An Academic Crisis at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh During COVID-19

Gobindo Deb[1] and Murshida Rahman[2]

Department of English, Hamdard University Bangladesh, Gazaria, Munshiganj, 1510, Bangladesh
Email: gdeb@hamdarduniversity.edu.bd[1], murshida@hamdarduniversity.edu.bd[2]

Abstract: In this pandemic situation, online class is a common scenario all around the world and Bangladesh is not an exception. This paper is an attempt to explore the impact of COVID-19 on tertiary level education in Bangladesh both from teachers and students point of view. The study aims to investigate the major challenges both teachers and students are facing to conduct online classes during this time. Moreover, this study also addresses some suggestions for effective online classes. To conduct this study researchers used the qualitative method and data were collected through semi-structured interview. The participants for this study were tertiary level teachers and students from different public and private universities of Bangladesh. The study reveals the major challenges to conduct online classes like insufficient high-speed internet connection, lack of digital device, poor electricity power quality, lack of affordability, lack of interaction between teacher and student, high cost of internet, not reliable exam system, health problems and so on. The study also recommended some solutions to overcome these problems such as ensuring internet speed and uninterrupted power supply, proper infrastructure, training both for teachers and students, financial aid for economically disadvantaged students, provide cheaper internet packages and develop technical skills. The findings of this study are likely to add value to any further research on online education in Bangladesh.

Keywords— COVID-19, online class, pandemic, tertiary education

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has become a BUZZ WORD for the entire world from 2020, and people are passing a crucial time for this invisible enemy. The whole world is fighting with COVID 19, which has spread to almost every corner of the world. Human beings all over this planet are being threatened with this name, and it is creating discontent among themselves day by day. Due to COVID 19, every individual is experiencing a different lifestyle, and it brings a drastic change in their daily practice. The World Health (WHO) Organization defines Coronavirus (COVID-19) as an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome. It was first recognized in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and since then outspread globally. As a result, WHO declare COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020.

The accelerating spread of COVID-19 and its different outcomes worldwide have led people to fear, panic, concern, and anxiety. The virus was confirmed to have spread to Bangladesh in March 2020. This pandemic has turned people's lives upside down and affected all aspects of life, including the educational sector. From March 17, 2020, all educational institutions in Bangladesh were declared close to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Since then, uncertainty exists in the educational sector. Although the government did not declare any national policy regarding continue classroom activities under lockdown. Still, some educational institutions started online education to provide students with an effective lesson in this adverse situation. Bangladeshi students have been very much familiar with the traditional mode (face-to-face) of education. For them, the online class is quite a new phenomenon though it is practised globally. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, educational institutions started online classes to stay connected with learners.

This article tries to present an exhaustive review of academic activities at the university level during this lockdown situation. For this purpose, some private and public universities have been selected to get an idea about university education's real scenario in this crisis period. Most of the private universities have conducted their curriculum online after the government declare close to all educational institutions. Although they had to face many barriers as they did not get proper guidelines from University Grants Commission (UGC). Public universities started their online classes later. By adopting different technologies, universities are trying to complete their semester/trimester on time by introducing online learning in the current situation. But we need to find a proper way out that all tertiary level learners can complete their degree within the time frame.

Only a few studies have shown the impact of COVID-19 in tertiary level education and previous studies have focused separately on teachers or students opinion. To researchers' knowledge, no previous research has investigated the impact of COVID-19 at the tertiary level both from teachers and students point of view at the same time. So this research presents here is an attempt to fill the gap.

2. **OBJECTIVE**

This study aims to examine the effect of COVID-19 and how online classes are conducted at the university level. This research will focus on students' and teachers' online education experience in the current situation and what problems are faced by teachers and students during online classes. With these aims in mind in the paper, we present some suggestions regarding productive online classes and how online learning can be made efficaciously available for learners in any future uncertain situation.

3. **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research seeks to address the following questions -

1. What are the challenges faced by students and teachers to conduct online classes during the COVID-19 situation?
2. How these challenges can be overcome for effective online classes?

4. **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Online education is creating opportunities both for learners and teachers. Nowadays, many researchers and educators are interested in online learning to enrich learners learning ability, and it has become a common practice in many countries of the world. Online education is a kind of distance learning, the umbrella term for any sort of learning that takes place through the internet where students do not physically interact with teachers like in the conventional classroom. Researchers [10] mentioned that "distance education is teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as a special institutional organization" (p.2).

The availability of internet access and the widespread use of inexpensive personal computers in recent years have made online education the largest field of distance learning [6]. Both hybrid or blended learning and purely online learning can be regarded as online learning. Hybrid or blended learning incorporates traditional face-to-face courses with the internet and other technologies, whereas purely online courses are provided entirely over the internet [11].

