

Research Article

Online English Classes for Bangladeshi Young Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Voices of the Teachers and Parents

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The recent COVID-19 pandemic brought a dramatic change in teaching and learning around the world. Almost all educational institutions shifted to the online mode of teaching so that students do not miss any academic year. In Bangladesh, such a mode of teaching was never introduced at the mass level earlier, and that is why it was quite challenging for teachers to conduct online classes initially. In some cases, teachers who did not have a certain level of technological expertise in using online teaching platforms experienced more issues in conducting classes. This qualitative study highlights the problems that teachers and parents of nine young learners (YLS) faced during their online classes. The focused group discussion among seven English teachers and nine parents revealed that many YLS could not follow the technical instructions of the teachers well, which compelled the parents to sit beside their children constantly. Moreover, this study reports on the experience of teachers in communicating and coordinating with students on online platforms in a developing country where a full-fledged online teaching mode has not been implemented before. Such a reciprocal interaction among teachers, students, and parents in an online platform provides the scope for rethinking the “parental involvement framework of online teaching” in an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) context, where parents’ digital skills, as well as involvement with the learners’ the learning process, affect students’ academic achievement to a great extent. The findings of the study have implications for planning online English courses for YLS in ESOL contexts such as Bangladesh, where the idea of online teaching is quite new.

1. Introduction

My son often clicks the “Leave meeting” option and pretends that he is attending the online class. When I go to check, he tries to hide the smartphone, informed Senjuti, a frustrated mother of 5-year-old Mishu. The same response was repeated by four more young learners’ (YLS) parents, as we interviewed them to determine YLS’ parents’ perceptions of online English classes in the Bangladeshi context.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a drastic change to the field of education all around the world, and Bangladesh is not an exception to the situation. The Bangladeshi private schools that use English as the medium of instruction began their online classes via Zoom, Google Classroom, or Microsoft

Teams platform in April 2020. On the other hand, the public schools where the medium of instruction is Bengali were taught via the “Ghore Boshe Shikhi” (Let’s Learn at Home) programme televised on the national television channel Sangsad Bangladesh Television from April 7, 2020 [1]. The episodes of each subject were archived in the YouTube channel “Ghore Boshe Shikhi” as well. This sudden change of mode in teaching was challenging for many of the teachers who were not tech-savvy and for students who were heavily dependent on teacher-centered face-to-face classes.

Usually, YLS require more detailed instruction and monitoring while learning online [2]. Moreover, both teachers and parents play a vital role in teaching YLS by following up with the school’s notices, sending homework online, and

making students understand teachers' instructions. Many researchers have attempted to determine how technology has transformed the overall education system during the pandemic [3–10]. Some studies have focused on the perspectives of students or teachers while using new learning technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic [11–14]. Rifai et al. [15] have investigated the effect of various learning technologies on YLs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Indonesian context. Another study in Indonesia explored how developmentally appropriate practice learning strategies support holistic learning among YLs during the COVID-19 pandemic [16]. However, limited studies have looked at the challenges teachers and parents face while YLs receive knowledge solely via online platforms in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) contexts, such as Bangladesh. This paper thus aims at filling that gap of knowledge by exploring the issues related to teaching English to YLs online from parents' and teachers' perspectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Strategies for Teaching YLs. Teaching strategies used for YLs differ from the strategies that teachers adopt while teaching adult learners [17, 18]. YLs are children aged between 3 and 12 years [19, 20] who usually become motivated to learn when the lessons are appealing [21]. In addition, such learners have more imaginations than older learners [17], and teachers have to adopt various teaching methods that work around their imaginations. According to Shin [22], teachers need to make the lessons short because YLs have less attention span. She also adds that lessons with various visuals, realia, and activities to move around physically make learning enjoyable for the YLs because they make sense of the world around them through hands, eyes, and ears [23]. She advises teaching YLs themes to follow for all lessons and maintaining a particular routine of activities within the class time. Repetition of a particular theme and a predictable routine help YLs in better retention of information. The teaching methods used by YLs' classrooms should be such that the students depend on books and teachers in the initial years, but gradually they move towards independent learning [23]. In addition, the teachers of YLs have to work hard to maintain discipline in their classrooms [24] because of some of the YLs' misconduct and not show proper respect to teachers and a tendency of seeking attention [25]. So, it is pretty obvious that while teaching YLs, teachers have to be careful about the learners' interests, motivation, and short attention spans.

