Education during Pandemic: Perspectives of Secondary School English Teachers from Malaysia, Nepal, and Bangladesh

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Abstract

One of the most affected sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic was education. Abrupt and sudden changes in teaching and learning practices that teachers and students experienced were unprecedented, and the effect is still felt today. Hence, the study sought to identify the challenges secondary English language teachers in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Nepal faced during the pandemic. Adopting a *Comparative Case Study (CCS)* research model, this was a transnational effort to explore the experiences of a cross-border ELT professional community teaching under various restrictions and limitations imposed by the governments in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Five key challenges emerged during the findings, namely: *(i) teaching and learning difficulties, (ii) unreliable and invalid assessments, (iii) infrastructural hurdles in a home learning environment, (iv) student displacement, and (v) compromised teacher wellbeing.* In retrospect, there was a cause for optimism as teachers acquired crucial survival skills, yet most challenges remain valid to this day. So various stakeholders must remain vigilant and devise robust measures in anticipation of future events of this kind and scale.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, impact, challenges, comparative case study*

Introduction

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 significantly impacted every aspect of human life, including economic, social, educational, and health around the world. Millions of people around the world were affected, and many of them lost their lives and life as we knew it no longer existed as we experienced unprecedented challenges (Khanal, 2020). The impact on the educational system was severe, resulting in the forced closure of all educational institutions due to social distancing restrictions. UNICEF (2021) reported that millions of children were displaced from schools due to these lockdowns, with 1 in 7 children missing up to three-fourths of their in-person learning. Different educational institutions responded to the closure with a variety of interventions, depending on the resources, both materials and human, that were at their disposal.

Particularly, the pandemic forced teachers to reconsider and recalibrate social interaction and organisation and, by extension, the existing education sector (Lukas & Yunus, 2021; UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). Teachers struggled to shift from physical, in-person teaching and learning as they were caught unprepared, lacking the knowledge and skills for digital pedagogy. By exploring the challenges faced during pandemics by secondary school teachers of English in three countries: Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Nepal, this paper presents a vertical and lateral understanding of a globalised community of English language practitioners via a comparative study. While teachers from these contexts experienced similar problems and the challenges faced during the pandemic, collecting narrative accounts from these respondents allows experiences unique to individual contexts to emerge. In short, the following research question is central to this investigation: *What are the major challenges that secondary school English language teachers in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Malaysia experienced while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Teaching during the pandemic in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Nepal

As an emerging subject of intense research and study, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector are widely researched and well-documented (Bashir et al., 2021; Jan, 2020; Loose & Ryan, 2020). Undeniably, for teachers, the pandemic was a challenging time for teaching as the looming financial and economic crisis inhibited progress in the field. Previous studies showed that stress and trauma negatively influence academic achievement and, more specifically, language acquisition among learners (Saigh et al., 1996; Söndergaard & Theorell, 2004). Worse, this was exacerbated by school closures worldwide, where "more than 1.2 billion students at all levels of education worldwide had stopped having face-to-face classes" (UNESCO, 2020, p.1). The emerging and widening technological gap in students of different socioeconomic groups meant that those without access to functional technology were far more disadvantaged in digital or remote learning (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). Over time, the COVID-19-induced economic hardship is likely disproportionally severe to children from marginalised groups, especially concerning their participation and engagement in alternative forms of learning such as distance learning (radio, TV, and internet) and the difficult conditions to learn using self-learning materials (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). The following sections include brief discussions on the situations during the pandemic in the Bangladeshi, Malaysian and Nepalese education sector.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the first COVID-19-positive case was officially reported on 8 March 2020, and as a result, the government shut down all educational institutions on March 17, 2020. After extending the closure several times, schools were finally reopened on 12 September 2021 after nearly 18 months of closure, and about 38 million students were affected by the pandemic-related school closures (Hasan, 2021). According to the UNICEF (2021) analysis of school closures report, Bangladesh ranked 3rd across the globe. The report shows the education sector in Bangladesh was severely affected due to the pandemic.

Although after the initial closure, most higher education institutions shifted their classes online,

it was not possible for schools to begin online classes due to many reasons, including the lack of logistics, technological support, internet and digital devices. Very few schools started synchronous online remote teaching, while others took the initiative to record lectures and upload them on social media platforms, mainly Facebook. Under these circumstances, it was very difficult for teachers and students to continue teaching-learning during the pandemic. As Rouf and Rashid (2021) reported, secondary and higher secondary English language teachers in Bangladesh faced many challenges, including unavailability of devices, students' poor class attendance and lack of interaction in classes, teachers' lack of technological skills and training, financial constraints, poor and unstable internet connections, lack of online testing systems, negative physical and psychological impacts, and the overall perceived ineffectiveness of online classes.

Similar kind of barriers that were faced by teachers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic are also reported in other studies (c.f. Ahmed, 2021; Bashir et al., 2021; Das, 2021; Datta, 2022; Farhana et al., 2020; Khan, Jahan, et al., 2021). In another study, Shrestha et al. (2022) categorised the challenges in both Nepal and Bangladesh contexts into three groups: school-level barriers (first-order barriers), teacher-level barriers (second-order barriers) and system-level barriers. They identified a lack of ICT infrastructure and poor Internet connection as first-order barriers, a lack of teacher efficacy and confidence in using online teaching-learning tools as second-order barriers, and lack of institutional policy and clarity in the assessment as the system-level barriers. The study reported poor internet connection, frequent power cuts, lack of ICT competence, and mental wellbeing issues as the major challenges. Although physical classes have resumed for over a year now, some of the challenges teachers faced during the pandemic are still prevalent and need to be addressed for successful teaching-learning.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, the education sector was severely impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Malaysian students suffered several abrupt school closures (Abdullah et al., 2020; G. Karuppannan et al., 2021; Lukas & Yunus, 2021) and a sudden transition to online teaching (S. Karuppannan & Mohammed, 2020; Mansor et al., 2021; Yong et al., 2021). Moreover, attempts to resume face-to-face physical learning were truncated by sporadic outbreaks in schools and dormitories (Loganathan et al., 2021; Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2022).