Learning could be asynchronous or synchronous or a combination of both in online education. Asynchronous learning refers to teaching and learning that does not occur simultaneously, while synchronous learning refers to simultaneous teaching and learning, both of which are conducted through technologies such as the internet [12].

Online learning can be viewed as flexible learning and due to this, it is gaining popularity among students and educators. Compare to traditional classroom online courses are cost-effective and offer opportunities for adjustable student-centred learning where students are expected to be autonomous learner [4]. Although online learning is effective for learners in various contexts however, some educators and academics do not support online education. Through online, education is getting challenging to solve difficult teaching and learning problems [3]. The interaction and classroom environment that occurs in traditional classrooms cannot be replaced by online teaching. Usually, online classes rely more on self-regulated learning for learners and some students are competent and skilled to adapt to online learning, but students who are less skilled and not comfortable with online classes may be at a learning disadvantage [4].

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries where online education could be used as a substitute for educating a vast number of people. However, the majority of students and teachers in Bangladesh are not familiar with online education. Here both teachers and students are accustomed to traditional face to face classroom. Although, some of the private universities in Bangladesh offer online courses. In recent days, online education is getting highlighted among young Bangladeshi learners. In this respect, some organizations started online activities that helped the majority of students for skills development.

Comparing to other subcontinental countries Bangladesh is still lagging behind in online education. In modern days online education has become an indispensable part in the context of higher education. The concept of E-learning was first introduced in Bangladesh in 1956 by a radio broadcasting programme and later expanded much by the establishment of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) in 1992 [7].

The education system has enlarged and flourished worldwide, but in Bangladesh, still traditional methods exist. Due to inappropriate learning pedagogy, both teachers and students can not take advantage of online education. Especially at the tertiary level both teacher and students need to know the online education system. If students do not have proper knowledge regarding this it will hinder their future skill development. To make the students competitive in this age of globalization, online education implementation is essential at the tertiary level.

For COVID-19 in different parts of the world, tertiary education shifted to online for the continuation of teaching and learning and this change is comparatively easy for those countries that had invested in the education sector and had strategies for any certain crisis. But many countries that had not previously developed any strategic approach for digitalization the education sector facing difficulties [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the education scenario in Bangladesh and apart from the other sector, it blows the education sector with its worst effect. Both teachers and students were not prepared for this uncertain situation. To control the expeditious outspread of this disease all educational institutions remained closed from mid of March 2020 and till now it is undetermined when educational institutions will be back in the normal situation. The normal flow of academic programs has been disrupted since the closure of tertiary-level educational institutions suspended face-to-face teaching-learning sessions and the delay to reopen educational institutions can have a negative impact on student's mental health and academic progress [8 and 2]. Universities and other educational institutions of Bangladesh have not faced such turmoil before. Owing to this pandemic, both teacher and students facing unforeseen circumstance.

At the tertiary level, online classes had started to keep connected with students. For conducting online studies, universities use different platforms like Facebook Group, Google Classroom, Zoom, Moodle, Blackboard and so on. The appropriate platform is obligatory to continue online classes. Both teachers and students are trying their best to cope up with this unpropitious situation. Although teachers are not able to deliver lectures in the classrooms and give the group works for students. As a result, teachers have to adapt to uncertain situations and develop various teaching strategies to progress in online education.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was based on the qualitative method to get an in-depth analysis of online teaching and learning at the tertiary level. The data has been collected through semi-structured interviews. The target groups for this study were university teachers and students from different public and private universities of Bangladesh. For this qualitative study data were collected from 10 teachers and 18 students. The interviews were conducted over the phone and via zoom. The data were transcribed and have been thematically analysed based on the answers provided by the participants. Every research has some limitations and this research also. The major limitation of this research is due to the pandemic more participants could not be arranged for the interview session.

6. FINDINGS

This part includes the findings from the two groups of participants: Teachers and Students.

The interview with the students revealed the following obstacles regarding online classes:

Insufficient High-Speed Internet Connection

The basic requirements must be needed for online classes like digital device and high-speed internet connection. But it is a matter of regret that in Bangladesh still, internet facilities are not available everywhere. In rural and hilly areas internet and modern infrastructure facilities are not accessible. It is a great challenge for successful online education in Bangladesh.

As student 9 mentioned, "I live in the rural area and here poor internet connection is a basic problem which hampers class. Due to lack of internet speed at my home on the presentation day I have to go to the road to deliver my presentation. Even due to lack of internet speed I could not attend one presentation". The majority number of students said that poor internet connection has a significant impact on their classes as well as exams. Student 13 remarked, "on the exam time due to lack of proper internet speed submission delayed and created mental pressure for me". Also, Student 7 commented, "for weak internet speed I could not submit my document on time and for these uncertain technical issues faculty members do not consider any students". According to Student 16, "once the internet connection is gone in exam time, had to re fill-up google form questionnaires and that killed time with lots of mental pressure".

