They happily agreed to help me and visit me. The interview was flexible and it was more like a conversation and as they are close to me, they expressed their issues without any hesitation. To make the interview more interesting, at first, I asked them to describe their journey from school to college and then from college to university.

Anika started to narrate her journey. Anika belongs to a small town located at Rajshahi division and passed SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) from government school and college. Though there are many complaints against government schools and colleges that they do not take classes regularly but Anika was lucky to have good school and college. Anika told me,

“Classes were taken regularly and teachers were strict about classwork and homework. However, I still had to take help from tutors and they were mainly the public university students from English department. Surprisingly, the tutors who belonged to big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong were more skilled than those who were from small towns”.

When I asked her about English language practice in her school and college she mentioned about the pressure of exam and the tendency of getting higher marks rather than learning. Anika also said,

“Before starting my university life, practicing English was only about learning vocabulary and learning grammar and my teachers and tutors at school and college gave importance on these so, I easily got A+ in English both in SSC and HSC but after starting university life, there was a big change. I got fundamental English course. I got admitted in Law and Justice but I had to take 3 mandatory English language courses. I got admission in January 2020 but on March 2020, the government declared to close all the educational institutions due to Covid-19 outbreak. Online mode of teaching made me confused; especially, in English language classes. As I had Bangla medium background, I could not practice speaking. Moreover, my listening skills did not improve as I prefer physical classes, I think I used to pay more attention on the class lecture while attending the physical classes. I used to listen carefully to my teachers as they had to speak in English. After starting online classes, I felt lost and due to poor internet connection, I was frustrated and did not attend the classes regularly. But it is true that my writing skills developed as we were assigned with different papers and got enough scope to think about new topics for writing. I hate online classes and just want to attend the regular classes at our campus with my classmates”.

Farin and Anika both are brought up together and they live in the same building. Farin’s journey in school and college is similar to Anika’s journey as they were classmates in same school and college. Now, they both are studying in same university but in different departments. Farin described her story of attending English language courses at university. Farin said,

“I got admitted in English department and thought these language courses are offered by my department and will be counted as major courses but later I got to know the difference. At the first day of the class, I was shocked as the teacher did not utter a single Bangla word. I was feeling uneasy as I did not have any experience of speaking in English. Oral presentations were nightmares for me but after shifting to online mode

of classes, surprisingly I started to take participation in group discussion and without any hesitation, I started to speak in moderate English as I did not have the fear of being felt insulted in front of the audience but it is also true that there is no better alternative of traditional classes as we are used to it from our childhood”.

Jamil is from Bogra and he has passed SSC and HSC from private school and college. There were multimedia facilities both in his school and college but his teachers used Bangla as a medium of instruction even in English class. Due to some personal reasons, he had to drop one ESL course and he had to take one course at this 4th semester. Before switching to online classes, he completed two courses at campus and as he had previous experience, he had less confusions during online semester but still Jamil said,

“I have Bangla medium background and physical classes helped me a lot to improve my English but I think online activities are okay for writing classes but speaking skills are not developed. I just pray to Allah so that this pandemic end soon and we can go back to our regular classes”.

Dipa, Mim and Tanha are friends and they started their undergraduate journey during lockdown when online mode was the only option to continue studies. As they were freshers, it is natural they did not have any experience of attending the classes at university level. They are school friends and their major is Pharmacy. I had to take their interview on Facebook messenger as they are now at Jamalpur. I had to talk to them several times on messenger and the interviews were semi-structured and to some extent, it was flexible. I asked them some questions and also gave them enough scope to express their opinion freely. They studied at Bangla medium school and college and did not have multimedia facilities at their classrooms. They learned English as a subject rather than a language through memorization and practicing grammar just for the sake of getting good marks. Creative learning and critical thinking were absent.