The Malaysian public quickly accepted that reopening and closures of schools would be part of the "new" normal during the pandemic, evident from the number of handbooks and guides produced to help manage home learning (MOE, 2020, 2021b; Sabah State Education Department, 2021), school reopening (MOE, 2021a) and conducting public examination administration (Exam Syndicate of Malaysia, 2021).

These challenges undoubtedly complicated and obstructed efforts to continue and sustain education during the pandemic (Loganathan et al., 2021; World Health Organisation, 2020). This was and is still mitigated through a series of interventions by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Intervention programmes were specifically designed to address students' academic deficiencies

depending on diagnostic tests (Curriculum Development Division, 2022), whereas official home learning guides were produced and disseminated to hard-to-reach teachers and students in rural areas (MOE, 2020, 2021b). Nevertheless, even several years into the pandemic, teachers, students and even parents are struggling to redefine and understand how and what education should look like during a disaster of this scale.

Nepal

The impacts of the pandemic were profound in the education sector in Nepal. The government of Nepal imposed a nationwide lockdown from 24 March 2020, prohibiting domestic and international travel, closure of borders and non-essential services in the first stage, which was later eased on 11 June 2020. After that, most educational institutions, private and public included, were completely closed. The National Examinations Board postponed the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), a centralised board examination for Grade 10 students. All examinations in universities, colleges and schools were postponed indefinitely. Students were 15 weeks behind the regular academic calendar (UNESCO, 2020b).

In response, the education system in Nepal shifted towards remote teaching and learning, utilising various digital tools (Dawadi et al., 2020; Gahatraj, 2020; Pradhan, 2021; UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) produced numerous education guidelines and protocols to address this crisis (MoEST, 2021). These include the COVID-19 Education Cluster Contingency Plan 2020, approved on 7 May 2020 (CEHRD, 2020), with an aim to prevent the spread of COVID-19 from education institutions into local communities by providing safe learning environments by putting in place appropriate prevention measures in schools and awareness activities in Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED)/ Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) centres, community, institutional and religious schools and communities. Similarly, the Student Learning Facilitation Guidelines 2020, approved on 4 September 2020 (MoEST, 2022), ensure learning through an alternate system. This system will also be considered even in the time of another pandemic. With the implementation of the guideline, schools will have easy access to keep the record of the admitted students, collect fees as allowed by the local level and implement the evaluation methods by downsizing the credit hours of the class. Another guiding document is Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020, approved on 22 September 2020 (MoEST, 2020a), which enabled a record of the activities of school management in education during the pandemic. The MoEST developed School Reopening Framework, 2020, approved on 5 November 2020 (MoEST, 2020b), based on the suggestions received from the province and local levels by reviewing the situation of COVID-19 at local and school levels. The objective is to make "children's teaching-learning and examination and assessment processes simple and run classes and schools in a fear-free and safe manner or by reclosing schools for a fixed duration". This framework detailed "the basic activities that the provincial governments and local levels can carry out after preparing strategies suitable to their local conditions on subjects such as children's safety in the schools in their areas, protection from the contagion of the pandemic, and building of an easy learning environment are incorporated". The MoEST developed Closed User Group (CUG) Service Implementation Guidelines (in process of being approved) to facilitate communication among teachers and students (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic inadvertently redesigned the education institution and its instructional norms, with greater focus devoted to digital or blended teaching and learning processes, hybrid learning environments, and mitigative measures to improve learning outcomes (MoEST, 2021). For instance, the main objective of the Education Cluster Contingency Plan 2020 (CEHRD, 2020) was to restrict the spread of the COVID-19 virus among teachers and students by providing safe learning environments with appropriate preventive measures in place (CEHRD, 2020). These initiatives of the government helped teachers continue teaching and learning during the school lockdowns. For areas lacking access to digital devices and a reliable internet connection, teachers relied on televisions and radios for remote learning.

Research Framework

A robust framework is required to anchor this cross-border investigation. As each country represents a unique and distinct educational context, identifying areas or domains of analysis is necessary for analysing and synthesising similarities, differences and patterns (Goodrick, 2014). This study adopted the Comparative Case Study (CCS) research framework by Bartlett and Vavrus (2016).
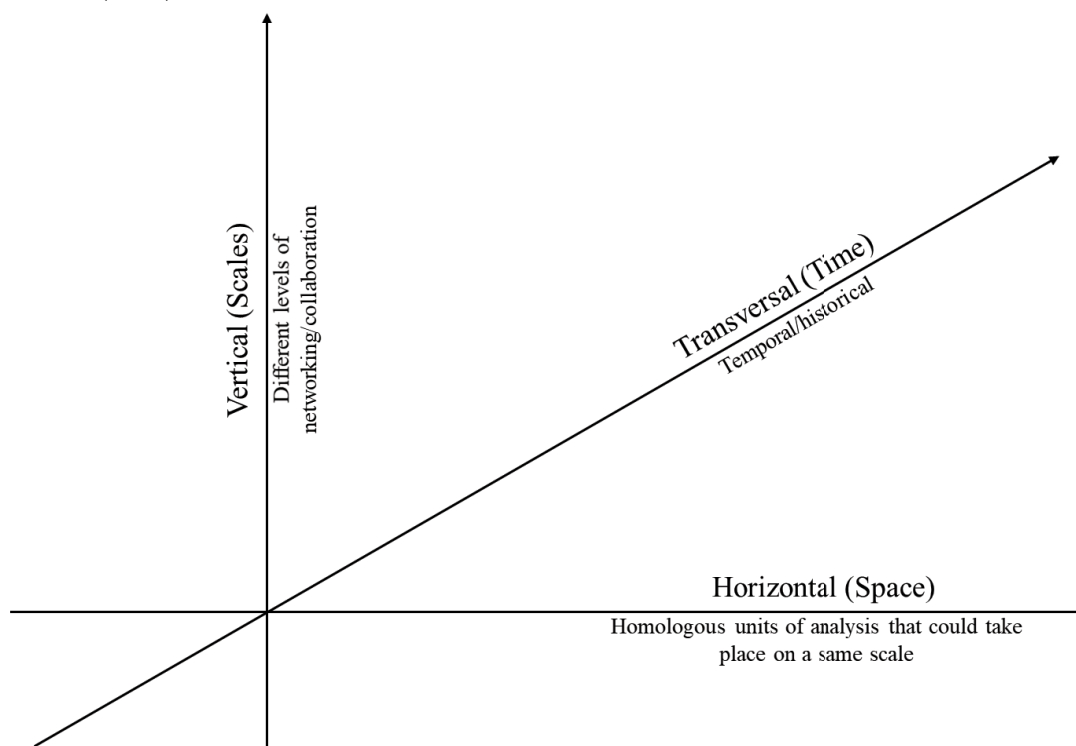
Figure 1: Comparative Case Study Research Model (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016)

