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University Students' Perspectives on Online Teaching Practices during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Online teaching demands proper awareness of technology and online teaching-learning skills. Online teaching is still new and has not been fully investigated in the Pakistani context. This study aims to investigate the perspectives of university students on the teachers' practices for online teaching during Covid-19. This study was conducted at a private university in Lahore, Pakistan. Fifteen female graduate students who completed a minimum of one semester with online education were interviewed. The data indicated the teachers' use of diverse practices for online teaching to enhance students' learning. It found that teachers chose various teaching methods to meet learning objectives. Most students positively responded to teachers' online courses, online teaching skills, and expertise. However, some students highlighted the inadequacies found in the online teaching. The study concludes that when students come from diverse social backgrounds and follow the same educational standards in relation to online teaching, there is an urgent need to bridge the difference.

Keywords: University Students; Students' Perspective; Teachers' Practices; Online Teaching; Covid-19; Pandemic.

Introduction

On February 26, 2020, the first patient of coronavirus was found in Pakistan, after which the number of reported cases increased every day. As a result, the authorities closed schools across the country, upholding strict orders and system arrangements. All educational activities, including examinations, came to a standstill, severely affecting students' careers, and education. On March 23, the government implemented a total lockdown, which was later upgraded to a smart lockdown on May 9, 2020. Due to the lockdown, students, particularly those from rural areas, faced significant difficulties due to the unavailability of the internet and other study aids (Hasan, Rehman, & Zhang, 2021).

Education is crucial not just for individuals but for nations. It grooms the personality, equips an individual with knowledge, and provides the skills needed to leave an impact in this rapidly changing world. Supportive leadership is required to emphasize the importance of education. Parents and teachers can help their children live better and more successful lives (Sharjeel, Muhammad, & Waqar, 2022). Advanced countries, such as Finland, Norway, and Poland, have a higher level of education. Pakistan is attempting to raise the standard of education and has implemented an online teaching method to curb the adversities of the pandemic. Before Covid-19, online learning was not common in Pakistan (Akram, Anjum, & Batool, 2020). Higher Education Commission, Pakistan permitted all higher education institutions to continue learning and teaching through online techniques.

The benefits of an online teaching and learning mode include the ease of learning at any time anywhere, repeatedly revisiting the learning materials, lower student costs, and broader reach to the audience. Online instruction provides time and space comfort, economic productivity, and flexibility. It allows students to obtain a globally recognized degree without attending on-campus classes. Students who are unable to engage in conventional school environments choose online education.

Unfortunately, some faculty members are still not fully aware of the effective use of e-learning and technology. Researchers should investigate students' perspectives to determine why

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teachers are unable to use online learning effectively. Some studies have explored students' attitudes towards online teaching at the university level (Rehman, Siddiqua, & Waheed, 2021). A small number of research studies have been conducted in Pakistan to examine students' online learning experiences during Covid-19. Second, a review of the related literature revealed that most literature takes a quantitative approach (Abbasi, Ayoob, Malik, & Memon, 2020), indicating that more in-depth research studies on students' experiences are required. Furthermore, most studies are focused on medical students (Abbasi et al., 2020). That study will be helpful in finding out the best teaching practices for online teaching during the pandemic from students' perspectives. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature and explore the teachers' practices that can be adopted to make online teaching and learning effective. The findings may be useful for adopting, strengthening, and reorganizing online teaching and learning strategies in Pakistan.

The research question for this study is: What are the perspectives of students on teachers' practices used by teachers to make online teaching effective during Covid-19?

Literature Review

Teaching, as a career, demands versatility, creativity, dedication, and spontaneity. Teachers are expected to be professionally trained, grounded in the theoretical knowledge of teaching approaches, and are usually held accountable for students' academic success (Naz, Muhammad, & Mahmood, 2022). Aims, material, technique, evaluation (marking and reporting), instructor character, and instructional quality are essential components of teaching (Ayua, 2017). Education is changing because of technological advancements, especially with the growth of digital education. Even though enrolment in higher education in the United States is declining, online learning is rising steadily. Much academic staff in higher education, on the other hand, are opposed to online teaching and see it as a source of apprehension and dissatisfaction (Shreaves, Ching, Uribe-Florez, & Trespalacios, 2020).

