



Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal

ISSN: 2634-9876

Vol. 10, 2023, pp. 177-188

Journal homepage: <https://cerj.educ.cam.ac.uk/submissions/>



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To cite this article:

Kartha, R., & Stroupe, R. (2023). COVID-19 and the Evolving Classroom: Perspectives from Two Indian Classrooms. *Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal*, 10, 177-188.



Link to the article online: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.104603>



Published online: 14 December 2023



COVID-19 and the Evolving Classroom: Perspectives from Two Indian Classrooms

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Abstract

As in other parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic in India brought with it an unprecedented change in the fabric and structure of the classroom in Indian schools, with teachers having to shift from in-person teaching to online instruction without prior exposure or training to this new interface of teaching and learning. This study—which was part of a larger paper on the newly introduced Arts-Integrated Learning (AIL) approach to teaching in a section of Indian schools—throws light on the perils and the possibilities of online instruction as experienced by teachers and students in two Indian schools. Drawing on the voices of the participants from semi-structured interviews that were conducted over a duration of two months, the study reveals the challenges posed to teachers and students by voluntary and involuntary disengagement, deeply embedded systemic pressures such as shortage of time, technological shortcomings, and teacher-centric pedagogical styles. The study further revealed the changing role and function of the teacher in the classroom, from a source of knowledge to a facilitative agent in the learning process. Additionally, both teachers and students highlighted the benefits of online instruction, citing time saved as an important factor. Given these perspectives from the two most significant stakeholders in the educational landscape, the study offers practical recommendations that could potentially mitigate the challenges posed by online instruction and reimagine the online interface as a tool that could aid both teachers and students in their interactions.

Keywords: online learning, Indian classrooms, teacher-student interaction, emergency remote teaching, online teaching

COVID-19 and the Evolving Classroom: Perspectives from Two Indian Classrooms

In March 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns that were put in place by the Indian government, educational institutions throughout the Indian subcontinent were brought to an abrupt close. Consequently, English teachers in Indian schools had to transition rapidly from a gradual use of the internet in their classrooms, to a sudden and unexpected reliance on technology (Shardha, 2020). In particular, this expedited shift towards an unprecedented dependence on online teaching did not always take place with the planned decision-making that accompanies quality online instruction, leading more schools to apply what can be termed ‘emergency remote teaching’ (Hodges et al, 2020) rather than successful online instruction. Subsequently, several Indian schools have had to construct their own online instructional models in an abrupt and instantaneous manner during the COVID-19 pandemic, without access to adequate support and without planned consideration.

Until the pandemic, online teaching was not viewed as a favoured option in India, given the paucity of technological infrastructure as well as technical support for teachers (Joshi & Vinay, 2020; Kamal & Illiyan, 2021). In addition, teachers were not equipped with the skills to teach and assess their classes through the online interface, nor were they afforded a choice in the matter of switching from in-person classes to online teaching (Kamal & Illiyan, 2021). Therefore, although online teaching was at first considered an auxiliary aspect of education for teachers (Joshi et al, 2021), the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic caused in-person teaching to be replaced by online instruction, compelling teachers to commit to the virtual world more than ever before. As a result, as Shardha (2020) notes, English teachers have been unable to assess the success of the online format, and while online learning was initially seen to offer greater freedom to teachers, the reality has been starkly different, with teachers feeling more limited by the format. As Allen et al (2020) further observe, the pandemic caused teachers to move into a tense time, filled with ambiguity where their work and profession are concerned. This is particularly true when considering online learning, where teachers and students in the English classroom attempt to adjust to a new idea of normality in education. In addition, teachers are tasked with ensuring that student engagement remains high, causing an increase in workload as well as the pressure to adapt to technology at a fast pace (Allen et al., 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017, as cited in Bailey & Lee, 2020, p. 181). In the backdrop of COVID-19, this paper highlights several challenges faced by Indian teachers and students, with a focus on how the pandemic has resulted in the rapidly changing role of the teacher as one of the several consequences of online instruction.

