

Coping Strategies of University EFL Teachers for Online Instruction during COVID-19 in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the perceptions, and practices of University EFL teachers in Nepal, particularly the challenges found and strategies adopted to deal with teaching English through online instruction during the pandemic. The in-depth unstructured interview as a research tool under narrative inquiry has been employed to collect the data while the concept of thematic analysis by Riessman has been exploited to analyze and interpret the collected data. The research finding reveals that despite technological inefficiency, social barriers, and psychological fear teachers underwent through the initial phase, the subsequent online classes with some of the coping strategies such as self-initiation, self-discovery, and cooperative approach have been found profoundly effective and productive both for EFL teachers and students. It also is found that online classes truly materialized the theoretical idea-ELT with ICT into the application to make English language teaching proceed ahead with IT. Such classes in EF during the pandemic lockdown forcefully shifted the paradigm of teaching from chalk-and-talk instructor-centered to a digital interactive learner-centered.

Keywords: *Online, Instruction, Paradigm Shift, EFL Class*

Introduction

The Nepal government imposed a rigorous lockdown across Nepal from 24 March 2020 to 21 July 2020 by banning national and transnational travel and closing educational institutions, services, and businesses when COVID-19 severely affected the world towards the end of 2020, including Nepal (Sharma et al., 2021). The unprecedented pandemic triggered a great crisis in every sector, including education. Nepalese educational institutions such as schools, and universities remained closed for about two months at the beginning of 2020 (Dawadi et al., 2020). However, for ensuring students' right to education, the Nepal government and Nepalese universities decided to shift teaching mode from physical to virtual by formulating a plan and policy to continue teaching and learning at schools and campuses to engage students for persistent learning, helping continue teachers' professionalism and ensuring students' rights to education (EAPSE, 2020). The transformed educational paradigm emphasized the rise

of e-learning, thereby conducting teaching and learning through digital mode. In the beginning, teachers at schools and colleges were not completely able to conduct online teaching and training in the new normal situation since most of them were new to using ICT tools. However, sticking to the decision that the Nepal government circulated for educational institutions, teachers and educators forcefully readied themselves for adopting a new mode of teaching-virtual teaching. It was also challenging for them to handle online classes as teachers in Nepal and around the world lacked the essential trained skills, technical knowledge, and pedagogical professionalism to assimilate digital technology into virtual classes prior to the global pandemic (Schleicher, 2020).

To overcome the crisis brought by the pandemic to starting online classes for teaching English, school and university teachers obtained technical support and facilitation guidance to virtual classes through using ICT tools. Initially, Nepalese university EFL teachers went through many challenges and hardships because of unfamiliarity with Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and other apps for teaching English. With the gradual practice of using online tools, teaching professionals at schools and universities commenced conducting online teaching in the same way as the educational institutions in most of the world from lower to higher levels ceased physical classes for the time being to resume remote learning through online instruction. Although EFL teachers lacked the resources, skills, and expertise to operate the ICT tools properly for English language classes, they continued teaching online. As a university EFL teacher, I experienced the same in terms of challenges and coping strategies while teaching English through virtual means.

In such a scenario, EFL teachers working at different universities began teaching English slowly through online mode. Online classes either reluctantly run or willingly conducted became part and parcel of educators' and teachers' lives in the run. Despite the challenges that teachers faced while using online tools for teaching English, the virtual mode of teaching almost displaced the physical classes during the pandemic. Experienced teachers belonging to the old generation and fresher teachers from the new generation alike engaged in handling online apps, for instance, Zoom, Ms.Teams, and Google Meet to run classes despite difficulties. Throughout the pandemic, online classes conducted by university EFL teachers in Nepal became an important mode to bring a new normal situation. The strategies universities' EFL teachers use during classes to deal with the challenges of transitioning face-to-face classes into online has been remained unexplored in the Nepali context. Thus, the paper examines the gap that exists in the course of shifting physical classes to online classes, particularly for EFL classes at Nepalese universities. Fulfilling the research gap is based on two major questions: a. how did university EFL teachers perceive and practice online teaching during the pandemic? b. what were the challenges the teachers encountered and then what coping strategies did they employ to overcome the challenges?

Literature Review

During the pandemic, EFL teachers in Nepal majorly engaged in three kinds of activities to overcome the adversity brought by COVID-19: a. Training workshop to familiarize themselves with IT, b. Program for acquainting e-resources, c. PDT for promoting teaching skills (Gautam, 2020). These activities that were run online empowered teachers' pedagogic expertise, and skills in using ICT tools for real online teaching. In terms of challenges that EFL instructors and learners confronted during the pandemic in Nepali and Bangladeshi higher educational contexts, Shrestha et al. (2022) report that shifting from physical teaching to virtual instruction entailed chief challenges such as weak internet service, inadequate institutional assistance to teachers, and unfamiliarity to online tools.