With the advent of the web, distance education has been the driving force behind the rise of online instruction. The web is currently a significant part of our lives and features how we work, meet, teach, and learn. Over the past decade, online education has become a standard part of many university programs, called distance learning or web-based learning (Sockalingam & Liu, 2020). Online teaching is built on a one-to-one basis to reach and engage modern learners everywhere. There are standard large-scale open online courses, involving researchers and educational institutions. These courses are convenient, easy to attend, have a high ratio of completion, and attract non-traditional students.

Teaching is about continually improving methods, techniques, and means to participate in productive and meaningful learning for diverse students. Every single lesson is complex, and teaching cannot be just didactic and passive lecturing, even without the extraordinary situation of Covid-19 and the lockdown of educational institutions (Arshad, Muhammad, & Waqar, 2022). Students need to go beyond traditional learning and prepare for the future. They can solve problems, think critically, work in teams, and be technologically aware of meeting the demands of the dynamic and ambiguous world. Online teaching provides exciting and engaging ways to enhance the learning experiences of students from diverse demographics in this internet age (Muhammad, Akhter, & Lala, 2019; Pirzada, Muhammad, & Ahmed, 2021; Pirzada, Muhammad, & Masood, 2021; Pirzada, Muhammad, & Zaka, 2021). Online teaching shares a great deal with face-to-face teaching, but it also has a distinct collection of skills and specifications (Naveed, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2022).

Chickering and Gamson (1987) recommended that instructors follow the following seven principles to be effective in online teaching: (1) inspire learner engagement, (2) promote scholar collaboration, (3) boost constructive knowledge, (4) provide timely input, (5) encourage timely submission of assignments, (6) convey extraordinary potentials, (7) value varied capacities and wisdom methods. Typical online lessons, such as corporate training or even Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), refer to the provision of standardized reading materials, audio and video resources, and tests (Sadiku, Adebo, and Musa, 2018).

Pakistan's higher education includes both public and private universities authorized by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC). In Pakistan, e-learning can close the success gap due to economic and financial factors, such as cost, enabling students to study at home. There is some quantitative and qualitative research available on e-learning in Pakistan. However, online teaching is a

newly emerging technique for online learning at home (for example, see, Hani, Naz, & Muhammad, 2021; Naz, Hani, & Muhammad, 2020).

Methods

The current study is a qualitative study using a structured interview research design. Semi-structured interviews are loosely bound interviews with open-ended questions. Interview questions provide valuable information that had used to understand better the teachers' ways to learn online. Because semi-structured interviews combine both structured and non-structured interview styles, they can provide benefits to both. They allow for proper comparisons of candidates while also providing an opportunity to investigate topics related to a particular candidate. However, semi-structured interviews are less objective and more difficult to defend when compared to structured interviews. Fifteen participants were selected who had studied at least one or more semesters online and were currently enrolled in MPhil degree in the selected institution. The first researcher analyzed the data using the template analysis methods (King, 2012), which "is a style of thematic analysis that balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analysing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study" (King, 2012, p. 426).

Findings

Student's Engagements in Online Teaching

Interaction with teachers

Most participants reported that the choice of deciding the medium for conducting classes and carrying out communication mostly rested with teachers. However, most teachers preferred Zoom for conducting online classes and the WhatsApp group chat feature for communication. A few members reported having used Google classrooms for taking online classes. Most participants seemed satisfied with the usability of Zoom and regarded it as user-friendly and easy to handle. For example, a participant reported:

> Zoom is easy and is perfect for attending online classes. It supports video calls to enable us to see each other and hence helping in creating a classroom environment virtually. Also, I personally like its screen sharing feature a lot. Unlike its competitive software used for conducting online classes, Zoom has been consistent, user-friendly, and interactive. (Participant 4)

Getting engaged in online learning

Participants noted that online teaching was more interactive as compared to physical classrooms. They felt excited about using and exploring digital technology. Having the liberty of switching off cameras whenever needed allowed shy students to participate in class at their own convenience without the anxiety of facing their fellows. Students supported online platforms as they saved them their traveling costs and time.