Many teacher researchers have worked to find out which teaching strategies are most effective in teaching YLs. For instance, Jeon [26] has utilised Dunn and Dunn's [27] learning style model, where learners' strengths as students are focused in class. Jeon [26] identified that expert YL instructors use a variety of strategies for the same batch of students so that all the students' learning styles are catered. In an in-depth interview with a teacher, Ridha et al. [28] found that she used instructional media such as whiteboard, handphone audio clips, and picture books. Even though the teacher used

lecture mode, she incorporated storytelling, games, and activities based on the total physical response (TPR) method that allows YLs to move around the classroom. Some other Indonesian English teachers of YLs used creative games such as "Simon says touch your nose," which makes students be actively doing the actions stated by the teachers. Another game that the teachers used is "Hangman," where if the learners cannot say the correct spelling of a given word, then a sticky figure drawn on the board on a hanging rope will be wiped out. They also use traditional board games such as Scrabble along with mobile applications on grammar and vocabulary practice [29]. Indonesian teachers also use choral drills, questions and answers, reading aloud, games with flashcards, scrabble, and ice-cream sticks to make learning interesting for YLs [30]. In this regard, Dhalia et al. [31] confirm that YLs retain new vocabulary more when online crossword puzzles are used in the classroom, compared to the hands-on Scrabble board game. The positive effects of digital media in teaching English to YLs were realised by the Ministry of Education as well. That is why, recently, the ministry has allowed to use satellite television in schools for showing educational programmes from a special kids' channel no more than 25 min a day [32]. The above examples of teaching strategies show that teaching YLs is indeed a bit different than teaching adolescents or adult learners.

2.2. Prominent Theories Related to Teaching YLs. There are some prominent theories of teaching YLs that help teachers to conduct their classes better. For instance, YLs require a bit of instruction and guidance from parents, teachers, and other people around them to learn something new. Such a way of taking help from others is called scaffolding [33], which supports learners to cross the zone of proximal development while they learn something new [34]. Some other theories, such as Lenneberg's [35] critical period hypothesis affirms that children learn any language better when they are between 0 and 12 years of age. In terms of teaching language to learners, Asher [36] offers the theory of TPR, where children are asked to engage in physical activity according to the language input they receive from the teachers [37]. For instance, making actions while reading a poem helps them use their motor skills and language skills together. In this regard, Piaget's [38] theory of cognitive learning divides learners into four stages sensorimotor (0–24 months baby learns object permanence), pre-operational (2–7-symbolic thought), concrete operational (7–11 years logical thought), and formal operational (12 years to adulthood-abstract thought). When teachers of the first three stages teach YLs, they must ensure that the students can understand the world around them through their senses, observations, and interactions, irrespective of the discipline of study.

2.3. Teaching English to YLs. Like any other field of study, English teachers of YLs can make language learning effective by using interactive class activities and routines. As children are mentally active learners, they try to make meaning out of a predictable series of tasks [39]. Pictures in books scaffold YLs to negotiate the meaning of the story when they have limited vocabulary stock [40]. This process of making

meaning of various aspects of the environment and lessons can be enhanced by using various genres of literature such as picture books, graphic novels, story apps, plays, oral storytelling, playgrounds, and rhymes [41]. In this regard, Reed-Yamauchi [42] used chants, drills, and songs among 25 kindergarten Japanese learners to teach vocabulary, where he observed that the majority of the students (91%) could recall the new vocabulary when drilling was used by the researcher than the other two forms of introducing new vocabulary. Teachers may also download effective learning materials from various online sources and customise the materials according to the student's needs [43]. In addition, teachers can think of themselves as children and modify their speech to use louder, clearer voices with repetition of sentences in the classroom [25]. Moreover, when teachers express the interjections in the stories well, YLs get to know how to use English expressions in real life. Such processes of modelling are a good example of English speech support for YLs in second language acquisition.