The CCS research framework proposed an investigation using three axes (do Amaral, 2022). The vertical axis, also known as "scale", locates the comparative study at a specific level of networking or collaboration. This comparative study, involving Bangladesh, Malaysia and Nepal, occurred in

a transnational, regional setting. More specifically, this axis narrowed the focus to the challenges that secondary English language teachers face in an "English as a foreign language setting"[1].

Table 1: The domains and corresponding challenges

Domains	Challenges
Pedagogy	Teaching and learning difficulties
Assessment	Unreliable and invalid assessments
Infrastructural	Infrastructural hurdles
"Habitus"[2] (re)configuration	Social displacement
Personal Wellbeing	Threats to personal wellbeing

Secondly, universally or commonly shared homologous units of analysis are located on the horizontal "space" axis. This permits a lateral analysis that depicts commonly shared struggles across three national contexts whilst allowing unique emergent experiences to arise. However, most CCS studies were either typological/demographic-driven (Buheji et al., 2020), intra-national (Cao et al., 2021; Cárdenas et al., 2022; Reimers, 2022), or highly oriented towards higher education (Huang et al., 2022; Su, 2020). Therefore, identifying these units of analysis was far from straightforward, requiring an intense literature review on English language education in these national contexts and the threats and opportunities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, five major domains and their corresponding challenges were identified through the literature review, which became the coding framework for this study. These applied to teachers and students, although the respondents were primarily teachers.

Lastly, the transversal axis investigates the cases temporally, locating experiences in a specific timeframe. This study collected anecdotal experiences of teachers from all three national contexts in their initial transition from physical, face-to-face teaching to a digital pedagogical setting. Many may continue to experience the aftereffects of this transition even to this day, which is why reviewing the challenges undergone is vital in anticipation of future school closures or disruptions to learning and teaching activities.
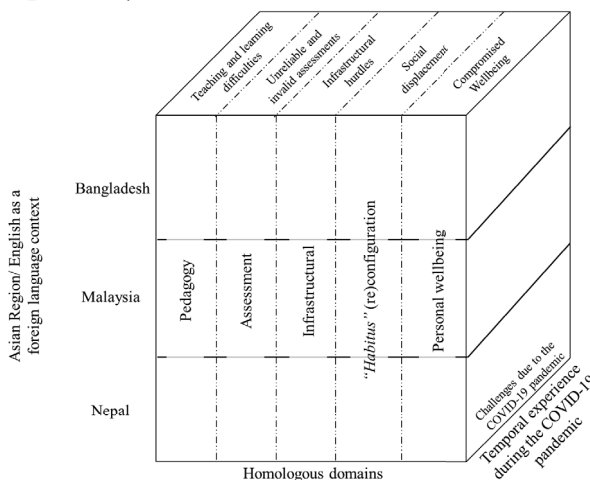
Figure 2: Adapted Comparative Case Study (CCS) model

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[1] English is often operated as a de facto second language in Malaysia but in many suburban and rural contexts, English operated very much like a foreign language.

[2] "Habitus" refers to the Bordieuan definition of learned behaviour, where it represents a learned set of preferences or systems by which individuals orient socially with the larger community (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014)

In short, the adapted CCS framework permitted a three-dimensional investigation into the participants' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The transnational nature of this study set itself apart as similar studies employed a self-contained perspective of the challenges that educators faced as a homogenous community (Bashir et al., 2021; Dawadi et al., 2020; G. Karuppannan et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Khan, Basu, et al., 2021; Mansor et al., 2021; Rouf & Rashid, 2021; Shrestha et al., 2022). The investigation can position the participants' unique perspectives across different national contexts and domains that other studies were incapable of providing.