Literature Review

English language teaching in India centres the four-skills approach, i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking, with a focus on long-term proficiency and fluency in writing and speaking (NCERT, 2019). However, student engagement is a distinct challenge that teachers and students face during online instruction, primarily since there is a perceptible shift in the role of the teacher—from being an educator who disseminates knowledge to a facilitator who can intellectually stimulate students in the virtual environment (Shardha, 2020). In addition, teachers tend to be concerned with the decline in student-teacher communication through the online platform, the use of which they believe results in a heightened sense of disconnection among students (Heaton-Shrestha et al, 2009). Furthermore, this disconnect is mirrored in teachers, as Shardha (2020) asserts, since the virtual classroom is not an enclosed space and therefore shares no physical resemblance with a real classroom, resulting in an absence of social connection and causing a strain on teachers since they are unable to see a physical response from students. This lack of social and physical interaction can cause both students and teachers to feel a wide gulf of detachment from the teaching-learning process. As Jefferey et al. (2014) note, students are likely to be less engaged when they feel a sense of alienation from their peers and the subject being learned, further highlighting the role of the teacher and perceived teacher proximity in the online environment. Furthermore, where language learning is concerned, as Sayer and Braun (2020) observe, this immediate interaction with classmates socially and academically is what provides language learners with an added advantage where linguistic communication is concerned.

In India, challenges to internet connectivity and device-related problems are an additional area of concern in online teaching-learning environments. Particularly in households that are economically disadvantaged, access to online learning and the resources required to study may not be as easily available, whereas students from economically stronger households may not face the same barriers (Daniel, 2020).

Students who join online classes during the day may have a number of connectivity issues, particularly since smartphones and other devices are likely to be shared between members of one family (Shardha, 2020; Sahu, 2020). In addition, students in urban cities appear to have more stable access to the internet and online connectivity as opposed to their counterparts in rural areas (Shardha, 2020). Therefore, the diversity and the disparity in resources within a single classroom can present a formidable barrier to successful online teaching and learning. The digital divide is evident in other ways within the urban context, i.e. in the lack of technological expertise among teachers (Muthuprasad et al, 2021) and reduced social interaction and community.

As Daniel (2020) argues, students and parents will benefit from educational organizations that offer additional support where domestic environments may not be suited to schoolwork. Furthermore, despite the challenges Indian schools are facing, examinations have been made compulsory and teachers have had to alter examinations to fit the online learning environment, often with very little time for preparation (Sahu, 2020). Therefore, the introduction of the online interface in education is an area of exploration that requires careful consideration, particularly in light of the limitations that the format presents to language learning as well as student engagement.

Method

This study—which examined the online teaching and learning interface in two schools—was conducted as part of a larger study on the Arts-Integrated Learning (AIL) curriculum approach being adopted in two schools in urban India. Employing a qualitative line of inquiry, all data for this study were collected with an exploratory focus over a period of two months. The two schools that were part of the study, Institution X and Institution Y are situated in two different states in urban India. To observe the virtual learning environment in both schools, online classroom observations were conducted in addition to semi-structured interviews with principals, students, and teachers of secondary and senior secondary classes. The schools chosen for the purpose of this study were Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) schools affiliated to the Indian National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), which has implemented AIL curricula across all affiliated schools. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all data for this research was collected virtually, using web-based communication technology.

Rural schools in India tend to have limited access to internet connectivity, and facilities and resources—both human and physical. Teachers in rural schools in India are far less likely to have access to teacher training than their urban counterparts, and as a result often remain unaware of current improvements or advances in their field (Diwan, 2015). Therefore, two schools in urban India were chosen for the study on the basis that teachers and students at urban schools were most likely to have access to the internet to be able to engage in online classes, which all CBSE schools have explicitly prioritised (ISID, 2015). Furthermore, since India has a varied linguistic landscape, with over 22 officially recognised languages (Bhattacharya, 2013), students from CBSE schools come from a variety of multilingual backgrounds, studying English as a Second Language—an integral area of study in this research. Institution X is associated with a recognised chain of CBSE schools that have a nationwide presence. The student population comes from middle and upper-middle class families, drawn from a mixture of communities around the local area, indicative of a typical CBSE school (Anvekar & Sugant, 2014). Since Institution Y is located in one of India's largest metro cities, students hail from a diverse mix of backgrounds from both within the local area and beyond. In this way, despite the differences in the overall school and class sizes, the demographic population of both schools was similar in terms of the wide array of socio-economic backgrounds of teachers and students, and the similarity of experiences expressed in interviews attest to this.