Often, studies conducted on various aspects of teaching English to YLs emphasise teacher researchers in improving the English curriculum. For instance, while proposing an English course for foreign YLs enrolled in a British school, Kavak [44] conducted a needs analysis among six migrant YLs, their teachers, and their parents. Consequently, she emphasised having a lexical syllabus that would help these learners build a stock of vocabulary as well as be informed of British culture. The formative and summative assessments of the course weaved together activities that required students to speak English more and complete repetitive activities based on different themes. The activities were presented to the students according to their cognitive ages suggested by Piaget [38]. Similarly, Zein [45], in focus group interviews of 26 English teachers of YLs in Indonesia, found that language dimension and learner dimension were pointed out by the participants as the two most important aspects of teaching English to YLs. They emphasised teaching spelling and pronunciation more so that the learners can develop language. The learner dimension, on the other hand, consists of learners' interests that help teachers to choose appropriate topics and activities in class. In this regard, Lee [46] surveyed 40 South Korean parents of YLs and interviewed three child-parent pairs to know how they feel about the English language education for YLs in the country. The majority of the parents felt that the private schools have a better English curriculum to follow. Although the South Korean government has introduced an English language curriculum in public primary schools, parents prefer to send their kids to private schools. The student participants, on the other hand, feel that English lessons in public schools are fun but too easy to complete and uninteresting. A teachers' workshop and a study conducted by O'Brian and Nur [47] in Sudan revealed that even if the teachers wanted to implement new strategies of teaching English to YLs, they could not implement group and pair work, and some schools expected students to sit quietly. The teachers lacked English language proficiency and theoretical knowledge to implement various teaching strategies that make teaching YLs effective. Such studies that attempt to explore what YLs, their teachers, and parents think about their learning are

important for transforming the existing English curriculum for YLs into an appropriate one.

In the case of teaching YLs, parental involvement has a significant role to play. Usually, parents of YLs (a) take care of their children only, (b) they are not an employee of the same school the children are enrolled in, and (c) they support children while learning through online mode [2]. Epstein's [48] framework of overlapping spheres of influence places students in the middle of the circle of school, family, and community. Here, students' parents support their learning by helping them to complete homework and making them get involved with the community. Such parental involvement in teaching YLs changes quite a bit in the case of the online mode of learning. For instance, Brockley's [49] study elaborates on a triadic interaction between teacher learners and computer-assisted competitive game lessons that support YLs' intrinsic motivation in English classrooms. Curtis [50] has proposed a framework for the successful achievement of students while learning online full-time. The framework establishes an interlocking connection between the roles of the school, students, and parents that facilitate the overall learning process in this mode.

For the current study, the researchers have chosen Curtis' [50] framework to explore the perceptions both teachers and parents of YLs have regarding teaching English via online mode in an ESOL context such as Bangladesh. They also focused on finding out the problems the participants face while teaching online.

3. Materials and Methods

The authors of this paper adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore the various viewpoints teachers and parents of YLs have regarding the online English learning experience of students. The open-ended nature of qualitative studies allows researchers to explore an issue that was not observed previously [51]. Teaching English via online mode to Bangladeshi YLs is a new trend that emerged as a necessity during the pandemic of COVID-19, and a qualitative study could bring out information-rich data [52] from participants selected through a homogenous purposive sampling technique [53].