Methodology

This qualitative study was designed to collect participants' experiences and recollections of the challenges and struggles they experienced when continuing education throughout the pandemic. The study employed a two-stage data collection process. Firstly, an advertisement was disseminated digitally on various social media platforms, calling for and inviting research participants, and individual teachers were contacted over the phone, drawing a total of thirty-five (n =35) English language secondary school teachers from Bangladesh, Malaysia and Nepal operating in government/public or private/independent schools. Secondly, upon receiving the participants' submissions, which were in the form of extended textual responses, the raw data was tabulated, where follow-up questions were proposed for individual video conferencing interviews with each participant. For participants who declined to be interviewed, these questions were emailed and sent to them via WhatsApp or Telegram to procure their further input. Those who agreed to a semi-structured interview were interviewed via teleconferencing tools such as Zoom and Google Meet. The follow-up interviews were conducted in English, and exchanges with these participants were transcribed using MaxQDA. Basic quantitative data analysis about the participants' backgrounds was generated (Table 2). The participants were relatively distributed in terms of their nationality and gender but were slightly disproportionate when it came to their academic qualification, teaching experience and school type. This suggests that the participants were academically high achievers, although most have relatively young teaching careers.

Table 2: Participants' demographic information

Sample Profiling			
No.	Variables	Frequency, n	Percentage, %
1	Country		
	• *Bangladesh*	12	34.3
	• *Malaysia*	12	34.3
	• *Nepal*	11	31.4
2	Gender		
	• *Male*	16	45.7
	• *Female*	19	54.3

3	Highest Academic Qualification		
	• *Bachelor's*	11	31.4
	• *Master's*	24	68.6
4	Teaching Experience		
	• *0 to 4 years*	8	22.9
	• *5 to 9 years*	13	37.1
	• *10 to 14 years*	5	14.3
	• *15 to 19 years*	5	14.3
	• *20 or more years*	4	11.4
	School Type		
	• *Government*	27	77.1
	• *Private/Independent*	8	22.9

Next, the transcriptions were coded according to the proposed CCS framework (Figure 2). Intercoder agreement exercises (Table 3) were undertaken before research team members individually coded transcriptions by country:

Table 3: Intercoder agreement report

Calibration Attempt	Kappa Coefficient (Brennan & Prediger, 1981)	Interpretation
1	.02	Slight agreement
2	.24	Fair agreement
3	.52	Moderate agreement
4	.73	Substantial agreement

The research team members coded the transcriptions individually once a Kappa Coefficient of .50 was attained. Analysis of the findings only proceeded after the research team members reviewed, negotiated, and finalised the coded transcripts.

Findings and Discussions

The findings resulting from the semi-structured interviews were rich and dense. The responses were coded and categorised based on the five homologous domains in the adopted CCS model (Figure 2), with each response corresponding to a specific episode or event.
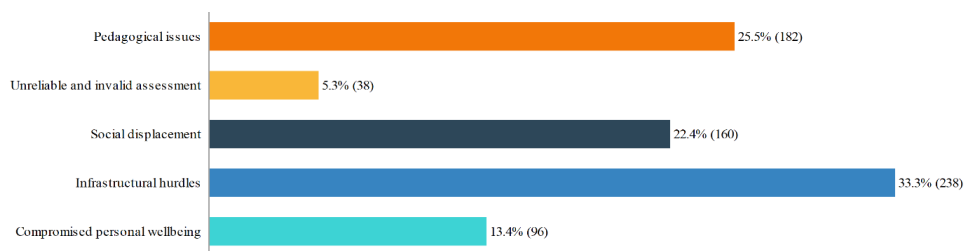
Figure 3: Challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Noticeably, the teachers and students struggled to adapt to online instruction (25.5%), which was further compounded by inadequate infrastructure to support the sudden transition (33.3%). The teachers were concerned about being displaced by enforced school closures resulting in hastily planned studying/working-from-home arrangements (22.4%). Additionally, there was doubt and anxiety over formative and summative assessments during the pandemic (5.3%), as the standard pen-and-paper assessments were restricted and reserved for candidates sitting for "national examinations"[3]. These restrictions were in place to ensure social distancing in examination halls, mainly when access to COVID-19 vaccines was limited. These issues cumulatively threaten the teachers' and students' wellbeing (13.4%), where concerns about their mental, emotional, social and financial welfare persist. These threats likely resulted in a massive surge in early retirements and resignations among teachers during the pandemic, as many could no longer cope with the added workload and stress. This phenomenon was widely reported globally (Allen et al., 2020; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Diliberti et al., 2021; Lachlan et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2022; Zamarro et al., 2022).

a. Pedagogical Issues – Teaching and learning difficulties

As implied, "Pedagogical Issues" collected challenges that complicated the teaching and learning process during the pandemic. Five sub-themes emerged, encompassing learners being disinterested during lessons, choosing to skip lessons, being unwilling to complete assigned work, and lacking access to effective learning materials and academic supervision (Figure 4).
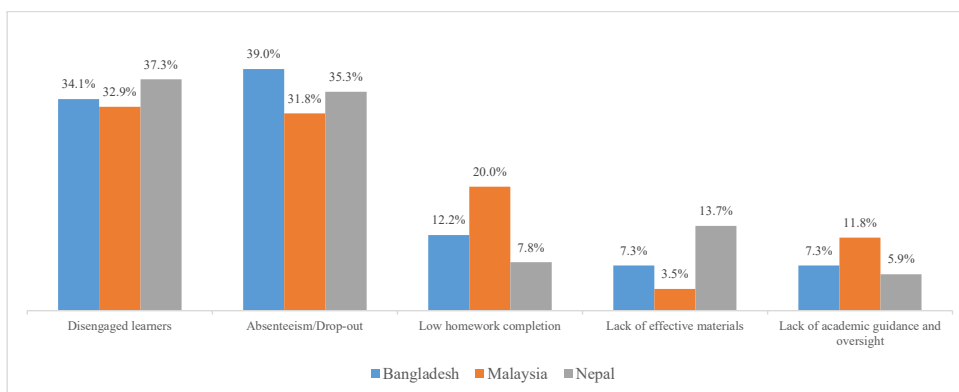
Figure 4: Teaching and learning difficulties faced by teachers

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[3] Referring to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) equivalent national school leavers qualifications such as the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) in Bangladesh, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) in Malaysia, and the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) in Nepal.