Participants

While Institution Y had approximately 1600 students enrolled, Institution X had a student population of approximately 450 students. Four English classes at Institution X and six English classes at Institution Y were observed as part of the study. Both schools differed in their choice of web-based communication applications. While students at Institution X were 12 to 21 students in an English class, Institution Y classrooms had between 25 to 55 students in a single class. To protect anonymity, students, teachers and principals were renamed with a coding system to match their respective institutions (Institution X and Institution Y), and therefore all

participants were groups in accordance with this code and appropriate serial numbers, i.e. principals (PX and PY), teachers (T1X, T1Y etc.) and students (S1X, S1Y etc.).

Interviews

Principals of both Institution X and Institution Y were interviewed in addition to three English teachers from the secondary and senior secondary sections at Institution X and three English teachers from the senior secondary section from Institution Y. All interviews were conducted over web-based communication applications. Interview timings varied between thirty minutes to 45 minutes. Of the twenty-two students who were interviewed as part of the research study, six students were from Institution X, while 16 students were from Institution Y. The six students from school A were from grades nine, 10 and 11 whereas the students from Institution Y were all from grades 11 and 12. All students were interviewed over the internet. Interview timings varied from 20 minutes to 40 minutes. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of participants involved.

Classroom Observations

All classroom observations were conducted using web-based applications. A total of four classes, i.e. two classes from the ninth grade, and one class each from the tenth and eleventh grades were observed at Institution X. Class sizes varied between 12-20 students and each class was held for a duration of 40 minutes. Of the six classes observed at Institution Y, four classes were from the 11th grade, and two classes were from the 12th grades. The 12th grade classes included all four class sections. The class sizes varied between 25-55 depending on the grade, as well as the number of sections, since the 11th grade classes consisted of one section each, while the two 12th grade classes were a combination of two sections, i.e. sections A and C together and sections B and D together.

Results

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all classroom observations were all conducted online, and for a majority of the classes, participant videos remained off. From the outset, this meant that there were no visuals to base the classroom observations on, since neither students nor teachers could be observed for their facial expressions or non-verbal communication. To a considerable extent, this meant that the observer was equally disconnected from the observation setting, and largely depended on the audio function to be able to gauge the class discussion. The ten classes that were observed were largely teacher-centric, and teachers appeared to be constrained by the time limitation of the 40-minute lecture window. This was evident in the rapid movement from topic-to-topic and by the substantial time teachers had to spend at the start and end of the lesson trying to allow students into the virtual classroom.

At Institution X, teachers greeted students as they joined the class on the school's preferred web-based application. Teachers repeatedly instructed students to turn on their video cameras, although in one class, the teacher's own video remained off. Teachers of both classes intermittently urged students to switch on their videos throughout the duration of their class. Although a few students complied, a majority of videos remained off. One teacher greeted students individually and repeated instructions for students who joined late, while reminding them to join class on time. In the ninth and tenth grade classes, the teacher elicited student responses by encouraging the use of the chat box, and asked students to type in the answers to lesson-related questions. In another class, the teacher requested two students to ensure that their peers were responding to all the questions being asked. The final class observation of a ninth-grade class was a hybrid lecture, where the teacher was present in the physical classroom, along with a few students, while others attended the same class online. While the teacher attempted to involve students in both groups, students who were attending online were unable to gauge whether the teacher was directing questions at their group or at those physically present. Both teachers registered attendance at the end of class by calling out student names to ensure their presence on the call. Institution X had smaller classes, and classes appeared to be more active, particularly since the chat box was being used. At times, however, teachers had to repeatedly ask students for a response. Certain students tended to answer more than others, though the teachers attempted to call on other students who remained silent.