The criteria for selecting parents and teachers for this study were that (a) they must be involved with the online learning process of YLs and (b) they must be willing to be a part of the study. For gaining access to the participants, the researchers contacted the principal of a school located in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where English was used as the medium of instruction. The parents and English teachers of Kindergarten-1 in that school were invited to be part of the study via phone. In total, nine parents and seven English teachers agreed to be interviewed in a focused group discussion by the researchers.

Prior to the interview sessions, the interview protocol refinement framework [54] was used to set the list of interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were coded with in-vivo coding. The coded data were categorised, and a qualitative thematic pattern

was developed by using the framework of Crabtree and Miller [55] that consists of organising data in a template, editing, and immersing in and crystallising the information as a part of the “dance of interpretation” (pp. 138-139). The themes emerging from the interviews were sent to two experts of the English language teaching field for interrater reliability [56], where their percentage of agreement was 90. Moreover, member checking was applied for establishing the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. The process of member checking was administered to make the data trustworthy as well [56], and all participants were emailed the transcripts of the interviews for approval.

3.1. Theoretical Framework for the Study. The researchers placed Curtis’ [50] framework for the successful achievement of students in online learning at the core of this study’s research design. The interview questions were created keeping the elements of the framework in mind. The first facet of successful online learning in schools is where teachers can increase communication, transparency, and individualisation in the teaching process so that the students are more successful in learning. The second facet is, students who must be self-motivated, engaged, and accountable for the learning process online. Lastly, the facet of parents includes monitoring, mentoring, and motivating attempts on the parents’ side that help students to complete the tasks given by teachers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Teachers’ Perspectives. The English teachers who were interviewed in this study had experience teaching YLs between 3 and 14 years. Three of them had completed Masters in English and Business Administration before joining this career. The rest of the teachers completed their Bachelor’s in Economics, Engineering, and Business Administration. Although the academic backgrounds of some teachers were not directly related with English language teaching, the school arranged various teacher training for all teachers.

The age range of the teachers was from 26 to 40 years. It was found that Nipa, a teacher who was 40 years, had a bit of trouble getting accustomed to the new format of taking online classes through Zoom and Google Classroom. She gradually learned how to take online classes within 2 weeks. The other teachers being younger and familiar with digital devices, did not have much trouble taking online classes. The school provided online training via video conferencing to all teachers.

When the teachers were asked about the challenges they faced while taking English classes for KG-1 students, they informed that connectivity had been a major concern. Either the teachers or some of the students had a problem with the internet connection.

Sadia found it difficult to engage students in hands-on tasks as a few of the students sometimes left the Zoom class whenever their parents were not around. Lipi said,

I couldn’t use flashcards or involve children in hands-on activities. It is hard to keep students engaged until the end of the class.

Lipi’s experience matches with Copland et al.’s [24] findings, where it was seen that it is hard to maintain discipline in YLs’ classrooms as opposed to older learners. Indeed, Shin [22] has mentioned that YLs learn more when a variety of visuals, realia, and body movements are incorporated [22]. As kids are not able to move much in such online classes, they tend to get bored easily. Moreover, the YLs understand the world around them by touching, seeing, and listening. That is why such learners lose interest in learning when the various senses are not used for long during class time [23]. Oktavia et al. [57] pointed out that YLs’ motivation of learning is volatile, and the biggest challenge is to keep them motivated throughout the class time.

Another problem that the teachers pointed out was the overwhelming amount of workload in preparing the online materials for YLs. Nahida informed,

We have to prepare for online classes differently, keeping the fact of visualisation in mind. The PowerPoint slides and videos should be attractive so that the students are attentive.

In this regard, Diyanti [43] suggests using various online materials in a class that may reduce teachers’ load. Jiang [32] also mentioned the importance of digital media in this modern time for teaching and learning.

