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Original research paper

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FOR UNDERGRADUATES IN LEARNING ESSAY WRITING ONLINE DURING THE PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: Writing is a very essential skill given that undergraduates have to write a lot during their degree programs. An essay is one of the written products that students are supposed to produce. Usually, students seek teachers' help, peer assistance, and library aid to master this skill of essay writing. However, due to COVID-19, students lost access to all these benefits as this novel disease affected education, and all educational institutions were closed around the world. Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan instructed the higher education institutes to switch to online mode of learning. Thus, universities started online classes using different learning management systems. Since the online mode of learning is practiced only in a few universities in Pakistan, it was pretty difficult for all stakeholders (administration, teachers, and students) in other universities to switch to a new mode of teaching and learning. This study explored the challenges undergraduates faced in learning essay writing online during the pandemic. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews which were conducted from six participants of essay writing class. Thematic analysis of the data from purposively chosen participants revealed that lack of and unfamiliarity with technological gadgets, unavailability of or poor internet, house chore, attitude of family members, feedback (whether written or oral) from the teachers, and limited interaction with peers or other resources hampered their learning in essay writing class. The study will have implications for teachers and university administrators. The study concludes with directions for future research.

Keywords: *Essay writing; challenges; undergraduates; online; COVID-19; pandemic*.

1. Introduction

Being a cognitive process (Jebreil, et al., 2015, p. 190), the productive skill of writing requires other skills as well; these may include problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Fareed, et al., 2016, p. 82). The process of gathering and composing ideas results in the form of a product – a written document. Connelly and Forsyth (2012) state that an essay is one of the most popular forms of academic documents or assignments in higher education (p. 7). Oshima and Hogue (2006) describe an essay as a piece of writing that is divided into numerous paragraphs (one for each main point), beginning with the introductory paragraph and ending with the concluding paragraph (p.17). Essay writing in English is a key component to

assess students' comprehension (Hale et al., 1995, p. 1). According to Redman and Maples (2017), undergraduates have to read the questions, understand them, and identify and organize information to draft a basic plan followed by multiple write-ups (p. 14) of assignments or term papers for different courses. Further, this skill gets improved over time through face-to-face teacher feedback (Ariyanti, 2016, p. 266), peer feedback (Huisman, et al., 2018, p. 956), and access to numerous university resources. However, as COVID-19 broke out, educational institutions across the world were closed (Toquero, 2020, p. 1). As a result, students were deprived of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers, and they lost access to libraries too.

The COVID-19 pandemic began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and spread fast over the world within months. The pandemic had an impact on every facet of life, including schooling. The global shutdown culminated in the lockdown of educational institutions as the situation worsened (Khalil et al., 2020, p. 35). Likewise, Ali (2020) reported that all educational activities in higher education institutions in Pakistan came to a halt. In the given scenario, online learning emerged to be the only mode of education everywhere. Therefore, all educational institutions throughout the world chose to provide online learning materials for students in all academic subjects using accessible technical resources (Kaur, 2020, p. 418). Following the rest of the world, the Higher Education Commission (henceforth HEC) upon the instruction of the Federal Government of Pakistan instructed the higher education institutes to switch to online mode of learning so that students would not suffer due to unusual and uncertain circumstances (Ali, 2020, p. 1).

Benson (2002) defines online learning as "access to learning experiences through the use of technology" (p. 443). Online learning has two types: synchronous and asynchronous. According to Finkelstein (2006), synchronous technology (e.g., audio-conferencing, videoconferencing, web chats, etc.) allows for "live" contact between the instructor and the students, whereas asynchronous technology including email, earlier video recording, discussion forums, etc. give sender and receiver to review and interpret messages later (p. 30).

Despite the convenience online learning provides, the pandemic time highlighted some of the challenges associated with online learning, particularly in developing countries. In this regard, Zhaohui (2020) pointed out that the focus was on "the transfer of educational content to the digital world and not specifically on online teaching and delivery methods". On the other hand, Zhong, R. (2020) reported that lack of resources in academic institutions, insufficient access and availability of the internet, and the lack of the latest technology affected students' capacity to participate in online learning. Likewise, lack of proper interaction with instructors was reported as another major concern associated with online learning.