Dipa told to me,

“I suffered a lot at my first semester. It was like I was talking to a computer. I could not make new friends and I failed to understand the lectures as the teacher used to talk in English. Reading, writing, speaking, listening everything is a challenge for a fresher from Bangla medium background like me in virtual classes. Still, I am suffering. My teachers used to comment that my writing is vague and I need to improve my academic writing. The English classes were nightmares for me and I got poor marks at speaking, writing, listening and reading. My teachers also complained as I used to remain silent in the classes and in viva I could not speak properly. I was so frustrated that I dropped my second semester and at present still suffering in present semester.”

Regarding to this issue, Mim said,

“The online activities are boring. My writing is not improving as I cannot get proper guidelines. In school and college, we had fixed topics for writing but now everything is different. As plagiarism is prohibited, I use paraphrasing apps to paraphrase online articles and often I submit it as I feel exhausted during online classes. I am fed up with online semester and I am in support of regular classes”.

Sadik Hasan is taking writing classes for 6 years and he said,

“I am facing trouble to teach both academic and creative writing. Students also lose interest after few moments in online class. I inspire them and create separate rooms on Zoom meeting for group discussion for any assignment; but sadly, majority of them do not participate. Especially, a good number of Bangla medium students have problems like using vague words, organizing ideas, poor vocabulary etc. I try to teach them through interaction but most of them do not follow the instructions. I think they do not take online classes seriously”.

Nasima Haque who is taking speaking classes for last 11 years said,

“In Bangladesh, we are still used to attend a teacher dominated class and believe learning is only possible in a physical classroom setup. In western countries, online ESL classes are very normal. Moreover, we have 40-50 students in each class and it is not possible to interact with the whole class but still in physical classroom atmosphere, I have seen many students from Bangla medium background who were not confident to speak in English improved a lot at the end of the semester. In online classes, they are not talking to each other though I encourage them. In a physical class, at least I can push the weak students to talk. I think these problems are not only occurring in ESL courses but it is the present scenario in other courses too”.

Chapter 6

Lack of Proper Feedback and Difficulties in Speaking Class

My participants also told that they are struggling to get the proper feedback from the teachers and it is impacting on their performance. Anika said,

‘Most of the time I cannot get the meaning of the feedback and my friends are facing the same problems. For instance, my teacher sends his feedback through text message and yesterday he wrote, “ideas are not well-organized”, now I am confused where did I make the mistake and what did he mean by ‘well-organized’.

Anika also added to her statement that

We can understand our teachers are also suffering and it is humanly impossible for them to write broad descriptive feedback in text messages. But we feel very depressed with these short feedbacks and do not feel motivated to improve our speaking and writing as we feel we are not getting a proper guideline.

Atique and Santa were agreed on some points; both of them stated that

One teacher has to answer and check response of hundreds of students at a day and it is natural they cannot write their feedback in detail in emails but it is easy to write comments on paper with pen. We get confused about academic writing as well as creative writing too as we are not getting proper feedback. Speaking skills are not developed at all because the feedback is confusing. We memorize scripts and give presentations. For students like us who are from sub rural areas and had poor facilities in Bangla medium schools and colleges; online language classes are nightmare.

Both the teachers agreed that they are failing to give proper feedback in virtual class and they mentioned the issues of time limitation, large number of students, shortage of teachers, poor internet connection etc. Both the teachers informed me about their struggle. In every section there are 40-45 students and reading a softcopy and writing detailed feedback is a big challenge though in regular classes the number of scripts is same but it is easy to put red cross on hardcopies and write a proper instant comment with a pen. Moreover, if a student fails to understand a feed-back he/she can immediately talk to the teacher personally and the discussion become more fruitful than an email. Moreover, the students complained that some of the faculties provide common feedback for all students and in the feedback, there is no specific point. The students think that teachers do so to save their time. The two teachers who are the participants of my research accepted this fact and they said they are helpless to do so as there are too many students in one section and it is the root of every problem.

The major problems that students are facing in speaking class and activities. Especially, students from Bangla medium backgrounds are suffering the most. Santa, Jamil, Anika and other participants mentioned about their situation. Jamil described their problems and said that

We never had any conversation in English before coming to university. The application of English in our daily lives was limited to, “sorry”, “thank you”, “excuse me” and these types of small phrases. However, in a physical classroom some-how we managed but in online classes, it is like a computer is talking to us.