At Institution Y, student videos appeared to be less of a priority as teachers frequently shared their computer screen through their web-based application with students, particularly in order to share pre-made PowerPoint presentations, with the exception of one teacher who used a YouTube video to highlight an explanation about a specific lesson. All three teachers attempted to engage students by asking questions intermittently, however—with the exception of three or four active voices—most students remained silent. Though teachers intermittently checked with the students if they were comprehending what was being said, students appeared to have difficulty interrupting the teacher to ask questions. In addition, in some classes, teachers appeared prone to calling on students who were already active participants, while the silent students remained uncalled on. In one class, the teacher was specifically instructed to turn on their videos since the students were carrying out a grammar-based exercise in the class, and the teacher instructed students to turn on their videos to be monitored by the teacher, an instruction most students complied with. Despite students and teachers living in predominantly urban settings, internet and connectivity issues (Shardha, 2020) were evident across classes, and students frequently dropped off the calls and re-joined classes during the course of the lecture. In some cases, this caused interruptions to the class when teachers from Institution Y could not see which student had dropped off the call and had to be interrupted by other classmates who then informed the teacher to allow the student to re-join. Class participation was encouraged by all teachers, though certain students tended to respond more than others. In addition, students appeared to hesitate when asking questions or clearing their doubts, as this would mean students had to talk over their teacher and interrupt the teacher in order to be heard. In addition, in some cases the teachers used presentation slides and spoke for the entire 40-minute duration of the lecture. As one student observed:

Well, basically, there's no interaction. It's just like sitting with a mic muted and cameras switched off and the teacher is just repeating the presentation slides. And just like she's telling a story, basically. She's just telling things, but it isn't grasped in the minds of people, since everyone in class has different capabilities. (S6Y)

In such cases, where students experience a largely passive learning environment, teachers would have no way of knowing if students remained completely attentive or even interested in the lesson during the class.

Principals

Principals of both schools commented on the experience of teaching and learning through virtual platforms due the COVID-19 pandemic. Principal X explained that the school had conducted orientation sessions with parents and students including on topics such as cybercrime as well as about devices that would be suitable to study with. In addition, the school had conducted online sessions for each section (primary, middle school, secondary school) as well as for teachers and students of every class. Principal Y explained that though teachers at their school underwent three to four basic training sessions, technology was not a familiar tool for teachers. Principal Y observed that students were more familiar with the internet, and therefore often more technologically advanced than their teachers.

Issues of visual disengagement

Both principals highlighted the challenges faced by teachers when teaching without being able to see their students, since videos during online classes remained off. Principal Y explained that video sharing was not made compulsory so as to protect both teacher and student privacy, particularly since students hailed from varying economic backgrounds and had several constraints such as sharing a small work or study space with multiple family members. Principal X cited the issue of internet bandwidth and connectivity as being a challenge to keeping videos on for the duration of classes. Both principals believed that routine spot-checks on students—asking them to turn on their videos intermittently—was a tool that teachers frequently used in order to ensure that students were present. As Principal Y commented:

In between what we do is to check whether the child is there or not; what we do is we ask them some questions and then we say yes, I want to see you. But then some of them have their constraints too because it might be a small home, and then the parent is also working. Often we can see in the background that there is a lot of disturbance. You can hear the cooker whistle, you can hear some mothers screaming too. (PY)

The principals further observed that online education represented fresh opportunities for growth while simultaneously acknowledging the challenges facing teachers and students, such as issues of internet connectivity, privacy and differing economic experiences among students.

The role of parents in online learning

Schools and teachers appear to face an increasing challenge in engaging students in the online interface, and therefore, the role of the parent in the learning process appears to assume greater significance than ever before. Principal X observed that parents were an important variable in the online learning experience, highlighting the general expectation that if a parent was present at home, their role was to support the teacher by ensuring that the student was engaged in online classes.

Benefits of online learning

Principal Y believed that there were benefits to online teaching while acknowledging that teachers needed to spend time preparing more than ever before. Principal Y considered the use of presentation slides an advantage, since teachers in the pre-pandemic era had not had the opportunity to embrace technology to the extent that the pandemic necessitated. Principal X suggested that the access to online classes now afforded Indian students the opportunity to be on par with the world, and that the role of teachers and students had been altered as a result of this.

For them [students], academics is not self-driven. It's not self-driven. And it cannot work if it is not self-driven...And I hope that this [online] time is bringing that back, because it has to be self-driven studying now. We are only facilitators, to the students who understand that and learn that skill and improve their ways, they're going to survive, the others will perish. There is going to be a big divide between the self-driven ones and others. (PX)

Consequently, Principal X viewed online learning as a leveller in certain ways, giving students from CBSE schools the chance to access learning and learning resources through the virtual interface with greater prospects than they might have been offered within the physical classroom.