Load Shedding/ Interrupted Electricity Supply

The interrupted supply of electricity is another vital obstacle to continue online education in Bangladesh. Low electricity power quality hampers online education a lot, especially in remote areas. Students cannot attend online classes in rural and remote areas due to low electricity power. Students mentioned their class interrupted due to poor electricity and they cannot understand the lecture properly. Student 17 said, "we have to attend exams in Google form and very often in the middle of our exam when electricity has gone I have to start my exam again from the beginning but our teachers do not extend our time for the exam".

Lack of Interaction with Teachers: Teacher-student interaction is very essential for a successful class. Student 4 said, "interaction with teachers is not happening properly because sometimes I do not feel comfortable asking questions to the teachers

but in the physical classroom I used to ask many questions to teachers until I understand the topic correctly". According to the students, there is a communication gap in online classes and they could not understand all the topics properly.

Distracts Concentration due to the Homely Environment: In this pandemic situation students have to continue their classes by staying at home. Most of the students expressed that they do not get the actual classroom flavour in this way and as a result, they can not pay their proper attention to the class lecture. Student 7 said, "I could not concentrate properly; even teachers failed to create a classroom environment through online." Students mentioned sometimes concentration distracts due to the homely environment. Everybody does not have their personal room and those who share their room with others face difficulty attending an online class. Participant 11 said, "at home sometimes I have to do household activities with my mother and sometimes when relatives visit us at that time it becomes difficult to concentrate on classes".

Lack of Affordability: All students are not financially solvent to buy data to continue online classes. The high cost of the internet is regarded as another challenge for most students. Student 12 said, "my economic condition is not well but due to online classes every month I need to buy data. We pay the university their full tuition fees but we need to spend extra money to buy data." Some students describe that they have to depend on tuition or part-time jobs to bear their educational expenses but in this pandemic situation, everything stopped and their family is not solvent enough to help them. In this context, it is challenging for them to continue online classes. This is another obstacle to run online classes smoothly for economically disadvantaged students.

Physical and Mental Health Problem: Sometimes online classes create mental and physical problems among students. Due to long time class students suffered from an eye problem, back pain and serious headache. Student 8 said, "class time is from 8:00 am-5:00 pm. and its really difficult for a student to sit on a chair for the whole day looking at the computer screen". Even in online classes, they do not get any break. In the physical classroom, they can get a break, but in online classes, it is not possible. So students feel bored for a long time class schedule. Moreover, students expressed that this situation makes them mentally depressed because of various technical problems during class and exam time create pressure for them. Even they cannot enjoy the online class like face to face class. Student 18 said, "online classes are like the robotic class because we cannot share our views with teachers and other friends. So we are getting frustrated day by day".

The findings from the teacher's interview regarding the various challenges of online classes are given below

Inadequate Technical Support: Lack of proper device, poor internet connectivity, load shedding was regarded as major difficulties by participants to conduct online classes. They mentioned these issues created problems both for teachers and students. One participant commented, "due to poor internet connection very often some students disconnected from the classroom and missed some part of the lecture. In that case, I need to start the lecture from the beginning. Sometimes students feel shy to ask the teacher if she/he missed any part of the lecture. In that case, the topic will not be clear to the students. I think it's a challenge for me as a teacher" (Teacher 5). All the Teachers said that for low-speed internet and poor electricity power students face difficulties even in the exam time.

Limited Technical Skill: Many teachers are finding it difficult to adjust to this new teaching style because all teachers are not tech-savvy. Most teachers in Bangladesh have no prior experience teaching entirely online, lack technical competence and are unaware of online assessment methods or course redesign. Teacher 9 said, "The curriculum of teaching and learning in Bangladesh is not designed for online education. This is why it's tough to continue online classes because some teachers do not have knowledge of how to conduct online classes".

Not Reliable Exam System: According to the teachers, the way the exam is conducted online is not the appropriate way to evaluate students knowledge. Teacher 2 said, "existing online examination system has a lot of scope for unethical activities and plagiarism. As a result, sometimes it becomes difficult to mark the performance". Most of the teachers commented that cheating and unfair means in the exam is common and teachers (both public and private universities) do not have appropriate access to the software to check plagiarism. According to Teacher 4 and 5, the exam question should be constructed in such a way so students can not cheat in the exam.

Not Possible to Monitor: Teachers do not have any control over the online class and as a result not possible to ensure students active participation. Teachers agreed that as students have the option to switch off their video camera and microphone during online classes, it is tough for teachers to understand whether students are present in the class or engaged in other activities.

7. SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE CLASSES

Following suggestions have been emerged from both Teachers and Students interview which are presented into thematic categories:

Ensure High-Speed Internet and Uninterrupted Electricity: For successful online classes, high-speed internet and uninterrupted electricity are mandatory. Stakeholders and Government can play a vital role to ensure this issue. Student 9 mentioned, "Government need to take proper steps to develop internet facilities in the rural area". Both teachers and students emphasized that internet speed and stable electricity power need to ensure in everywhere to run online classes without any obstacle.