Students gave mixed responses on engagement with their teachers. Few were satisfied with their digital interaction with teachers: "Teachers tried their best to plan interactive sessions but were helpless as nothing could replace face-to-face learning" (Participant 5). Although their teachers ensured to design interactive sessions, digital media has its limitations. Most of the interaction suffered due to frequent power failures, low bandwidths, and domestic settings that were inappropriate for the teaching-learning process.

Interaction with peers

During the pandemic, digital technology surpassed human interactions. All in-person interactions were replaced with digital media. Unlike with teachers, communication with friends over digital media was smooth and convenient, just as it had been before Covid-19. Students reported that their academic collaboration was backed by technology during Covid-19. The quality, however, suffered due to a lack of physical interaction in terms of management. For example, a participant stated, "Well, it was not easy for our class representative to manage all the classes on WhatsApp groups. Most of the time, students remain non-responsive and find it convenient to switch off their devices after missing their group deadlines" (Participant 6).

Prompt Feedback in Online Teaching

Adequate feedback on online teaching

Most participants seemed satisfied with teachers taking and providing students with their feedback. Students reported that teachers not only provided them with timely feedback on their assignments and project but assisted them in improving their performance. Similarly, teachers actively sought students'

feedback to review their own performance. If they could not ask directly, they held question-answer sessions at the end of every class to identify gaps in learning. They also reviewed students' performance during and after presentations and on assignments. However, a few students reported otherwise and stated that teachers were not as prompt as they are in classrooms when it comes to providing feedback. They were not engaged in providing continuous feedback and only reviewed their performance after quizzes and assessments. Hence, they were not able to improve their performance.

Most participants stated they were satisfied with teachers who provided quick feedback. They were more likely to be satisfied if the teacher gave detailed feedback with detailed explanations. Feedback in online learning motivated students to study online. Teachers' positive feedback enhanced their morale and encouraged them to work harder. "Feedback that teachers provided helped us in improving our performance in exams" (Participant 8). However, a few of them were very disturbed by not getting timely feedback. "We didn't get the timely feedback, and so we are not satisfied" (Participant 13).

Adequate materials and methods for strengthening concepts, and skills

Most participants stated that all teachers used different strategies to reinforce the critical material. Reinforcement was significant for the educational process. The teacher used a variety of methods to support the material. Some teachers used quizzes and short questions, while others used revised material to reinforce the concepts, skills, and content. Teachers usually used presentations to strengthen essential materials and ideas and reinforce skills. Teachers reinforced important material for understanding in online classes through slides, YouTube videos, and articles. But every teacher had their own method. Some had support sessions before assessments. Others formed pairs, distributed courses, and asked them to summarize each topic or make essential points to clarify it for the rest of the class. They were giving thought-provoking assignments that were relevant to the lectures. "All the teachers used different strategies to reinforce the vital material. Some teachers used quizzes, answers to short questions" (Participant 15).

Few participants reported that there was no concept of empowerment at the university level. Some teachers needed to work on their teaching methods. Some teachers used to carefully plan their curriculum, courses and lessons but could not do so for online teaching. When teachers assigned complex tasks as they used to do in normal classes, students were not satisfied with the learning and got nervous, as this was online education. As a result, they were unable to manage and simplify complex tasks.