Cumulatively, absenteeism and disengaged learners dominated the findings across all three contexts. Very few students attended online lessons consistently; even when they did, they were inattentive or non-participatory. They recalled instances where students seemingly entered and left the class at will. More frustratingly, those who attended online lessons regularly were often students with better proficiency. Students who needed the most help were often absent. Over time, this enlarged the proficiency gap among their students.

> *Most of the time, half of my students were absent from the lessons. I had to try to reach them personally, which took more time from an extremely reduced classroom interaction. Most of the time, my calls went unanswered. But when I did reach them, they cited various problems and reasons for not attending my lesson. (BGM05)*

> *My students who hadn't achieved the minimum band were the ones who refused to attend lessons! Sadly, even for the best class of the year, the first set, only 8 out of 30 students attended the online lessons regularly. (MGF03)*

> *My students were frequently absent from my lessons. Most of them would conveniently join the lesson when it was close to finishing. And even those who were present were passive and reluctant to participate in the lesson. (NPM05)*

A low homework completion rate among Malaysian students (20%) was cited more frequently than the Bangladeshi (12.2%) and Nepalese (7.8%) counterparts. Granted, Malaysian teachers experienced fewer issues with disengaged and absent students, meaning they were better positioned to assign more homework to their students. In most cases, very few students return their work on time, so the teachers had to be empathetic and understanding, tolerating such tardiness:

> *In terms of return rates, only a few return their work on time. But generally, I don't reprimand students for returning their work late as long as they return their tasks. The return rate is far less than 100%, but it's more than I can ask for. On a good day, I can get about 80% of homework submissions for the elite classes. (MGF09)*

Providing in-person academic guidance to their students was challenging for the Bangladeshi teachers. Technical and labour-intensive skills were difficult to teach and carry out virtually, as the students were afforded personal attention and encouraged to engage in peer discussions in conventional face-to-face lessons. These were not possible during online lessons. Resultantly, teachers opted against teaching these labour-intensive skills and revisiting them once in-person learning resumes:

> *They have become slow in writing for the lack of practice in the class, which was not always possible in the virtual class. The students received proper instructions and guidelines for improving their writing skills. (BPF12)*

Nepalese teachers struggled with a lack of effective materials to teach during the pandemic, as they no longer had access to physical learning materials and resources during school lockdowns. Six respondents noted that their students could not access their textbooks due to prolonged school closures. Lacking alternatives to these valuable learning materials would further paralyse any efforts to teach and learn during the pandemic:

The students had no books at all. Clearly, the school and local government were unable to provide these books to them. At the same time, they were not ready to produce materials or resources for self-learning for the students. (NGM04)

b. Unreliable and Invalid Assessments

Collectively, conducting assessments during the school lockdowns was problematic and challenging (Figure 5). The validity and reliability of these assessments were dubious and time-consuming as there were no suitable alternatives. Additionally, teachers relied on assessment standards that were unintended for remote teaching and learning. They must also deal with unrealistic expectations from school leaders and parents.
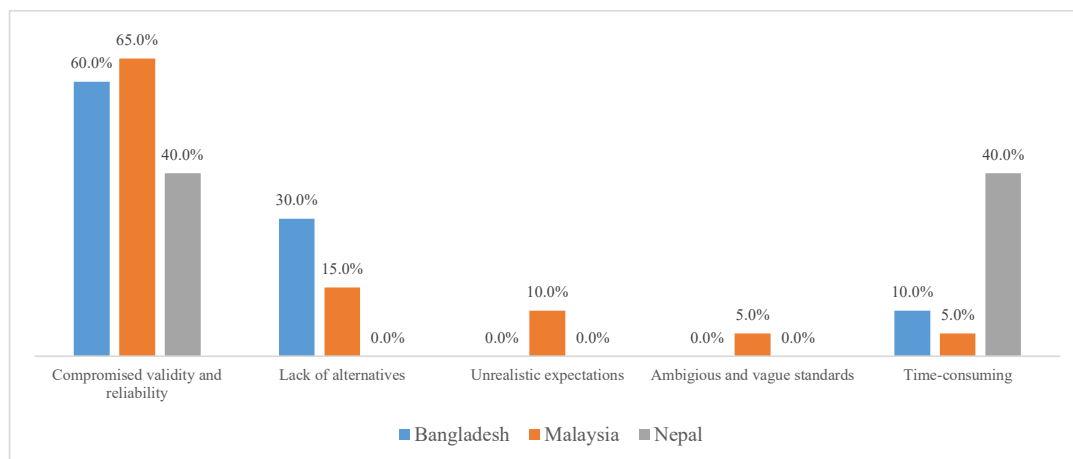
Figure 5: Unreliable or invalid assessments

Mainly, the validity and reliability of their assessments were highly compromised as administration and invigilation of in-person examinations were impossible during the lockdowns. Resultantly, many teachers resorted to computer-assisted assessments (Bashir et al., 2021; Khan, Basu, et al., 2021; Lukas & Yunus, 2021) using digital survey forms such as Google Forms and Survey Monkey. However, there was no way to ascertain if the students had elicited help from other individuals or referred to external sources.

I realise many students provided identical answers, meaning they could be copying their answers from the same source (BGM07)

Assessing work online was relatively easy to do. But at the same time, I find this worrying as my students submitted work they copied from Google. I know this because sometimes I copied a chunk of their answer and found the exact words on the internet (MGF12).