In this regard, Sharin (2021) states that virtual learning during the pandemic in the Malaysian context witnessed challenges, including stress, anxiety, and turbulence in students due to their unfamiliarity with IT use. In order to find out the efficacies of ICT integration in teaching and learning in Indonesia, Fitri and Putro (2021) researched how teachers perceived online instruction during COVID-19 with descriptive quantitative research questions by using online questionnaires to 126 primary and secondary teachers research tools and found that due to the pandemic, academic organizations-schools and colleges-obliged to shift physical teaching to virtual teaching, making EFL teachers employ ICT in the classes. In a sense, the ELT hugely witnessed a paradigm shift in the teaching field due to the emergence of the online mode of teaching. This study finally concluded that the majority of EFL teachers positively favored ICT integration in ELT.

Likewise, Altam (2020) conducted research using a closed-ended questionnaire Google forms in quantitative design on Yemeni learners to explore the effectiveness of online social-instructional means, for example, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook on English language teaching, in Indian universities, thereby drawing takeaways that learners most effectively improved their listening skills while using online tools. Besides the improvement in listening skills, students developed practicing new vocabulary by reducing spelling errors.

Similarly, Huang (2020) conducted research on e-learning instructional tools for English language teaching that China used during the pandemic. Based on the interviews with Chinese educational specialists attending two online national seminars, the research found that OER and OEP both played a pivotal role to overcome the challenges brought about by the pandemic. The efficacious use of both tools OER and OEP contributes much to promoting both the teaching and learning of the English language.

EFL teachers majorly tried transforming themselves by participating in training events, learning how to handle online resources and tools, and running virtual classes to teach English. Bhattarai (2020) conducted qualitative research with unstructured questions

and informal conversations to find out how secondary EFL teachers in Nepal experienced and perceived the challenges and adversities in English language teaching caused by the pandemic. It was a challenging job for teachers and educators because online teaching was completely new so they had to learn a lot while it was an opportunity as it opened a new space of exploring and experimenting with a new world of online teaching.

Having observed and examined research conducted by researchers in the field of ELT through ICT during the pandemic, most of the research has been carried out to focus on English language teaching at secondary schools and other issues that this paper does not incorporate. Thus, the paper fulfills the gap that has been left for opening up in EFL and EL teaching through virtual means during the pandemic.

Methods

The paper is fundamentally based on qualitative research, which (Hussain et al., 2013) define an interpretive paradigm as the constructivist, humanistic, and anti-positivist paradigm. Though it relates to a group of methods, it gets closely associated with the qualitative approach. The source of knowledge and reality lies in the participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. Because our senses primarily function to mediate the issues in interpretive epistemology, the knowledge that we acquire through sense is always subjective and fluid. Regarding it, Cohen et al. (2007) aver that it is not the researchers, but the participants who are involved in activities that understand the phenomena through their direct participation and engagement.

Narrative inquiry as a research design entails storytelling and researching whether employing narratives as the data or exploiting recounting stories functions as an important tool for interpreting or showcasing findings (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). It is an approach to linking stories and events with the actual practices in which the narratives by University EFL teachers regarding challenges and coping strategies for teaching English online during the pandemic as well as my own experience of virtual teaching English language greatly contribute to constructing and understanding the research the issue in detail.

The data used in the research were collected through taking in-depth interviews with university EFL teachers employing Zoom video recording. I discussed my research goals, research objectives, and minimum expectation from them before I recorded the audio video. Focusing more on their experience and practice they adhered to teaching English through virtual classes rather than class observation, the extensive interviews were centered on how they perceived and practiced online teaching in the new normal situation and what challenges they faced, and what strategies they used for tackling the challenges. The interviews ranged from initiating preparation to employing strategies to triumph over adversities. Since the research aim is to explore the practice, challenges, and strategies adopted by EFL teachers while online teaching English, interviews were conducted for exploring narratives relating to teachers' experience and practice.

The interviews with four EFL teachers with pseudo-name working in different four universities were conducted through Zoom recordings with their consent. They told their stories of adapting online teaching in midst of confusion and fear from the point of view of failure to success. Then the transcribed data were coded into definite themes for interpretation based on the idea of Riessman (2008), who asserts that narratives by the participants function as the building blocks of the research. The narratives by teachers have been analyzed in the light of constructive and collaborative learning theories.