Strategies were needed for effective feedback in online teaching

Students reported that most teachers realized that their students belonged to different backgrounds and thus, had various problems owing to their socio-economic background. Hence, they were generous while providing feedback. They treated students based on equality. Teachers used several techniques to provide feedback, most of which were based on verbal feedback. Students commented that during such unprecedented times, providing students with e-certificates could have gone an extra mile. Some said that encouraging written feedback should be mentioned on LMS against their assignments as it can lift their morale and motivation.

Participants also opined that online education was equally strenuous and a daunting experience for teachers, and they also needed motivation, which was nowhere to be found. For example, a participant stated,

Teachers should be supported in this regard as well. Organizations and universities should ensure that they provide teachers with the required resources in this regard. Maybe a special fund should be allocated to all teachers that could cover their expenses. (Participant 4)

Despite the challenges and uncertain conditions, teachers outperformed themselves every time they experienced a lockdown. Yet they suffered the most. They were downsized and were paid salaries in half for having worked double shifts.

Learning Objectives in Online Teaching

Course contents alignment with objectives

Most participants commented that their course outline was aligned with course objectives. The teachers were capable enough to identify and discuss the scope and goals of the course. Additionally, the content complemented the course outline and helped to achieve the objective in a steady progression. Some participants reported having been taught by teachers who either did not provide any outline at all or were still drafting one.

Curriculum content

As discussed above, the content was least affected. Participants opined that curriculum content had been significantly influential in engaging the students owing to the course material available on YouTube and other video hosting websites. All the courses followed deadlines. However, few teachers set no curriculum for their classrooms. They were not provided with their course outlines but were only verbally informed about the topics and were expected to find the content independently. Since many books were only available at their libraries and not found online, they preferred to have traditional classrooms.

Modern techniques during online teaching

Teachers had gone digital with an inherent assumption that all the students would have just the sufficient bandwidth that would keep their learning processes going. Teachers enjoyed the liberty of having multiple options available without being caught in the hassle of arranging required digital media. Teachers used different techniques such as brainstorming, demonstration, and activities to enhance their skills. Moreover, students were provided with a hands-on learning experience by digitally pairing them in groups. There was plenty of audio-visual aid available in the form of YouTube.

Students seemed satisfied with the activities their teachers had planned for them during online classes. They were effective and sufficed the purpose well. Teachers ensured to provide equal opportunities to all the learners. However, classes lacked variance in discussion topics. Discussions were not as organized as they used to be in in-person classes. The participants argued that online classes could only be successful if the infrastructure was designed to support them. For example, a participant reported:

> Because the online teaching-learning process is complicated and involves many underlying factors that can make or break the process, blaming teachers for the failure of the system would be sheer injustice. There was no training arranged for teachers and students to make the most of the education technology. Our teachers and we both were in a dilemma of what and how during the Covid-19. And the time we spent figuring all these problems out cost us our stamina, focus, and our grades. On the other hand, it brought exertion for teachers as well. (Participant 15)

Assessment during online teaching

Online assessments were similar to physical classrooms. Students were assessed by using several tools, such as online quizzes, classroom presentations, and group activities. The only difference was not having to attempt written exams during online learning.

> Online assessments were not different from a usual assessment. Rather than attempting our exams on paper, we attempted them online. Content and policies were the same as in a traditional exam. We were assessed based on what we were being taught. And the content we were taught was from books and articles. (Participant 5)

Online assessments were another challenge for students and teachers. Most teachers could not subdue the chances of cheating, which hampered the overall purpose of assessments. Students faced troubles while operating on LMS. Had there been any instructional training for teachers, it would have been more effective and beneficial.

Extra material during online teaching

Some participants, however, reported that online education had been difficult in terms of time management and learning. Since teachers did not have to face students in person, they bombarded them with a lot of content to cover in a short time. Students had a mixed response to the additional assigned material. Most students reported that they had not been expected to read anything other than the course content; some, however, reported that they were expected to read content available on the internet relevant to their course content.