Saba commented that

Oral skills are not only about fluency, pronunciation and other language related issues; but body language, eye contact, these are also very important and these things are not possible in online classes. Moreover, for written assignments there are many ways to cheat with the help of technology but somehow, we manage in writing but our performance in the speaking classes is not satisfactory.

All the participants agreed they are not getting the opportunities of practicing eye contact, appropriate gestures, tones etc. and they think though some of the introvert students are taking online speaking classes positively but in the long run, they are the worst victims as in future they may face problem in their academic and job career as they are not improving their communication skills. In fact, many of the participants think online speaking classes are destroying their communication skills.

Chapter 7

Physical and Psychological Problems and their Impact on the Performance of the Students

Tanha told me,

“Sitting in front of the computer screen and typing assignments is a mental and physical torture. As now assignments are the main way of assessment, we are getting too much pressure. I usually try to skip speaking classes as I do not have previous experience of attending classes where the lecture is delivered in English. Writing is a little bit easier as there is software like google translator, paraphrasing tools, auto correction in MS word etc. Still, I get poor marks. I am getting depressed day by day and I personally do not prefer online ESL courses”.

The other students are also struggling just like Tanha. Sitting in front of the computer screen is creating health issues like headache, irritation in eyes, back pain, shoulder pain, high blood pressure, panic attack etc. Even I got to know that one student had panic attack and many students are taking help from psychologists. As a result, students are losing interest in online ESL courses as well as the other courses too. In spite of getting motivated to improve their English they are getting frustrated and online semester is becoming a burden for them. Mental and physical health goes hand in hand. As students are getting sick, they are getting psychologically disturbed too which is impacting on their performance. Apart from these reasons, there are some other factors which are hampering the performance of the students. As during this lockdown students are sitting at home for a long period, they are not getting the opportunities of group studies; especially those who are from sub rural areas, are now out of Dhaka and cannot meet their fellow mates. It has a negative impact on their mental health because education is not only about learning from books but communicating and socializing with classmates is also important.

Another important point that I have discovered after talking to the students is the lack of co-operation of the family members at home. The participants are from sub-rural areas and though most of their parents are educated but there is still a belief in our culture that there is no alternative of real-life traditional classes where teachers deliver lectures and students take

notes. They think students waste time in online classes and private universities are making money in name of online classes. This belief is stronger in rural and sub-rural areas. Majority of the participants said they share rooms with their siblings and cannot attend the classes with full attention. Parents also interrupt in between of the classes. Female students are the major victims and are asked to help in household chores even when the classes are running. Families believe online classes are useless and they do not support the students. These issues indirectly create a negative impact on the critical thinking of the students and these types of psychological torture discourage them to work on their assignments properly. Though as university level students, it is their responsibility to handle everything by their own but during this pandemic situation students need a friendly environment to attend classes from home.

Chapter 8

Some Positive Sides of Online ESL Classes

Though there are several complaints, problems and challenges faced by both the teachers and students, still I surprisingly found some positive sides after gathering all the information. Though the usefulness is few in number but still a single positive point can bring huge change. While collecting the data, the participants hardly mentioned the positiveness of the online courses that is why this chapter is also short in length.

The first thing I have found that, the introvert students or weak students who are willing to improve themselves, try to talk in the class as they do not need to worry about the audiences or they do not feel humiliated due to their poor English. One participant said,

“I ask more questions in online classes and I think it is a big achievement for me who used to be so shy in physical classroom environment. Now this small achievement is helping me to build-up my self-confidence level and hope that will help me in future when regular classes will start”.

Sarowar shared his experience in this way,

“I think everyone is more conscious of the negative sides but I personally think I am having some privileges as I am an introvert. Now I can take participation in class without any hesitation as there are no audience in front me; moreover, I get enough time at home to study by myself. It is true that I cannot get proper attention of my teachers but to improve my academic writing and oral skills, I get more time to research on internet and as a university student; it is important to be self-sufficient”.