Analysis and Interpretation

The data (qualitative) collected from the semi-structured interview have been analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. As to manipulating narrative data, Fan Tang (2002) recommends three steps: a. reading the narratives and putting them into possible groups, b. categorizing them based on similar nature, c. representing for interpretation. The data have been grouped into five thematic topics: shift of virtual learning from physical mode, updating with technology, shift to learner-centered learning, opulent space for speaking and listening skills in English, and strategies adopted in online teaching. The refined data in each thematic topic have been interpreted by using constructivist, and cooperative learning theories.

The shift of virtual learning from physical mode: Chewing an iron

Although the University provided training and workshops on how to conduct virtual classes by using ICT tools and teaching applications to EFL teachers, they were first unaware of it. All of the participants said that they underwent a hard time since it was a very new practice and an approach to teaching the English language. Considering this changing approach in a sociological context, Jaffee (2003) puts forward three major aspects to be taken care of: the relationship between a learning environment and the social roles, the learning atmosphere and existing pedagogical practices, and the transformative roles, relations, and pedagogy while shifting from physical to virtual classrooms. When the teachers commenced virtual classes for teaching English to bachelor and master-level students, they said that they faced multi-dimensional underlying challenges. With this reference, Nabin said:

The major challenge I faced at the beginning of initiating online classes included social disbelief, lack of resources, physical pain, and psychological fear. Some of my colleagues had said that teaching through online classes was like the union of the sky and the earth in a place like Mugu.

All of the participants agreed with what Nabin shared about online instruction for teaching English that teemed with crucial challenges such as adequate online resource materials, physical discomforts, social disbelief, and psychological anxiety. In addition, Nira said, "Though online instruction was not completely new to me, I felt a kind of

mental stress, and anxiety about facing the camera, using apps for presenting slides, and videos, and setting up the sound. Likewise, another participant, Mohan viewed, “Initially, I faced many problems simultaneously, for example, poor internet access, lack of ICT tools, social distrust on behalf of teaching faculties and students and psychological turbulence”.

In this way, all of the participants expressed that they chiefly had psychological stress, insufficient online-related materials, physical discomforts, and social disbelief as the major challenges. However, all of them thought that it was a time of adapting to the new normal situation, shifting teaching learning modality from face-to-face to online mode. Despite having several difficulties and challenges, University EFL teachers adopted and adapted to the online culture and virtual platform assimilating the idea expressed by Harasim (2000) who states that the 21st century commenced with a paradigm shift in every sector including attitudes toward online education that indeed transformed both teachers and students worldwide into adopting and adapting network of collaborative teaching and learning.

It was not easy for EFL teachers to adopt a new culture of online teaching and learning because they immigrated to the digital world during their adult life, thereby adapting to the new culture of virtual teaching and learning proving to be challenging (Toledo, 2007). In this sense, it was extremely tough for them since they faced physical, technical, psychological, and sociocultural problems when they initiated conducting classes through online mode. Nonetheless, taking help and training from the university and collaborating with colleagues and students gradually advanced the teachers to familiarize with online culture for running teaching-learning activities. As to how they grew up for conducting virtual classes, Nira said:

Although I took training on how to use the apps for classroom purposes, I did not learn all aspects for practical use. I did not know how to share and play videos and set sounds in Google meet. In order to resolve the problems, I consulted with colleagues, students, and YouTube videos.

The self-initiation and self-discovery, collaboration, and co-operations seemed greatly helpful for the teachers to overcome the challenges. It shows that all of the participants in the research applied the self-initiatory and self-discovery and collaborative strategies of teaching and learning for shifting the teaching-learning paradigm from face-to-face to a virtual model.

Virtual ELT: Updating with technology

When the university colleges decided to run classes in the virtual mode during the lockdown, EFL teachers at the universities of Nepal did not have the necessary skills at handling the online tools, apps, and ICT-related materials. Although the policy by

the Nepal government to develop teachers' ICT skills and efficiency for teaching and learning in the classes emphasized training the teachers (Rana & Rana, 2020), EFL teachers at university colleges in Nepal are not found to be efficient users of ICT tools for teaching in online classes. When inquired about the efficiency of exploiting online instruments for the virtual platform in the initial stage, Nira said as other participants:

I was a semi-efficient user of ICT tools for teaching though I had been taking online classes for M.Ed. students more asynchronously and less synchronously for a year. In spite of training and workshop that the University organized for teaching faculties, I learned many things about how to operate ICT for online classes from colleagues and students.