Since the challenges were for all stakeholders, Mailizar et al. (2020) suggested that students' views should be investigated to explore the challenges they face in online learning (p. 08). On that, Aboagye et al. (2021) surveyed the challenges to Ghanaian university students in online learning during the pandemic. The results revealed that accessibility issues were the most important issues for

undergraduates followed by social issues, lecturer issues, and academic issues (p. 1). In addition to this, Mahyoob (2020) surveyed 184 Saudi undergraduates to evaluate their experiences in online learning. The results showed that learners experienced technical, academic, and communication challenges (p. 351).

Since a significant deal of learning and teaching as well as administrative activities of academic institutions are handled manually in Pakistan (Salam et al., 2017, p. 171), it was a great challenge for academic institutions in Pakistan to switch to online mode of learning. Farooq et al. (2020) studied the challenges of online learning for medical students in Pakistan and found that lack of faculty training and institutional support, internet connectivity issues, maintaining student engagement, and online assessments were some of the challenges (p. 567). Another quantitative study (Anwar, et al., 2020, p. 52) conducted in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan revealed that students faced barriers and challenges like problems with technology, lack of training, low motivation, resource constraints, and low computer literacy.

Although the above-cited studies have explored and highlighted challenges for undergraduates, most of them are generic as they talk about online learning in general. Moreover, most of the studies particularly in the context of Pakistan have adopted a quantitative approach leaving a gap for a more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. Besides, challenges to students in ESL classrooms have received very little attention in this regard. More importantly, the literature seems to lack the voices of undergraduates who belonged to far-flung areas of a developing country like Pakistan and were studying a writing course online for the first time in their educational careers. Keeping in view that the students lacked face-to-face support from teachers and peers and that they interacted first time with online learning, their experiences became a significant topic of study. Given these research gaps, this study aims to explore the challenges undergraduates of a public sector university in Pakistan faced in learning essay writing online during the Pandemic.

Research Question

What challenges did the undergraduates face in learning essay writing online during the Pandemic?

Sub-questions

1. What were the technology-related difficulties for the undergraduates?
2. How were the conditions at the undergraduates' homes for online learning?
3. What were the problems related to communication with teachers and peers?

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

The context for this research study is a public-sector university in Sukkur, Pakistan. This university is different from other universities in the region based

on its high-tech infrastructure and its novel merit-cum-need based scholarship programs. Students who join the university through these scholarship programs for their undergrad studies belong to far-flung areas of the whole country. When the COVID-19 broke out, the students were supposed to leave hostels immediately. Many of the students left their belongings such as laptops and books with the hope that the situation would soon get better. Some of the students belonged to areas where even the electricity was not provided by the government. In such a scenario, studying online would have been a real challenge for those students.

When the HEC instructed universities to start online classes in March 2020, the universities were free to use any mode – Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. Zoom was used along with the university's learning management system (LMS) in the context of this study. The classes ran for consecutive three hours – one course each day. So the students were engaged all six days a week. This practice continued throughout the Spring 2020 semester.

Although the university provides state-of-the-art technological facilities to students, they were unable to benefit from them because the campus was closed. So, the students were on their own to use any means to attend classes. The participants of this study used different resources to attend classes depending on their socio-economic status. However, the university provided a certain amount to students for subscribing to internet packages on their cellular phones.

2.2. Design

The design adopted for this research is a case study design because the researcher wanted to explore in depth the challenges for undergraduates in learning essay writing online during the pandemic. A case study, in the words of Denscombe (2017), focuses on numerous "instances of a particular phenomenon to provide an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences, or processes occurring in that particular instance".