Consequently, many students progressed to the next academic year without experiencing a proper assessment of their learning attainment. In most public and government schools, academic progression occurs by age group, although some private and independent schools still retain students who failed to show satisfactory academic progress (Sharma, 2016). Regardless, a lack of viable alternatives to assess the students validly and reliably during school closures was a severe

problem. One Nepalese teacher remarked:

> *For almost two years, the students had not studied properly in school. They became so weak in their academic performance but indiscriminately progressed to the next academic level without reliable or valid assessments to measure their learning attainment. Granted, schools were compelled to do so because it was a government policy. Consequently, it is very difficult to deal with the students because of this large gap in their English language proficiency (NGM04).*

In the short term, this allowed schools to manage their students efficiently in terms of classroom logistics and teacher deployment. However, the academic gap among students of the same age group will manifest over time without sufficient intervention to address this gap (Bailey et al., 2021; Goudeau et al., 2021). Some schools emphasised greater use of formative assessments to compensate for their inability to assess the students summatively. However, issues related to unrealistic expectations placed on students and vague standards used impeded efforts migrating to such forms of alternative assessments. A Malaysian teacher recounted her experience carrying out a classroom-based assessment mandated by the Ministry of Education:

> *So I tried to carry out a Ministry-mandated classroom-based assessment called PBD. But I was told to base this classroom-based assessment on the prescribed learning content according to the stipulated learning outcomes all students must attain within the stipulated curriculum. That's not realistic. The curriculum was written for a normal academic year that did not account for long-term school closures like what we had due to COVID-19. Furthermore, the descriptors used in PBD are vague and unhelpful, such as "hardly understand", "limited understanding", and "adequate understanding". But there's nothing or nobody for me to refer to that could help me define these descriptors. (MGF03)*

In addition, processing these assessments during the pandemic was challenging. Teachers had to handle their students' work digitally, which became a time-consuming and physically challenging process. The teachers struggled to mark scripts digitally, especially when procuring a writing pad or stylus was too costly.

> *We carried out summative examinations and class tests online, which was relatively easy to do. But checking these scripts online became way more time-consuming. (NGF07)*

> *Marking scripts on a laptop was difficult. I experienced muscle aches and back pain. Also, the marking process took longer than usual. (MGF06)*

c.   *Infrastructural Hurdles – Home learning environment*

Figure 6 depicts the challenges that the students faced when learning from home. These include a lack of digital tools and the required competency to operate them, unaffordable and poor internet connectivity, distracting home surroundings, and poor parental involvement in their learning.
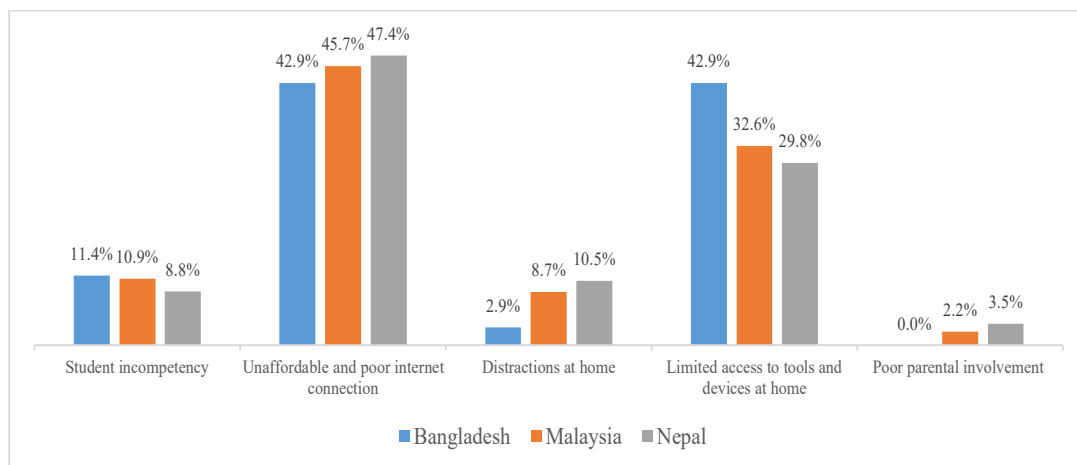
Figure 6: Infrastructural hurdles in a home learning environment

Unsurprisingly, infrastructural hurdles in the home learning environment were a common shared experience in all three contexts. Nepalese respondents cited unaffordable and poor internet connection and limited access to digital tools and devices as two main stumbling blocks for their learners. However, even for those who were lucky to have access to these resources, constant power cuts and geographical challenges further restrict their access to these alternative forms of learning:

> *During the first national lockdown, I was working in a rural area in the Taplejung district where the students didn't own any devices that they could use to access alternative forms of education. They didn't even own a radio or television, let alone a digital device or internet connection. On top of that, we experienced frequent power cuts, which rendered these electricity-dependent alternatives ineffective. What can I do when the electricity supply is inconsistent? (NPM05)*

However, having reliable access to digital tools and internet services did not guarantee that the students could learn effectively. A Bangladeshi respondent recounted his experience with several parents who were technology-sceptic and critical of technological use in schools. They were reluctant to acquire devices or services necessary for their children to participate in online lessons:

> *Infrastructure-wise, many students were unable to access online activities as they lacked proper devices. As many lived in poverty, their parents were not able to provide them with these devices. However, there are parents who were against their children learning using electronic gadgets. These students could be curious about and eager to attend my lessons but couldn't because their parents didn't want them to use the internet. (BGM10)*

This posed serious challenges to Bangladeshi teachers. The mandated school closures had crippled all forms of physical learning, yet some parents negatively perceived efforts to compensate for this loss using digital or virtual learning.