Along with this, another important point is, group chat on Facebook or online discussion board is getting more priority in online ESL courses and students need to maintain formal tone and mode while writing any comment or asking questions. Some teachers are allocating marks for online group discussion though chatting. This is helping the students to develop language skills.

Nasima both said,

“In our education system, we all run after getting more marks rather than learning; so, we as teachers are adopting new ways to draw the attention of the students. Some teachers are allocating 5-10 marks for online discussion so that the students participate for the sake of getting marks”.

Sadik told, “I think one of the positive sides of online classes is that the students are trying to study by themselves as in our context we have normalized that teacher spoon-fed the students and tell them everything”.

I got to know from the teachers that students are doing better in writing opinion-based answers as they are getting enough scope to think and research from home. Moreover, creative writing is preferred more than academic writing by the students in online courses. Comparatively, students are doing well in free or creative writing rather than rule-based writing. When I asked the students regarding this issue, majority of the students agreed to similar points. However, another interesting fact that I have found from the participants is as students are given more assignments now, and they have to type these assignments on MS word, some students shared some positive sides too. For instance, they are organizing ideas in paras while writing essays. I found these types of positive sides from the responses of google forms. Fahim said,

‘I had a bad habit of writing any answer in one single para on exam scripts and my teachers warned me several times but during the exams I used to be so nervous that I could not notice it but now while typing all the answers on Microsoft Word, I can clearly notice that writing answers in one single para seems wired and I correct it consciously, so I think this small step is also a positive side’.

Chapter 9

Discussion

This chapter contains the critical reflection of the previous chapters which describes the collected data from the interviews of the participants. I have tried to find out the inter-relation between every piece of information to come to a conclusion and at the end of the chapter, few recommendations have been suggested for solving the problems.

The first point that I have found is the lack of interest of the students about online classes and most of the students are not sincere. They do not take it seriously. For this issue, only the students cannot be blamed. Nasima Haque, who is an experienced teacher said, ‘Our whole education system is problematic and we still believe study can only take place in physical classroom atmosphere. Our students are so much dependent on their teachers and they do not try to explore anything by their own’.

Majority of the students accepted this and stated that

We are so much dependent on traditional classes and education system that we need to be pushed by our teachers to study. Every day we go to class and the teacher needs to remind us about our assignments. Now we are not facing our teachers directly and in virtual classes, the teachers cannot push us and we always try to find short cuts to submit the assignments.

Secondly, there is almost no change in the outline of online writing and speaking classes and almost all the contents are same as the previous normal classes before switching into online mood. After talking to the students, it has been found that the activities are almost the same. In the previous chapters, I have mentioned that most of the students are struggling with formal writing assignments. From the interviews, it has been found that the first-year students have little knowledge about the structures of formal essay, paragraph writing. Students who studied in the schools located in sub-rural areas mainly learned essay, paragraph, letter writing through memorization rather practicing the structure, so as a result, at online platform they are more confused with formal writing but from the gathered data, it has been showed they are doing better in creative writing or writing answers of open-ended questions. Formal academic writing contents are taught at the beginning of the semester but it is fine for traditional classes but in virtual classes, it is decreasing the confidence level of the students and they are losing their interest.

The other important fact that came into light after analyzing the findings is the impact of previous criteria to evaluate the speaking skills of the students. For example, students are asked to give presentation on social problems and they are asked to use transitional words, pauses, hedges and cushions, maintaining formal tone etc. In a real-life classroom, the weaker students can observe the performance of the other students and get a better idea but in online ESL courses, students from Bangla medium students are suffering more and the participants have already mentioned about their struggles. Almost all of them have never spoke in English at their school and college life and suddenly in this online ESL course, they are getting frustrated as they cannot observe their other classmates from English medium background and get an idea.

Moreover, absence of team work is also affecting the language learning skills. According to Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma & Singh, (2021), individuals are motivated to work hard to develop social skills in the school environment, which might not be available in an online setting.

