

Impact of COVID-19 on the Online Learning Experiences of High School Students in Pakistan

Bushra Mariam Umair¹ & Shazia Nasir²

¹Greenwich University, Bushra.umair12@gmail.com

²Head, School of Linguistics at Greenwich University, Shazianasir.222@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The spread of COVID-19 forced educational institutions around the globe to go online. In March 2020, Pakistan also went under strict lockdown, forcing schools to go online. Though the students, teachers and the parents, as well, braved this situation but there has always been a state of uncertainty in their minds. The students had an unknown fear for their learnings as they were not sure what the future holds for them. This research paper will be focusing problems; high school students faced during the online education process. Pakistan being a developing country, with limited technological resources, online learning was a challenge not only for the students and teachers but also for the parents as well. The ambiguity had left the students in continuous fear. In this phenomenological study, semi-structured interviews with open ended questions were conducted with five students from three different schools to share their experience of online learning. The findings of the research revealed that going online is inevitable under the given circumstances but it cannot replace face-to-face learning.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Face to Face learning, High School Student, Online learning

1. Introduction

By the end of 2019, we were introduced to a deadly virus COVID-19, an invisible enemy whom we were not acquainted with. COVID-19, caused by SARS-CoV2, which was first identified in Wuhan, China, is a respiratory viral infection. It is transmitted through a respiratory droplet of the infected person (CDC 2020). Policymakers all over the world were left with the option of practicing social distancing and self-quarantine policy. Subsequently, educational institutes were forced to shut down, diverting to teach online. To keep the wheel of education rolling, high schools in Pakistan also opted to teach online. Hence, conventional face-to-face learning was substituted by the online learning experience. Both the students and teachers of colleges were left clueless and uncertain about the scenario they were in. Nevertheless, humans are programmed in such a way that we adapt to the environment we face. This led us, therefore, to a distinctive form of teaching technique that was previously unconventional for us. Urban areas in Pakistan were less affected compared to rural ones. This is because of adverse financial conditions.

1.1. Research Question

The study focuses on the following research question

Q 1. How was the overall learning experience during COVID-19?

1.2. Education in Pakistan

Pakistan, like every other developing country, the conditions in the field of education are not quite favourable. Poor infrastructure and untrained teachers leave an irrevocable impact on the education sector of Pakistan. Hence, leaving most of the population in rural areas as being the most affected. Education in the field of science and technology has been hit the most because of the shortage of trained teaching staff, ill-equipped laboratory and the curriculum which is being taught has a little relevance with the need of the present time. The root cause behind this grave problem is the non-serious attitude of the government in the allocation of an adequate budget.

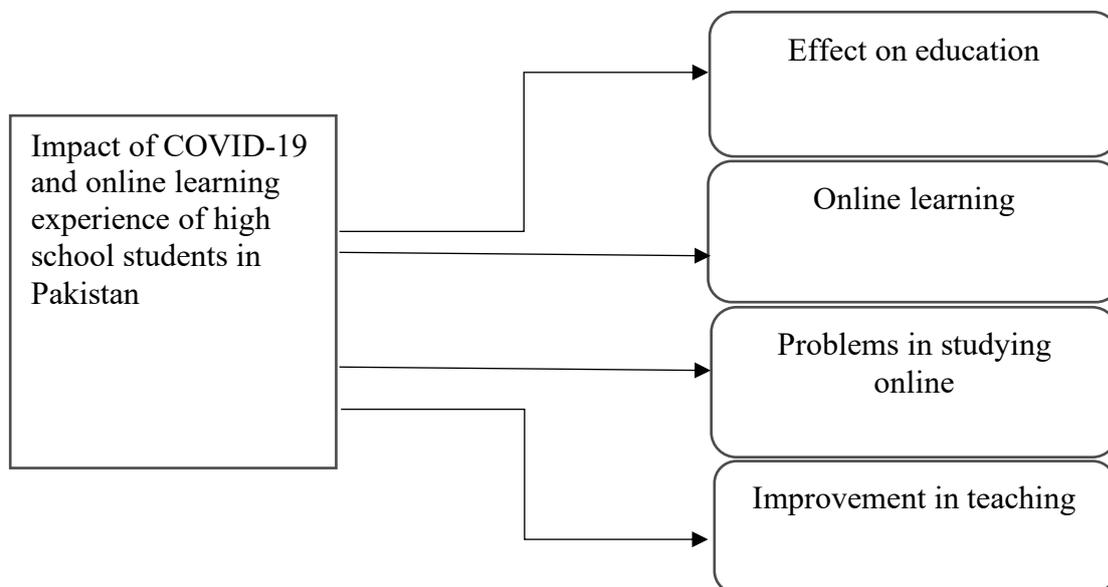
1.3. Online Education

Online education has been originated back in the 1980s, and undoubtedly it can be a debatable form of learning. Its definition can vary upon a person's understanding, and most people define it in the context of its materialistic view. It is usually defined as access via technological tools such as web-based, web distributed, or web cable (Nichols 2003). While Ellis (Interview with e-learning guru Dr. Michael W. Allen, 2004) contradicts him, and states that e-learning does not only cover content and industrial methods via CDROM, but also interactive audio and videotapes. Commonwealth of Learning presented the most updated definition of e-learning as a process of educating based on the separation of the instructor and learner in time and place under the mediation of technology delivery with the possibility of face-to-face interaction (Learning 2020).