Despite the challenges they faced in the beginning, the participants forcefully learned how to use ICT tools-GoogleMeet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, etc. through friends and students, as well. Slightly similar to what Nira said, Nabin viewed, "Besides learning how to use online tools from the workshop training from university, I learned many features of online apps from googling and viewing the YouTube video". With regard to using technology in language pedagogy, Hafifah (2020) draws a conclusion that ICT in the form of digital literary plays a great role in current language teaching equipping the teachers as the front-liners in education to find, create, and communicate content in context with both cognitive and technical skills. Assimilating the core value of digital skills into the online mode of teaching, the university English language instructors enhanced and updated themselves with ICT to ELT with institutional support, self-discovery, self-initiations, and a cooperative approach.

Online teaching: A shift to learner-centered learning

The paradigm shift of EFL classes from physical to virtual mode changed not only the channel of English language instruction but also the way of instructional methods and techniques. In this regard, Yehya (2020) reports that online teaching and learning through ICT tools have brought a paradigm shift in education for enhancing knowledge and skills and for promoting learners' engagement in learning the language in contexts. Virtual instruction embracing students' complete engagement refers to a high degree of work, faith, interest, and emotional attachment to attain a higher level of critical thinking skills and learning aptitude. Regarding the shift to learner-centered learning that online teaching brought forth, three-quarters of the participants said that online teaching integrated ICT with ELT for making classes learner-centered and participatory. Given the change that online instruction yielded, Nabin said:

When I enhanced my skills to use Zoom and other apps, I started involving students in sharing their learning experiences on the topic. Consequently, students engaged in interactive and autonomous learning activities which enabled me to lower my work pressure. They began working in groups and pairs to share; this was the reason that they developed their self-confidence and efficiency in the use of English.

The enhancement of ICT skills developed among university teachers over a short period greatly helped them change the way of conducting teaching-learning activities from a teacher-centered model to a student-engaged model. The transformation of the teaching paradigm stemmed from the fact that student-centric methods reduced the burden of the teachers thereby assigning the students to work, self-engage, and cooperate. The dynamism of teaching and learning through online instruction develop a high level of cognitive, critical thinking, interpersonal and managerial skills in students. The ICT tools enable students to be independent learners, creators, researchers, and contributors to producing new ideas and skills (Lan, 1999). In line with the same idea and teaching-learning experience, Mohan expressed:

I found ELT has more advantages than other subjects because all resources in English can be found on online platforms such as websites and other digital domains. ELT integrated with ICT emphasized interactive and cooperative teaching strategies for teaching English skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well as critical thinking and creative thinking skills.

English language teaching at the bachelor and master levels through online mode benefits a lot from virtual domains since such online sites and online videos provide both students and teachers with adequate teaching and learning materials. As both teachers and learners took part in language learning activities in virtual mode, both parties—teachers and students—engaged equally with interactive and collaborative approaches. The individual work, pair-share, and group work greatly enhanced students' reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills along with critical and creative thinking.

Opulent space for speaking and listening skills

The global pandemic, COVID-19 obliged educational institutions from nursery to advanced university classes to run through online mode. Due to the changes in teaching-learning activities from physical classes to online, EFL teachers did not remain untouched in their delivery and meaningful learning. As to how the online mode of teaching helps learners enhance different skills of language, Soliman (2014) claims that the virtual mode of teaching and learning enhances students' overall language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing through a variety of online materials and resources. When asked about the impact of online instruction on English language teaching, Nira shared her experience:

The effectiveness of English language teaching depends on how teachers have been trained in different skills of teaching speaking, listening, reading, writing, creative and critical thinking. Regarding my online classes experience, I found the virtual mode of instruction for ELT was completely resourceful and effective since my University regularly trained me and my colleagues for interactive and effective classes.

The experience expressed above shows that online teaching for English language teaching is more resourceful and effective than physical classes since the online mode of teaching can benefit from online platforms such as websites and digital libraries. Thus, both teachers and students can utilize the resources and materials for English language teaching and learning. However, other English teachers shared different experiences of English language teaching through online mode. In this regard, Nabin revealed:

I found students more actively engaged in class activities in virtual classes than they did in face-to-face classes since they could easily access texts and materials for practicing all skills. As a result, they had more exposure to speaking, listening, and reading skills than writing.

The online instruction that changed the approach to teaching and learning activities from traditional to modern/updated emphasizes the student-centric, interactive and participatory mode in ELT. However, among the four skills of the English language, writing lags behind other skills though Banditvilai (2016) contends that online teaching is much more beneficial to develop the four language skills equally with independent learning and high motivation. Active engagement by students, easily accessible materials such as audio video on the subject matter, relevant text documents, and two-way communication between teachers and students mattered a lot in English language classes.