Participation in Online Lessons

Most participants held that online participation was vital and had a good experience participating in online classes. They considered it a crucial practical approach. Most students asked questions to show their presence in lectures. Teachers had set class participation as the benchmark of students' learning and were helpful and supportive to shy students. They ensured that all their students participated in class so that they might reflect on their learning. Participation in traditional classrooms was essential,

but its importance increased in online courses as it indicated whether the students were learning or not.

Shy students avoided being in the limelight, but unlike in the traditional classroom, teachers could not read their facial expressions and body language, so they had no other option but to participate. Availability of a steady connection was, however, the determinant of students' class participation. Contrary to the discussion above, a few participants noted that even when they wanted to participate in class, talkative and confident students dominated the discussions and therefore, they remained deprived of the chances to participate in class.

Technical support in online teaching

Online learning software was new for both students and teachers. Most students reported that their teachers were helpful and supportive, even though they, themselves, were having an ongoing hands-on experience with the software. For example, a participant reported,

> Things were very different, but I was supported by the teachers in every aspect. My teachers troubleshot me through emails and conversations, and some even suggested us the troubleshooting video. All this help came in handy, and I am now able to proficiently use software for my own learning. (Participant 14)

Pattern of activities and due date in online teaching

Students were positive that the progression of studies was consistent, and teachers had been lenient with deadlines. To ensure the participation of each student, they set generous deadlines. Some teachers, however, were inconsiderate of students' problems and assigned complex projects to complete with inflexible deadlines.

Clear Learning Expectations

Teachers' expectations

Students thought that online learning was a new experience both for the teachers and students, but their teachers had high expectations. They remained inflexible while setting their course and deadlines and did not account for the unavailability of resources. Learning material was disseminated through students' learning portals, WhatsApp groups, and emails. Teachers delivered their lectures by preparing and presenting PowerPoint slides and shared them later in emails. Students were encouraged to explore as many ways as they could to support their own learning. Students gave a mixed response regarding the clarity of the material. Since the margin to ask questions and clear any confusion was exceptionally low, students were confused about how they should go about their assignments and other activities.

Instructional strategies for understanding the content

Most participants said that they were using various teaching strategies to understand the content in online teaching. In online learning, discussions and collaborative teaching methods were the best options for understanding the content. Students liked the activity method or the argument method, which teachers usually used. They found group activities to be constructive during online learning. teachers were qualified and capable and made sure that their students were learning attentively and participating actively in the conversation. Therefore, each group was assigned a specific task so that everyone could discover it online. Some teachers used the lecture method. They found it more appropriate and helpful than the simple lecture method because it kept them motivated. Therefore, discussion and active work during online studies helped improve understanding of the course content. Sometimes, teachers posted video links on Google Classroom, which was very helpful. "Teachers have used discussion methods to meet the needs of learners. That was the best option to understand the content in online teaching" (Participant 9).

Instructor Presence

Teachers' presence in online teaching

All the participants said that teachers kept their videos on to show their presence during Zoom classes. Most teachers used to do question and answer sessions to indicate their presence and to keep the class interactive. The teacher tried to communicate with all the students and checked their presence by asking questions. They did various activities in online lectures to show their presence. Some teachers thought in a way that students felt like they were in a physical classroom. Teachers were continually active during the online study. "Most instructors used question/answer sessions to indicate their presence. That was often done to keep the class interactive. When the students were leading the class" (Participant 8).

Announcements, appearance on video, and participation in discussions

All participants said that most teachers used different mediums for announcements. They used different strategies for reports and participation. Most teachers used WhatsApp, Zoom, and the student portal for announcements. Sometimes liked to turn on the camera in Zoom meetings for effective interaction. Some made it mandatory for students to turn on their videos, which became a challenge for some students.

Some teachers used audio only for the announcement. They had a distinct experience when studying online. Some students noted that it would have been better if the teacher had been visible on video so they could see them and understand their facial expressions. "Announcements were made using WhatsApp groups, email, and Google Classroom. Some teachers ask to appear on video for effective interaction" (Participant 13).