Teachers

Pressures of time

Teachers appeared to feel the strain of online teaching (Shardha, 2020) particularly due to the time required to prepare for online classes and the time required to understand and use technology effectively. Since videos were not required to be switched on, teachers experienced a sense of disconnect with their classes. As one teacher commented, "we are just totally mechanical, you are like a machine in each other's place. I'm the machine here and they [students] are the machine there. So, it's difficult to teach them (T2Y)". Not being able to observe students in a physical setting was another challenge that teachers faced regularly.

In one-on-one teaching, when they are in front of us we know, we can understand their needs. But now we don't see them. And we have 40 - 45 minutes after which they have another class. So during class, our school hours, we can't even talk to them as we would in the corridors. And it's a little bit difficult to guide them and train them. (T3Y)

Teachers agreed that videos remained off due to privacy concerns on both sides, but acknowledged the interruptions caused to class time when requesting students to respond or answer to a question:

Pressures of engagement.

As Shardha (2020) highlighted, the lack of response from students produces a strain on teachers, which was evident during the classroom observations, as teachers in some classes continued to ask students questions without receiving a response. Internet connectivity issues appeared to be a challenge not only for teachers but also for some students, leading to involuntary disengagement. As one teacher commented, the control that teachers usually have over a physical classroom appears to be almost entirely missing from the online interface, particularly when teachers have no way of knowing whether or not students are fully engaged in the lesson.

I think these are the most testing times for a teacher's patience because you have little control now and you can only just tell them [students], you have nothing more to do than that. And in between the class it really becomes very difficult to keep on reminding them to switch on the camera. (T3X)

Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers turn to the frequent use of presentation slides to conduct their online lessons. This results in a lack of engagement from students, particularly since the teacher has to share the slides through their own screen. In addition, students pointed out that the classroom interface is at a disadvantage when compared with the booming industry of Indian private coaching classes, which appear to offer students a wider choice of learning styles.

Students

Voluntary disengagement

Since the use of videos were not compulsory during classes, students found ways to multitask between online lessons, using the time to relax, self-study or catch up on sleep. While students agreed that attending online classes without videos was generally not enjoyable, the newfound freedom from routine and the choice to voluntarily disengage from the lesson was a welcome change. However, some students mentioned the disconnection that teachers were feeling through the teaching and learning process. As one student observed:

The most common thing that students do is that they join the class and then leave. So like, a teacher doesn't know whether the student is there or whether he or she is learning, like sometimes when teachers ask questions, the student does not reply or they do not give any response. So it's not as effective as physical learning. (S2X)

Students further acknowledged the effect that voluntary disengagement from their peers had an involuntary effect on their own engagement within the online classroom.

Involuntary disengagement

For those students who experienced involuntary disengagement, the absence of video appeared to highlight a stark sense of disconnect from the already-detached online interface.

It feels like I'm studying in a dark room, there's a spotlight on myself. And there's no one. And from a dark corner sound is coming and I have to study from there. To be honest, I don't like online learning. I'm just waiting for the time when this pandemic gets over, and I just want to go to school and learn in a better way. (S1X)

Students also felt that the online interface allowed little room for two-way interaction, citing the challenges that arise from teachers and students not being physically present in the same space. As one student observed:

When you are in a physical class, you can raise your hand and you can actually interrupt the teacher without being rude. But when she's teaching an online class, your voice, you know, overpowers her voice, and then it kind of gets messy. (S12Y)

This interruption was especially challenging in classrooms where students numbered beyond 25, particularly if the chat box function was not used.

The changing roles of teachers and students

Online learning could afford students the opportunity to become autonomous learners, assuming greater responsibility for their learning. In particular, students create their own routine and have greater ability to voluntarily disengage from the online classroom and use their time in a way that suits them. However, this calls into question the role of the teacher, who may be conducting the class, but may not necessarily have engaged students. On the whole, the online interface places students rather than teachers in control of their own learning, shifting the dynamic from a teacher-centred classroom environment.

Discussion

The current online lesson interface in the English language classrooms that participated in this study highlights the challenges faced by teachers and students in the course of teaching and learning English online, as well as the dynamic change in the role of the teacher and the student in the language teaching and learning process. The challenges of teaching and learning through online classes were evident in interviews with participants as well as during classroom observations.

Internet connectivity issues proved to be a challenge for teachers and students even within the urban setting, since a lack of network and connectivity would cause students to disconnect from the class intermittently. Teachers would then have to interrupt their session to let these students back in, and if they were unaware, other students had to point out that the student who disconnected was waiting to be let in through the waiting room on the web-based application.