Although in Pakistan distance learning is not an innovative concept, but it was reasonably new for most of the institutions. Institutions like Allama Iqbal Open University and Virtual University are among those that are successfully practicing this for a long time. However, students tend to be unsatisfied with the outcome of it. One thing which should be concerned that these means are meant for older students. Despite the willingness of most of the institutions to have a smooth transition, it seems to be difficult to embrace it in the longer run. Due to the chaotic situation, none of the sectors were regulated and therefore leaving people in despair. This happened in the field of education where teachers and students were perplexed by the quick shift of pedagogy. Pakistan is a country where most of the teachers available are untrained. According to the statistics, the total number of teachers working in high schools are 51,350 in 2016. This records an increase from the previous number of 46,431 teachers for 2015 (Statistics 2016) out of which mostly belong to the urban side of the country. Pakistan is far behind in the field of science and technology, hence leaving a huge population of educators blind to online teaching and learning.

1.4. The problem Statement

The problem statement could be explained with the help of graphical presentation below



2. Literature Review

In Pakistan, not much literature is available on the online learning during COVID-19 except a few articles in the newspapers. With the literature available, it can be extracted that with the efforts of educators the learning process kept going. This investigation gives an analysis of online education during COVID-19.

The human race is not witnessing a pandemic for the first time. In 1918 a similar situation was faced (Taubenberger and Morens 2006). The economy faced a great blow and the same kind of uncertainty could be sensed now. The major barrier which hinders us is an inaccurate or incomplete record (Beach, 2020). Almost 50 million died during the pandemic of 1918, but survival does not just mean to be alive. The deployment of millions of young men, as well as the widespread deaths and dismantling of both civilians and service-members, has its effects on the economy. These issues, at times, prevent making convincing interpretations of the data given (Beach 2020).

In the current circumstances, in a country like Pakistan, where 22 million students are already out of school, there is a major hike of students being dropped out of school. The spill-over economic effect of total lockdown flared up the difficulties for the remaining students. Pakistan is a country where investment in public sector education is merely enough, COVID-19 had shrunk it even more. This will widen the gap between the public and private sector school (Mujtaba 2021).

Despite the promotion of e-learning, the realistic side was not been able to cater to a large audience. However, the government has taken steps like teaching through low-cost tools like television and radio, but through surveys, it has been observed that only thirty percent of them are aware of it (Geven and Hasan 2020, 3). Even with the most optimistic scenario, it is observed that an average child will lose 0.8 years or 0.5 years of education. It further detects the learning poverty which was already 75% may rise exponentially (Geven and Hasan 2020).

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs Phenomenological method in acquiring data. It aims to describe the meaning of individual life experiences. The researcher tends to unfold the essences of individual experience, and deeply lived moments one may experience (Marshall & Rossman 2006). To get the essence of the phenomenological experience the researcher took semi-structured interviews of participants as the primary method to get substantial data. The participants who were selected belonged to a school where the management has just been changed. The students have a direct experience of the phenomenon (Merriam 2009). In this research, all five participants were taken into confidence and signed an informal non-disclosure agreement. In the form, it was mentioned that they are free to quit whenever they choose to. Furthermore, their identity would not be revealed and would be named as Participant A, B, C, M and S. All five are girls between the ages of 15-17, doing their O-Levels. All the participants were given the choice of not answering the question they were not comfortable with. They were specifically selected for the interview because they have been attending online classes regularly in school through zoom. The interviews were conducted online on zoom on January 6, 2021. All the participants were asked to keep their videos on, to cover all the signals which could be physical or verbal. The consent to record the video was taken before commencing the interview.

4. Findings & Analysis

4.1. Pandemic

COVID-19 has left the world in a state of unseen fears, always approaching toward anyone. People were in the state of shock trying to make use of the meaningless life they were living. The participant while describing COVID-19 were seen uneasy and trying not to talk about the situation more. Although most of the participants have mentioned not to believe the threat of the virus in the beginning of lockdown; later they were left with no option to accept it when their own family members contracted the same virus.