In the case of teachers’ communication, transparency, and individualisation, all teachers admitted that parents have an important role to play in the case of these facets. All parents of their classes were very responsive and helpful in monitoring, mentoring, and motivating their children to complete home tasks. It was hard for teachers to go near the students individually to see their work as they did in face-to-face classes. Parents helped in monitoring the students’ work during class time instead.

One of the teachers, Trina, stated,

I feel that in online classes, parents are more involved in their young children’s learning. Whenever the parents had any trouble, they had contacted the teachers via phone or email to keep the learning process active.

In terms of teaching English via online mode, both Nahida and Trina believed that storytelling and rhyme classes were more interesting on the online platforms as they could use various videos from YouTube to motivate students. In physical classrooms, not all rooms had the facility of multimedia that teachers could use for this purpose. Among many interactive classroom activities, Ridha et al. [28] and Bland [41] mentioned about storytelling as a prominent strategy for teaching YLs.

The teacher participants informed that Language classes’ grammatical elements were shown to students on shared screens. They added that during online classes, many YLs felt shy to express themselves in front of the screen. Oktavia et al. [57] also mentioned that YLs are often shy to speak or respond in class. Additionally, weaker students often took the option to ignore online classes whenever possible. The

teacher partially eliminated these issues by individualised teaching through extra classes after school; however, these efforts often resulted in counterproductive due to the lack of participation from the students to do online extra classes after doing 4 hr of regular class every day.

The book that the school followed for teaching the literature was *The New Radiant Way, 2nd Step, and The Radiant Way, 3rd Step*. The pictures in the book helped learners to connect to the story easily [40]. The grammar book titled *Popular Grammar for Kindergarten* and Spelling and the dictation book titled *Nelson Spelling Pupil Book-1* [41] had pictures to follow vocabulary items. The children were also asked to colour the pictures in some of the activities so that they absorb the meaning of the words easily. The teachers used drills in Spelling and Dictation classes and repeated the words quite a few times. Many scholars believe that increasing the stock of vocabulary among YLs should be the core focus to develop their language skills [44–46]. The vocabulary learning tasks and other activities must be planned according to the age-appropriate cognitive stage of the learners [44]. According to Reed-Yamauchi [42], among chants, drills, and songs, most of the Japanese YLs of his study learned new vocabulary items well through drilling. Here, the teachers become the model of good speech for learners that is presented through a repetitive, loud, and clear voice [25]. English teachers used chorus drills in online classes to keep the practice going on. However, they admitted that it was hard to monitor if all children were participating. According to Madjid and Entusiastik [30], Indonesian teachers of YLs also use various choral drills, games, and activities while teaching English interactively.

One of the positive moves the school administration had taken was to increase the frequency of parent–teacher’s meetings during this pandemic. Many teachers said that the frequency almost doubled as they had meetings with the parents after every fortnight. Most of the teachers pointed out that parental involvement had a positive correlation in improving day-to-day performance and maintenance of discipline during an online class. The parents monitored children’s inappropriate behaviour in the online classes and prevented them from leaving meetings while classes go on. Moreover, the students were strictly told not to turn off their cameras during class.

4.2. Parents’ Perspectives. A total of nine parents participated in the focused group discussion, and six of them had completed their Masters in Business administration, Communication, and Computer networking, while one of them had completed Ph.D. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Eight of these parents were females, while one was male, and their age range was from 35 to 37 years, and five of them were working parents. The parents were informed that the concept of online learning was new to them, and they had to follow the step-by-step instructions provided by the school as part of their preparation. Most of the time, either the parents or their spouses sat with the children when online classes went on. The majority of the children could operate Zoom or Google Classroom screen independently, but they were not able to send the

home tasks to the teachers via email. The parents had to check any notice given by the teachers to Google Classroom and email home tasks and class tasks to them.

While responding to the query about the challenges of receiving lessons online, the parents informed that the children had 4 hr of online class every day, and most of the time during the last two classes, they became restless.

Tanzina stated,

I have to make sure that Nihan is sitting still to listen to the teachers during the last class.