While most teachers had developed some level of familiarity with the technology that was being used by the school, the online applications being used often appeared to limit teachers to certain techniques. With the web application used in Institution X, teachers were unable to share their screens, and therefore relied more on auditory reminders and the use of the chat box whereas teachers in Institution Y, who used a different application regularly shared their screen to showcase their presentation slides and videos.

In classrooms with larger class ratios, the online interface meant that teachers were often unable to keep track of the wider classroom, limiting their focus to the students who were active participants in the lesson. In line with a more teacher-centric approach to English teaching, teachers using the web-based application did not use breakout rooms as a means through which to enable students to work in smaller groups. However, doing so would still mean that the teacher would have to create and monitor at least 10 or 15 breakout rooms on their own, since in some cases, the number of students in a class could go beyond 50.

Teachers spent a greater amount of time than usual preparing slides or other media in order to teach a lesson. At Institution X, teachers used a more discussion-based approach, calling out to students intermittently while also keeping the chat box active, and were able to do so since classes were smaller in size. At Institution Y, teachers created presentation slides to explain grammatical concepts or textbook lessons, which required prior preparation. However, as some students pointed out, presentations did not necessarily provide a high level of engagement and appeared to be a possible cause for voluntary disengagement. The use of presentations also limited the interaction in the classroom, since the focus was primarily on the teacher and their screens. Therefore, students in classrooms where presentation slides were used as a tool repeatedly were likely to experience a fundamentally passive learning environment, and teachers could not know whether their students remained attentive or showed interest in the duration of the lesson. Furthermore, while teachers viewed the idea of presentation slides as a positive measure compared to classrooms where virtual resources were infrequent, students considered the use of PowerPoint slides a reason for voluntary disengagement.

Citing the Indian socio-economic context, principals and teachers believed that students may not always have had access to privacy within their homes and therefore schools adopted a more lenient policy towards the use of videos during online lectures. Some teachers and students expressed the belief that not all students had an adequate sense of propriety and that some students had appeared in inappropriate clothing or had adopted inappropriate postures during the lessons. These situations caused teachers further stress as they had to explicitly reprimand or in some cases, remove the offending student from the classroom. Students and teachers further referred to the change in routines induced by the pandemic, where students tended to wake later than usual for a school day, often just a few minutes before their online class began. As a result, several students mentioned that they preferred their videos to be off. In addition, some teachers appeared to feel that the use of videos was unsafe, particularly since other schools in the national media had reports of students creating inappropriate memes out of screenshots of teachers, captured during online lessons. However, despite these views, both groups, i.e. teachers and students believed that the lack of videos highlighted the present disconnect in online classes to a larger degree.

As videos could remain off for an entire lesson, students commented on the ease of voluntary disengagement that allowed them to use the opportunity to study other subjects during their English lesson, or in some cases, catch up on sleep or browse the internet during their online class. For those students who did not view English as a difficult subject, class time could be spent studying a more challenging subject. For students

who attended private classes in addition to their regular school classes, the online interface offered greater freedom and saved students a significant amount of time that they would otherwise spend commuting. However, students expressed that despite the ease of voluntary disengagement, the lack of physical and social interaction was an ongoing challenge, and that the classroom community and atmosphere that accompanied physical classrooms could not be replaced.

Moreover, for students who attempted to engage during the online lesson, the largely passive experience appeared to create multiple challenges. For students who could not understand aspects of the lecture, the online interface impeded the ability to ask questions. Being unable to see their classmates or their teachers, students often hesitated to ask questions or clear their doubts for fear of interrupting or talking over the teacher. Students also conceded that the experience of online learning was as much a challenge for their teachers as for them, particularly since teachers were less familiar with technology than students themselves.

Recommendations

As is evident from the voices of students and teachers in the data collected in this study, the lessons from the COVID-19 educational environment further call for the provision of efficient and engaging online instruction in the English classroom.

Flipped classrooms

Schools might benefit from making a concerted effort to revise the structure of their virtual instructional framework by incorporating a flipped classroom model in order to address the various issues of internet connectivity and disengagement. Since schools have little control over student network issues and internet connectivity, the entire structure of the online English classroom could benefit from a model where students are encouraged to use the 40-minute lecture window to share their learnings from reading and writing activities carried out outside of class time, focusing instead on more interactive skills and listening, speaking and discussion-based activities within smaller groups within their online classroom. Both teachers and students could benefit from the use of more breakout rooms and online group tasks.