4.2. Frightening Time

Karachi being the city of lights has never witnessed anything of this sort ever. The young participants have faced frightful time being at home, or whenever they were getting a chance to see the city in dark. The depressive state of the surrounding developed a feeling of distress among them. This was observed during the interview as the participants mentioned the horridness of the time.

4.3. Unpredictability

The uncertain life during this time created a feeling of despair among the student. Not being able to forecast any goals created unwillingness to make any. Therefore, failure in the accomplishment of results led life towards many insecurities. Teenagers were not able to predict about reopening of schools and uncertain exams have left the life in emotional distress and puzzle about their future termination of exams by the board fuelled more anxiety to the purpose.

4.4. Homeschooling

Home-schooling was the option most of the students were left with. This option only works on a condition when there is someone who has a sound knowledge of the content. Additional support from siblings or parents has helped students with their studies. Students have more relatable examples and have hands on experience of their parents and guardians. This also helps families to have a better understanding of their children's academic growth. If there was inadequate support from home this might have lead towards wrong concepts. This is more favourable for students of younger grades.

4.5. Lack of Technological Awareness

Being a developing country Pakistan still faces problems in the field of technology. Before COVID-19, only a handful of schools were providing technological-based learning. Though none of them have ever tried online learning which might be the reason people are facing problems with getting used to it. Students were facing problems in operating new software because of a lack of awareness and training. Educational institutes were sometimes managing several software devices which increased the challenges for students.

4.6. Improvement in Teaching

The complaint of not understanding whatever was taught during the lesson was the primary problem which has led to many others. In Pakistan, the school's main goal for students is just to give the bookish knowledge. If the school is unable to deliver the main goal, then for parents there is no point left sending their children to school. However, participants have witnessed the gradual betterment of teaching methodology during the course of time. Usually in Pakistan teachers are not trained, they face problems in teaching techniques during normal classroom session and technology was an additional problem for them. Lack of teacher training may be the root cause behind it.

4.7. Educational Loss

There was uniformity among the participants that there was an educational loss during pandemic. While the teachers were connecting through the screen, the students were lacking the understanding they required. Students who lack additional support from home may face the consequences of it in the upcoming examination.

4.8. Promoting Self-Study

Some students preferred this lockdown for the reason of self-study. Participants were at the age where they are given guidelines mostly, rather than telling bits of information. Learning through additional text was embraced during lockdown where there was no help from home.

This may be the ideal outcome from this lockdown, however conceptual incorrectness fear, would always be there.

4.9. Non-Serious Attitude

The lack of physical presence created an environment of non-seriousness. While using the mobile phone to connect to classes, students usually drift off to messages and toward social media accounts that prevented students to understand the concepts properly. This may be because of boredom or maybe lack of seriousness during classes. This non-serious attitude is the result of constant despair and uncertainty.

4.10. Depreciating Social Growth

Isolation has driven people to a state of loneliness. It has been observed that being away from school, the students missed out the social interaction with their peers. At this age, teenagers seek more independence, while being locked up in the house for months their soft skills are highly affected. During the interview, it has been observed the students were finding difficulty in expressing themselves. Perhaps the reason behind this is the lack of interaction with peers.

4.11. Psychological Effect of Pandemic

The uncertainty and frightful days have left the students in shock. They were not forecasting the effect of COVID-19 in the beginning but later still managing to live life along with corona. For them initially, it was fun to get a break from school. However, they were not able to see the domino block which had just fallen to affect the total setup of their life.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

Pakistan is one of the few nations that has gone for the closure of schools within the first week of pandemic (Geven & Hasan 2020). Even then the widespread of the virus was not controlled, however, it was restrained for a while. Pakistan being a third world nation had witnessed problems in all the sectors of life. Education has not been the focal point for the authorities ever. The deteriorating situation of the educational sector had taken the impulsive hit by COVID-19. This resulted in chaos, where most of the students in the beginning were thinking the lockdown to be a holiday. This constant state of denial led students to not taking online classes regularly. It is pertinent to mention lack of trained teachers had made the student baffled and add more to their problem. Students had also lost interest in online classes due to continuous electricity breakdown and lack of technological facilities in Pakistan. The results in this study have revealed that nearly all, but specifically high school students faced more challenges. One of the main challenges is the slow learning process which they encountered during their online classes. Also, their fear of not connecting on time due to power breakout of poor connectivity. The study also resulted in some implications for educators and institutes. They must get themselves fully equipped with the modern technology to facilitate their students. The educators can include some motivating instructional methods like virtual field trips to inspire their students.

Due to lockdown, most of the people were left jobless or not being paid by employees. In a family where there is a turmoil of economic crises, there is no option of buying multiple mobile gadgets and invest in studies. Hence, leaving a huge chunk of the population not given a chance of education. Therefore, it could be derived that due to COVID-19 online learning was the option left for the students to keep up with their academics. However, online education could not simply replace the physical school experience.

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