Teachers' energy levels and passion levels during online teaching

Most participants said that teachers had high energy levels, which were sufficient during online teaching. Teachers did their best to deliver online lectures. The story of the energy and enthusiasm of the teachers was high during online education. The teachers collaborated with the students to continue the learning process. They helped students to learn better during the pandemic and were enthusiastic and energetic. They taught with passion and aimed to engage students in online learning. "Teachers had good energy levels, rarely when they have a problem. They did their best to deliver online lectures" (Participant 7).

Some participants noted that teachers were also human. Some teachers had lost their energy. When students shared powerful concepts, teachers felt happiness. The students also took part and tried to make the discussion more valuable and useful. If the students' energy levels were according to the teachers, then the sessions would benefit all the students. Some teachers were aggressive, while others were very noble. Those who had been aggressive in physical classes remained that way in online courses. However, some were aggressive in their physical classes but very lenient in their online courses. Each teacher had their own level of energy and motivation, and attitude toward online learning. Some were more passionate and excited about teaching online.

Activeness and excitement while studying online

Most participants said that they were energetic and excited while studying online because the instructor arranged various activities and discussions. They were excited and active while learning online when they were given encouragement by their teachers. Constant support enabled them to be passionate and engaged in learning online. When the topic under discussion was interesting and connected to the current situation, they stayed active and shared their knowledge in this regard. They said they were active and self-motivated learners; usually, they ate something before online class, and breaks during lectures were very helpful. "They stay active and excited while reading online because the instructor arranged various activities and discussions" (Participant 3).

Some participants said that they were not active or passionate about online learning. Some did not like reading in online classes. Because all the teachers were different while teaching online, these students got praise from some teachers, while others did not pay attention to them. They were very excited when teachers preferred their answers. Otherwise, a lack of performance in online courses could result in them losing their self-confidence. Therefore, it was a fundamental approach for teachers to consider students who were not good at the skills required for online education. Their levels of motivation and activity and performance in the class depended on the environment of the class.

Discussion

This qualitative study explores the perspectives of university students on the teacher practices for online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. It found that most teachers preferred Zoom for classes, as it is convenient and easy to use. Participants pointed out that online teaching was more interactive as compared to physical classrooms, and online classes allowed them to save traveling costs and time. However, others noted that digital interaction is limited due to issues such as power failures, low bandwidths, and unfavorable domestic settings. On the other hand, digital communication with friends was smooth and convenient.

Some participants believed that education is nothing without action and that using education in the real world should be a priority. There were many ways we could apply our education to the real world. Modern technology and online learning provide an opportunity to connect with the real world.

Teachers provided effective learning materials that were helpful in applying in the real world. They used various activities during the online session to make it more interesting. Some used an innovative online model to select and learn. They were moving forward with their situation and looking to the future. They used their education through various academic creativity, such as participating in online competitions and discussions.

Most participants stated that instructors had provided help with new learning experiences. They provided helpful guidance for unique occasions; and guided students on how to apply the knowledge in further experiments. They provided direction to solve problems and were happy when students followed their instructions and found and created innovative solutions. Most teachers gave students activities that gave them new experiences. They used various skills to develop real-world connections and provided books and art to connect with the real world. Most teachers motivated and encouraged students to make real-world connections. They encouraged students by telling their experiences and mistakes and connecting their struggles and trials with their learning to the real world. Teachers had different techniques to motivate the students.

Conclusion

When students come from diverse social backgrounds and follow the same educational standards in relation to online teaching, there is an urgent need to bridge the difference. Failure to understand the individual differences between students may lead to skewed assumptions because the online teaching-learning mode, which is in its infancy here, does not fulfill the desires of all. More research is obligatory on how to develop effective online instruction. This study suggests that more research is needed to explore teachers' practices for online teaching in the future to protect students' loss.

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