On the contrary, Malaysian students had better access to reliable internet connections and digital tools for online learning than their Bangladeshi and Nepalese counterparts. Nevertheless, the respondents were more concerned about their students navigating myriad different applications and tools when learning. Commonly popular real-time video conferencing tools such as Zoom, WebEx and Google Classroom have screen share functions that promote visual engagement during lessons, akin to that of a whiteboard in a physical classroom. However, unlike in physical classrooms where students can easily access other resources such as a dictionary or a thesaurus, they would have to switch programmes or applications during online learning. Switching or jumping between applications on low-end devices is disruptive to students and teachers alike:

> *The students mostly had to share devices with their parents or siblings. That's why sometimes they were absent during online lessons because their parents might be using the devices. But even those who can afford their own devices struggle to log on and off Google Meet to other applications when I am using different learning tools. I sometimes use applications that are less resource-hungry, such as Google Docs, but there were some students who did not have enough storage on their devices to install it. (MGF03).*

d.   Social Displacement – Student displacement from schools

As students were displaced from schools, the participants noted troubling consequences (Figure 7). These include a lack of learner autonomy, disciplinary supervision and learner privacy. The students also suffer from extended isolation from school and burnout.
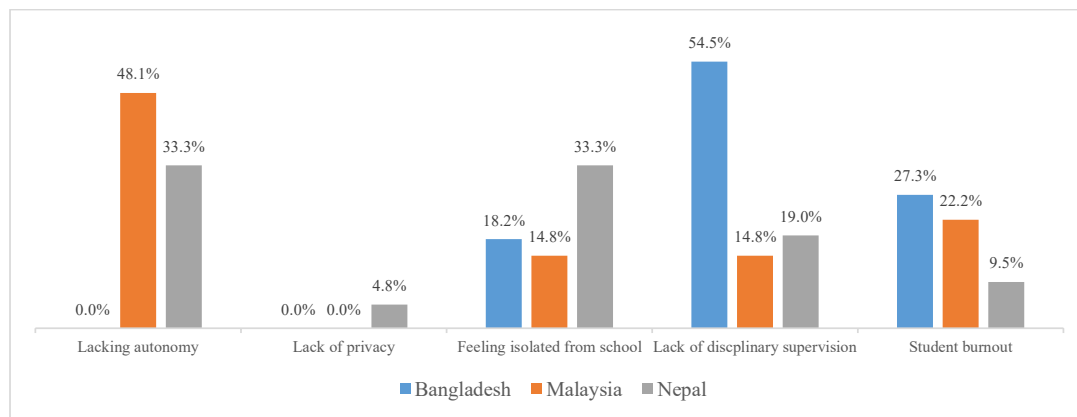
Figure 7: Student displacement from schools

Comparatively, teachers from each country had different concerns regarding their students being displaced from schools. Bangladeshi teachers were troubled by being unable to supervise their students during the pandemic. They felt helpless when their students misbehaved. For instance, if their students were absent from or disruptive during online lessons, they had no way to manage their students' belligerence.

> *It was difficult to draw their attention, ensure their presence in class, and control their classroom behaviour. It's really difficult to monitor them, and they tend to take advantage of this. (BGM10)*

Optimally, the parents need to supervise their children when learning from home (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Lukas & Yunus, 2021), although they were arguably unprepared as the teachers. Often, the parents, be it earning a livelihood or fulfilling other commitments, had to leave their children unattended, thus leaving their children with an unprecedented amount of unbridled freedom:

> *Many guardians thought that it was not necessary for their children to participate in online classes. Furthermore, if their children were not attending online classes, then they wouldn't have to pay any tuition fees. So, most students took advantage of this and skipped lessons. On the other hand, their guardians may not necessarily know how to help their children learn digitally, even if they were eager to learn. Not every adult can teach children how to operate online applications to learn. (BGF03)*

Malaysian teachers also observed this phenomenon. Their main complaint revolved around their students' inability to be responsible for their learning, resulting in students often making poor decisions about their learning. One respondent believed her students were not ready to be vested with greater autonomy as they were accustomed to being spoon-fed and coached into adhering to prescribed learning habits and norms:

> *I don't think that the students are ready for that. I allowed my students, from the best class, mind you, to focus on subjects they needed rather than attending my lessons and completing my homework. This was done informally, of course. But this went out of hand really quickly, and almost everybody stopped attending my lesson. I set up strict ground rules, only allowing a few to skip my lessons because I felt their English was good enough. I cannot strike such an agreement with other classes because they will abuse this. (MGF09)*

The Nepalese teachers echoed these lamentations. The school lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that their students were removed from schools for nearly two whole years. This significantly impeded their social skills as much as their academic progression. But more severely, students became accustomed to a no-rule, no-restriction learning environment, which made it harder for them to focus and remain on track:

> *When we returned from the school lockdowns, we had to deal with students who were habituated to being free. They have been learning from home, with no uniforms, no rules, and minimal supervision. Now that they were thrust back to school, it was difficult to keep them focused and challenging to keep them on track. It still is. (NGF01)*

e. *Personal wellbeing – Compromised teacher wellbeing*

The participants reported a myriad of challenges they faced that threatened their wellbeing (Figure 8). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has posed financial, social and health issues. More critically, it magnified the mental and emotional stress of the teaching profession.
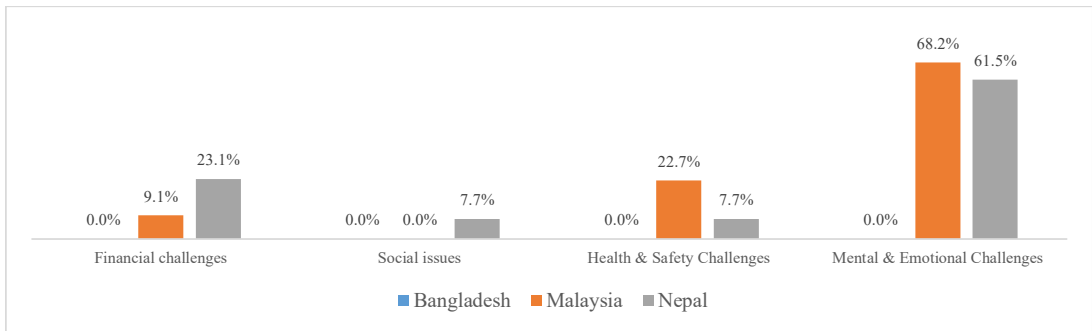
Figure 8: Compromised teacher wellbeing