All the students have complained teachers are giving more assignments and as they have to work on computer more long time, they are having more health problems; such as headache, burning eyes, back pain, shoulder pain and as a result they feel exhausted and adopt unfair application of technology. They use paraphrasing apps, Google translator, keeping books/notebooks under laptop during presentations and reading out rather than instant oral presentation etc. In our culture, there is a norm that the more pressure you give to your students, the more they learn but sometimes it becomes a burden for the students and though they work hard but they cannot acquire the lesson. The students who took participation in this research, informed that they sometimes adopt unfair ways to complete homework to meet deadlines and this extra burden is creating negative attitude towards online ESL courses moreover, it is not developing their English speaking and writing skills.

Apart from these negative sides, surprisingly I have found few positive responses too. Some students said that they feel free to talk in English in online classes as they do not have the fear of being judged and as they are shy in nature, this online platform is helping them to practice speaking. Though successful conversation also needs eye contact, body language, expressions etc. but at least they are trying to speak and in future, it may possible that they will confidently take participation in class discussion in a real-life classroom. So, it can be considered as baby steps towards bigger success.

After analyzing all the findings from the participants and keeping their complaints, suggestions in mind, some recommendations can be proposed to overcome the problems:

- a. During covid-19 pandemic, online setting is only the option to take classes, so the outlines and activities should be totally revised by ELT professionals.
- b. As the students who are from sub-rural areas are suffering a lot, it is important to create a comfort zone for them. Informal classroom discussion should be given more priority in the speaking class to break down the ice between the students from every background.
- c. As students' major priority is getting higher marks, more marks should be allocated for class discussion.
- d. ESL courses should be revised and there can be a separate course designed for the normal classes and those contents will be taught when the students can return to normal classes.
- e. As ESL courses are language courses, language class should be fun not an extra burden. Assignments should be less in number. Teachers can teach the fundamentals of the target language through the real-life contents. For example, students can be asked to keep a journal entry where they will note down their own progress, journey, struggles etc. and the teacher can encourage the students to do so for bonus points and they can do it with their own will; no pressure will be given.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

The research has some limitations as it has been completed within a short period but at the end of the research, some new aspects came into light which can lead the future studies. I have focused on the two language skills; speaking and writing and found the problems in online ESL courses. The findings of the research hints that shifting to online mode has brought out new type of problems such as mental and physical issues, misuse of technology and so on. We are familiar with the problems of traditional classrooms in our country but virtual classes are new to us and it is not confined between a teacher and the students. The surroundings of a student, parental support, good technological facilities etc. are interrelated to this online mood. So, the co-operation of parents, teachers, students and authority is equally needed.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions (for the students)

1. What type of activities you did in English classes during your school and college life?
2. What type of problems are occurring in online ESL courses?
3. What are the major problems in speaking class?
4. What are the major problems in writing class?
5. How does writing and speaking skills are hampering/improving after shifting to online classes?
6. What are the influencing factors which encourage/discourage to attend online language courses?
7. Do you get enough opportunity to interact with your classmates?
8. How is the environment of your home for attending online classes?
9. How do you complete your assignments with the help of technology?
10. How do you select your assignment/presentation topic?
11. How does your teachers interact you about the feedback?
12. Do you see any positive sides of online semester in case of improving your English writing and speaking?
13. Are you satisfied with the online classes? Yes/no? please describe.
14. What are your suggestions for solving the problems in writing and speaking class?

Appendix B: Interview Questions (for the teachers)

1. How do you provide feedback?
2. How online ESL courses are affecting the English writing and speaking skills? Please share your opinion.
3. Do you have any suggestion for making change in online mood of the courses?
4. Who are found to be the weaker students or worst sufferer students in online ESL classes and why?
5. How does online courses are motivating/demotivating the students to adopt unfair means to get marks and how it is impacting their writing and speaking?
6. What are the criteria for evaluating the online speaking and writing activities?
7. What are the negative/positive sides of online mood?
8. How do you encourage your students to interact during class time?
9. How do you make sure the classroom discussion is meaningful or not?
10. What type of assignment/activities you prefer?
11. What are the mistakes students make in online class?
12. What can be the future problems in writing and speaking of the students because of online language classes?
13. Is there any solution to solve the future problems?
14. What are your personal thoughts on the communication skills of your students?