Ensure Access to Teaching Resources and Affordability: Findings reveal that both Teachers and Students need to have proper access to digital devices and unbroken connectivity. The majority of the participants stated that their institution does not provide any facilities like laptop, device or wifi facilities. Participants also mentioned that institutions can provide facilities to economically disadvantaged students to continue online classes. Student 12 said, "Government can allocate some fund in the education sector for poor students to provide smartphone and internet data". Also, Teacher 5 said, "internet package rate should be reasonable so everyone can get access and can introduce a special package for poor students". The government can contribute to this sector and university authority can negotiate with operators to arrange reasonable internet facilities.

Develop Technological Competence: Participants suggested that to facilitate online learning both students and teachers need to have appropriate knowledge of technology. Training can be arranged both for teachers and students. All teachers are not equally competent and teachers need to be more skilled regarding the use of technology to make the classroom interactive.

Need proper structure: Most of the Teacher emphasised forming the proper guideline and infrastructure for online teaching and learning. When the government declared close to all educational institutions including universities, at that time both teachers and students did not know what to do because there was no proper guideline to follow. To make online teaching and learning successful there need to be a proper guideline. Teacher 8 said, " proper planning and platform should be designed and accessible to everyone for effective online education". We have yet to meet the online class infrastructure requirements for all students. To accommodate all students or a group of students, policymakers must address these issues.

Continuous Assessment: Teachers are not satisfied with the existing online exam system. Teacher 2 suggested, " I think a continuous assessment should be followed based on attendance, class responses, assignments, viva, and presentations rather than Conventional examination system where not possible to assess students' capabilities and intelligence". Teacher 3 also mentioned, "open book exam and assignment could be effective in such situations". Teachers also suggested developing plagiarism check software to check students script.

8. DISCUSSIONS

Lack of basic requirements like digital device, high-speed internet connection, poor electricity power is regarded as the major challenges both for teachers and students for successful online classes. Students both from public and private universities suffered the same problem. The study revealed that most of the students do not feel comfortable with online classes due to various obstacles, only one or two students mentioned they feel comfortable.

Usually, in Bangladesh, both Teachers and students are accustomed to working in physical classrooms where they have a direct relationship with each other. Most of the teachers think that quality education is not being ensured online. On the contrary, Teacher 8 said, "through online quality education can be ensured and teachers need to be efficient for this purpose. In modern days teachers should play the dynamic role to make classroom interactive". Teachers need to be more skilled regarding the use of technology, they first need to learn different ways to navigate the technology themselves before helping their students. If teachers do not overcome these limitations, online classes cannot be worthwhile. To make online classes effective and successful both teachers and students need proper grooming. To make online classes interactive need to involve students through innovative activities like mini impromptu presentation expanding institutional subscription to e-resources, and increasing interaction between teachers and students [9].

The data also revealed that to some extent, the outbreak of COVID-19 is gradually creating the social inequality among students. It is observed that students with laptops, smartphones and PCs with proper internet connection only eligible to take part in online classes. All students should have access to devices and internet access, and those who cannot afford it should be given financial aid [9]. It is also observed that in private universities students have to pay more tuition fees to compare to public universities and in this situation for online classes they need to spend extra money which is quite challenging for them because all private university students are not from a wealthy family.

The present study also found that due to this pandemic social interaction among teachers and students is being hampered. For effective learning group work or discussion is so much needed. Students' regular group experiments with peers, face-to-face

communications, and social relationships with friends and teachers delayed due to the pandemic, which may detract from their desire to learn [5].

Private universities started implementing online activities since the shutdown was declared but some public universities started their activities much later. As a result, the study found that public university students already been caught in a session jam due to the pandemic. Many Teachers suggested that authorities can think about introducing blended learning for effectiveness in the education sector after the post-pandemic situation.

9. CONCLUSION

For Bangladeshi teachers and students, the online class is quite a new phenomenon though it is practised globally. It is a huge challenge to suddenly switch to online teaching in Bangladesh. Due to COVID-19 educators and students around the world are trying to adjust to 'new normal' academic environment. The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted significant changes in academic institutions around the world, as well as a reconsideration of online pedagogy and new teaching methods by educators. May be online education may not be proved effective to some extent and cannot take place of the traditional classroom but in such cases like the COVID-19 situation, there is no alternate to online learning.

One of the few positive outcomes of this crisis is that we may be able to reshape our traditional education system for the better. Maybe there will be more crises in the near future, and we must be prepared to meet those challenges. The government and stakeholders need to take initiative to enhance online education in Bangladesh and obviously should have the proper infrastructure to make online classes effective and beneficial for any situation.

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