In the same way, Mohan revealed his experience relating online instruction with ELT, claiming that English language teaching got more advantages than other subjects because of abundant resources and materials for English language teaching in the online domain. When comparing the student's performance in different skills, writing seemed to lag behind other skills since students have been found to have copied and pasted for writing their assignments. The speech by eminent native speakers and authentic materials greatly help learners learn English. As a whole, online classes for English language teaching and learning have been a useful platform for live interaction, presentation, group activities, and autonomous practice.

Strategies Adopted in Online Teaching

Castañeda-Trujillo and Jaime-Osorio (2021) state that English teacher educators at Colombian universities during the pandemic adopt new teaching strategies by practicing information technology like teaching learning apps, and videoing software, etc. along with upgrading self-learning and adapting new practices to resolve the difficulties. Similar strategies: workshops and training and collaboration have been used by University teachers to mitigate the emergent challenges. To overcome the adverse situation coping strategies that EFL teachers sensed and adopted in the course of online teaching, Maya narrated:

When I started teaching English through online mode during the covid-19 pandemic, I found several challenges such as psychological distress, physical pain, and a lack of complete expertise in using online apps and tools. According to the quote, "when there is a will, there is a way", I took workshop training given by the central offices of the university. However, it was not adequate to handle IT tools, so I discussed the problems with my seniors and colleagues.

As Maya narrated how she faced the challenges with some of the remarkable strategies and techniques that she acquired from formal and informal training and personal efforts, all of the participants working as EFL teachers at the universities of Nepal adopted similar types of techniques and strategies to resolve the challenges.

When the teachers lacked perfect efficiency to use online apps such as zoom, MS Teams, and Goggle meet, they empowered their efficacy to handle the apps by sharing their skills with colleagues. In this regard, Laudari et al. (2021) who studies teachers' perspectives in Nepali higher education during the pandemic, conclude that teachers' attitudes and their professions are interlinked with each other to run effective online classes. The study also adds that not only external factors such as environment, internet, and tools but also inner zeal matter a lot for the successful accomplishment of teaching-learning tasks. At times teachers took help from students when they could not use some new features in the apps and tools. Meanwhile, in the same issue, Nabin reported:

When I lacked skills in using educational apps such as Zoom, MS Teams, and others, I googled related websites, searched Youtube, and consulted with IT experts and teachers. Chiefly, I learned to use online tools for teaching by watching Youtube videos. My self-initiation and discovery helped me a lot to resolve the problems to run effective online classes.

The report by Nabin reveals that the training and skill of handling ICT for English language instructors are inadequate to conduct online classes and it is essential for teachers to go for innovation and discovery. When they faced difficulty, it was their duty to self-initiate in solving the problem. It was the same problem Nabin faced and he used his intuition and self-discovery approach to tackle the challenges.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges COVID-19 brought to the fore that are equally same either in EFL, ELT, or other subjects in the initial phase, university EFL teachers faced challenges with embracing some important coping strategies. Adopting strategies of self-initiation, self-discovery and cooperation helped English teachers a lot to solve the problems of psychological distress, physical discomfort, and technical operation of ICT. With the help of coping strategies, English teachers at the university came out of the turbulence they underwent during the lockdown.

EFL teachers succeeded in bringing a new normal situation to their profession of teaching online. Virtual classes during the pandemic functioned as a remedy to such a critical situation. When it came to evaluating the way, virtual classes played the role in EFL classes, they are found to be profoundly useful and productive because IT as a tool of online instruction has resorted to the EFL for its operation and continuation. By all means, virtual classes truly materialized the theoretical idea of “ELT with ICT”, into real practice to move English language teaching along with information technology.

Resources of ELT from interdisciplinary fields can easily be accessed from the internet that promotes four skills and other skills of English-reading, listening, writing, and speaking as well as critical thinking, and creative skill helped shift the paradigm of English language teaching from traditional fixed physical classroom to virtual mobile classroom. Considering the essence of the research findings into consideration, the paper would equally be beneficial for both teachers and university officials in the course of formulating plans and policies and implementing educational programs during the adverse situation, especially for running online classes. Majorly, EFL and EL teachers can draw ideas and strategies from the research, thereby implementing them in their online classes even in normal times. Based on the findings, universities would prepare policies and logistics to tackle the challenges that any disasters bring forth in the days to come. In addition, the paper would fulfill the needs of the researchers related to online teaching in the future.

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