Spaces for social interaction

Students in the English classroom appear to feel the absence of social interaction that the physical classroom might provide. Therefore, if schools are to remain a relevant place for students to gather on a daily basis, schools must support teachers to be able to find ways in which to aid social interaction within their online classrooms. This could enable a greater sense of interaction among students, while further facilitating a learner-centric approach to classroom activities. While smaller classrooms and class ratios would create room for teachers to feel less pressured, the use of breakout rooms could nevertheless serve as a platform from which teachers could begin to encourage learner autonomy among students.

Professional development focusing on technical skills

English teachers could benefit from specialised lessons provided by their institutions on how to deepen their understanding and use of online communication platforms and web-based applications. If teachers are able to enhance their understanding and use of technological features and applications, this may lead to a significant change in the manner in which English classes are conducted, and subsequently in student engagement and interest levels. The alternative appears to be a far less desirable outcome, where students remain voluntarily or involuntarily disengaged from daily lessons. Moreover, considering the current dependence on the internet as a teaching tool, teachers might benefit from being offered regular training to build skills that are appropriate to the virtual era. This could afford teachers a greater understanding of online applications that are currently in use, as well as through internet resources that could create more collaborative spaces within the virtual classroom.

Reimagining the role of the teacher

Given the circumstances under which teachers conduct lessons online, the role of the teacher in the online English language classroom appears to be shifting from that of a teacher to that of a facilitator. The online interface appears to augment student abilities to become autonomous learners, depending far less on the teacher than in the case of physical classrooms. While in a physical classroom, teachers could teach English and

command attention from students without the use of virtual aids, the role of the teacher in the online classroom is called into question particularly since the students being taught are from a generation that has largely grown up within the framework of technological innovations. How teachers and institutions navigate and approach this shift, reimagining the function, purpose, and role of the teacher could vastly alter the quality of the teaching and learning process in the English classroom.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that while the Indian Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has 21,175 schools in India (CBSE, 2020), the study had access to two CBSE schools in two separate cities in India. However, since the CBSE is affiliated to the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the same regulations apply uniformly to all CBSE schools). Therefore, the two schools chosen for this study can be considered a reasonable representation of CBSE schools across the country. Furthermore, since data for this research thesis was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant limitation to this research was the inability to travel to the country where the research was conducted due to the subsequent travel restrictions imposed by different countries. Furthermore, since both schools that were part of this research were observing the countrywide lockdown in India at the time of data collection, all classes were conducted online, and therefore all classroom observations were conducted online. However, all data that was collected through online class observations and virtual interactions with students and teachers, was in addition to detailed field memos, surveys, questionnaires, and interview transcripts to ensure transparency. This was done by ensuring the validity and reliability of all instruments used, triangulating all data in addition to maintaining clear and thorough memos. While the sample size of participants included in this study was significantly smaller than the numbers of CBSE students who are enrolled in classrooms all over the country, the diversity in cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students can be considered a reasonable representation of CBSE language classrooms across India, particularly since CBSE schools cater to the children of central government employees who come from different regions in India, as well as to locals in the area (Rajeswaran & Avekar, 2014).

Conclusion

The data from this study emphasises the challenges faced by teachers and students in English classrooms at the high school level in two Indian cities. The fundamental shifts in education the world is currently experiencing due to the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic further spotlights the importance of quality online education going forward. To remain relevant in a rapidly changing educational environment, schools might benefit from reconsidering, reimagining, and revising their current online model of teaching. To remain relevant in the process of teaching and learning, the online model could be employed to prioritize student engagement rather than a focus on attendance and the completion of the prescribed syllabus in the English classroom. Moreover, where online learning in India is concerned, issues of connectivity and bandwidth may still prove to be an enduring obstacle even within urban settings. Without being able to wield control over student engagement in online classrooms, teachers and students appear extremely likely to lose motivation but also, importantly, a more tangible sense of connection to one another, thus bringing into question more pressing, foundational assumptions of the teaching and learning process. Finally, the role of teachers within the online classroom may assume a significant shift towards that of a facilitator of learning rather than a subject expert as teachers have traditionally been viewed in India.

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