Shin [22] states that YLs’ lessons should be short as they have a very less attention span. Sitting in one place for 4 hr each day indeed is a tiresome task for children [22].

Most of the parents admitted that it was challenging to keep the YLs’ attention steady as they were too young to be self-motivated, accountable, and engaged [51]. The parents had to play these parts of students by emailing the tasks to the teachers on time, motivating them to be in class, and ensuring that they were completing all tasks.

Kona mentioned how time-consuming it was for a working parent to upload home tasks to the children. She commented,

It is too taxing on working parents as we have to upload home tasks for all subjects separately. Moreover, submitting homework to Google Classroom was challenging as the system crashed, and we had to email to the teachers. Sometimes it seems that our children are not students, but we are.

Along with all these problems, all parents also mentioned their health concerns. They felt that such a long screen time is detrimental to children’s eyesight as well as overall health. They added a common issue of poor internet connection on both teachers’ and parents’ sides.

Regarding parental involvement in teaching English, the parents had to monitor if their child wrote the spellings or lines correctly. This way, they played the role of mentors and motivated the students to correct their mistakes before submission.

Mukul added,

Often, my son Ayaan did not understand the phonetic sounds pronounced by the teacher and I had to help him with that.

She also mentioned that the story and rhyme hours were enjoyable for her children as the teachers showed relevant YouTube videos. This finding corresponds with Sevik’s [21] comment that children are motivated when the lessons are more appealing and attractive. On the other hand, the way teachers used to teach rhymes through physical movement in face-to-face class was not fruitful because the kids did not want to do the movements. In regular classes, students used to follow their classmates and teachers and make actions relevant to the rhymes. In this regard, Zein [25] mentioned that teachers’ expressions in the stories inspire YLs to notice how English expressions in real life are used.

All parents admitted that they were more involved with their children's learning process in online classes. Senjuti said,

I feel that I can see his improvement directly, which was reported to us through report cards and parent-teacher meetings in face-to-face classes.

In terms of transparency and communication on the teachers' part, the parents were very satisfied with the detailed feedback they received from the teachers via email. If they had any query, they could call up the teacher and ask to clarify. However, the teachers could not give individual attention to all students on screen. Sometimes the class became too noisy when all students responded to the teachers. It happens because YLs usually try to seek the attention of the teachers [58].

5. Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way of teaching all over the world. This paper reports on various challenges faced by teachers and parents of YLs of English via online classes, especially in an ESOL context such as Bangladesh. Both the teachers and parents mentioned that the poor connectivity of the internet has been a major problem in holding smooth online classes. Bangladesh's government may take note of this issue and invest in building a good infrastructure of IT in the country so that educational institutions can offer a blended learning environment to the students. Schools should be given funds to have computer labs where teachers can take online classes and also download interesting materials for the learners. This step will indeed modernise the traditional lecture mode of teaching English to YLs.

As an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world has moved towards blended learning, and Bangladesh should not be lagging in any way. As both the teachers and parents have unanimously agreed on the fact that it is hard to keep YLs' attention while an online class is going on. As a solution, the teachers resorted to various interactive videos for storytelling and rhyme classes and impromptu games.

The findings of the study also emphasise the fact that for making online English learning successful for YLs, both parents and teachers must collaborate and interact frequently. If parents do not monitor, motivate, and mentor at home, YLs will not be able to be motivated, engaged, and accountable for their learning. In other words, parents and teachers must scaffold learners' learning jointly to use online learning platforms effectively. The pandemic has compelled Bangladeshi schools to look for an alternative online platform to teach students, which has opened a new horizon of infusing blended learning at various levels of education in the country.

Data Availability

The qualitative interviews from parents and teachers used to support the findings of this study have not been made available because the research deals with children.

Consent

The parents' consent was obtained only for using the information for the research purpose and for valid publications. It was not to be sent to any public platform.

Disclosure

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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