Heider (2021) pointed out that teachers have exhibited similar psychological effects to that experienced by healthcare workers and yet are less likely to be heeded when they speak out against school reopening or raising awareness about teacher burnout. This was echoed in the responses from Malaysian and Nepalese respondents. They described their experience of struggling with various challenges to their wellbeing throughout the pandemic. Predominantly, the enforced school closures and sudden transition from physical, face-to-face learning to digital pedagogy wrought upon them significant mental and emotional challenges. While Nepalese teachers expressed slightly more concern about their financial challenges, Malaysian teachers were more conscious of contracting COVID-19 or other related ailments.

The Nepalese respondents recalled their initial response to the sudden shift to online teaching and learning. It was a transformational experience as much as it was traumatic. While it enabled some form of teaching and learning to continue, albeit to a limited extent, many teachers were not ready for an aggressive and abrupt transition. This led to confusion, anxiety and fear, compounded by prolonged contact hours to compensate for the lack of in-person administrative and pedagogical duties:

> *We shifted our classes online in the first two or three months of the initial onset, but we were unprepared for that. We were confused. There were so many other challenges too. We struggled with the infrastructure related to having classes, managing our household, taking care of our children…I was suffering from anxiety. (NGF01)*

Notably, the teacher's relationship with technology is why mental and emotional stress skyrocketed during the pandemic. Technology has long been central to schools and teachers as an administrative or pedagogical tool. However, if technology mainly complements physical, in-person teaching, it has since become a staple to digital and virtual instruction. What was once optional became mandatory overnight, putting many teachers under great stress. One Malaysian respondent lamented, almost close to tears:

> *To be fair, even before the pandemic, we get messages on Saturdays and Sundays instructing us to carry out certain duties; it could be administrative or academic or related to co-curricular activities. This became far worse during the pandemic. We now had to do everything that we used to do in person, virtually and digitally. Can you imagine teaching Physical Education (PE) through the screen, organising an English drama competition virtually, or facilitating test registration digitally? These brought me endless anxiety. I had to text them individually*

and communicate with them to find out why they were absent during online lessons. All this administrative work is killing me. (MGF03)

Worse, this Malaysian respondent was diagnosed with moderate stress, bad depression and anxiety, but she received little help from the school or district-appointed counsellor. While there were plenary talks addressing teachers on managing their mental health, this plenary intervention was ineffective:

I really expected some help. I asked the school counsellor if it was possible for me to get counselling from the district education officer. But, I was told that I must be referred to the district counsellors before I can get counselling. In the end, the office did organise a brief talk on mental health. It's a plenary talk for the school's academic and administrative staff. We were shown PowerPoint presentation slides telling us we shouldn't feel stressed and how to manage stress. It did not help me one bit. (MGF03)

Interestingly, none of the Bangladeshi respondents expressed worries about their wellbeing resulting from the pandemic. In fact, they were more concerned about their students' learning loss. Unfortunately, the data at hand does not clarify why, as this went unnoticed until the latter stages of this investigation. Future studies, however, should explore the impact of the pandemic on Bangladeshi teachers' wellbeing.

Conclusion

Figure 9 compiled the major obstacles that the participants experienced in continuing education throughout the pandemic. It is very likely that they will continue to experience these. While these anecdotes and recollections were tales of struggles and challenges, they were not intended to demotivate nor dispirit teachers who may resonate with these experiences.

Figure 9: "Code cloud"⁴ correlating to challenges teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Nepal

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector is undeniably unprecedented, and its effect lasting through the coming years, if not decades. The teachers and students were

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⁴ The larger the font size of a particular code, the more frequent it was cited by the respondents.

subjected to social issues, financial stress, emotional distress and threats to their health and safety. To a limited extent, adapting and shifting to remote teaching and learning helped alleviate some of these challenges, yet more is needed to understand how teachers address these challenges and ensure continuity in their teaching practice.

The challenges that Bangladeshi, Malaysian and Nepalese teachers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic were remarkably similar. There was a clear indication that the public authorities in these countries needed better digital infrastructure to address the effects of teachers and students being displaced from physical, in-person teaching and learning. More importantly, this cross-border study suggested that closer collaboration among various stakeholders is necessary, allowing us to learn from each other's experiences.

Retrospectively, policies and emergency measures enacted by various governmental bodies in these respective countries may have produced mixed outcomes, but greater intranational and transnational discourse is vital for critical reflection and improvement. ELT associations like BELTA, MELTA, and NELTA can play a vital role in motivating and developing skilled practitioners for future endeavours. Their members can form internal and external networks that promote skill and knowledge sharing, both of which are crucial cornerstones for 21st-century education.

Researchers, educators, and school leaders can draw useful insights from this study in preserving the resilience of the education sector and draft flexible strategies and models to optimise ELT approaches. These efforts must, at the very least, train teachers to be adaptive and versatile so that they are equipped to utilise the latest pedagogical practices and resources at their disposal. They must be resourceful and creative in contexts where infrastructures are underdeveloped.

Lastly, it is more important that teachers are empowered to share their stories and narratives of their experiences in continuing education. They were pioneers and front liners who, through trial and error, navigated one of the most challenging periods in history, striving to continue education against all odds. The importance of their perspectives on surviving and navigating such a treacherous and challenging time cannot and should not be understated.

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