2.3. Participants

All the students studying the essay writing course online made up the population of this study. However, using the purposive sampling method, only six participants were chosen for the sake of this study. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select rich data-yielding cases (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 23). Regarding sample, Duff (2018) states that a sample of three to six participants is sufficient for a case study. The participants were six in number: two females and four males. Both female students belonged to the Education department and the male students came from the Business Administration department of the university. The participants were coded as MB1, MB2, MB3, FE4, FE5, and MB6. The male participants were selected on the basis that they belonged to far-flung areas of the country. The overall reason behind the selection of these participants was to get rich data from the students having the least access to the outside world and slightly strict or tough family conditions.

2.4. Data Collection Tool

The main tool for data collection was semi-structured interviews. The participants were contacted as the university opened at the end of September 2020 after the first and the most severe wave of COVID-19. After seeking their consent and ensuring confidentiality, the researcher met the participants on separate days one by one. The meetings were held in an open space and in compliance with the precautionary instructions as laid out by the government and the university administration.

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of two warm-up questions and five core questions. The interviews were conducted after seeking consent from the participants and ensuring confidentiality. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to shuffle their questions and expand on predetermined areas. Semi-structured interviews were employed to get deeper insights with the use of open-ended questions. The interviews were taken in the national language Urdu or the regional language Sindhi. The interviews were recorded using a smartphone. Later, they were translated and transcribed manually.

2.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the data. A six-step process – coding, grouping the themes, displaying data, interpreting the findings, and validating the results – suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017) was used. In the words of Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis allows the researcher to make meaning out of data based on recurring ideas

3. Findings

The findings of the study revealed six themes: technological gadgets, access to the internet, house chores, and attitude of family members, feedback from teachers, and limited interaction with peers & other resources. Each theme is discussed below with the comments of the participants.

3.1. Technological gadgets:

Since the classes were online, students had to rely on technology to carry on their studies. Although students faced challenges related to the availability of resources, more pressing challenges were the use of learning management systems (LMS), typing essays rather than writing them with hand.

For example, FE4 said,

"I had not used LMS before…. So, I often got confused in its use… once I submitted an essay [compare & contrast] on some other assignment file [cause & effect]".

Another participant MB6 said,

"Writing essays by typing was a new thing and a little bit time-consuming for us. As we were not used to it, it was quite hectic, especially for the new students who had just started learning through technology".

These comments reflect that the students did not have enough experience of the use of LMS even though the system existed in the university before the pandemic. Besides, challenge with 'typing' essays indicates that they were used to writing their essays manually and suddenly they had to switch to typing which was challenging for many.

3.2. Access to the internet:

With regards to the internet, the availability of the internet, its access, and poor bandwidth created problems for students. Moreover, costly mobile internet packages were also a challenge because students needed to use certain applications for activities.

For example, MB2 said,

"I lived in a village where the net connection was poor so I had to go 01 km away to attend an essay discussion session". Upon further inquiry, he said, "Sir gave us recorded lectures to watch before class and we discussed the essay format and sample in discussion session."

MB6 said, "For example, at the time of the last assignment of compare and contrast [essay], I was in the village and there was no 4G and Wi-Fi system, even electricity was not there. So, it was very difficult for me to submit my assignment and I missed that and did not submit it on time".

Participants' comments point out one interesting thing that students were given lectures before the class. This could have been a relief for students in a way that they could watch them at their own pace and time. However, submitting assignments on deadline was still a big challenge and students failed to do it on time.

3.3. House chore:

This theme is interesting in the manner that the extended family culture or small houses due to socio-economic conditions made students responsible for doing house chores. They had to face familial challenges and deal with housework while developing their essays.

For instance, FE4 said,

"When you are at home, you are always given something to do. I would cook at home and sometimes my class would be at the same time. It was difficult to manage lengthy written tasks and housework."

MB2 said, "My family didn't take care of COVID-19. My brothers worked in fields and asked me to join them. Being youngest among all, I had to join them. Sometimes, my tiredness affected my ideas for my essays".

The last comment indicates that the people in rural areas were still engaged in farming during the pandemic and the students were in a way 'forced' to work there because of being at home.

3.4. Attitude of family members:

As mentioned earlier, some respondents were from backward areas where education is not a priority so students faced challenges from their family members too.

MB2 said, "I would do my reading from my phone and submit essays using Camscanner. Some of my family members would taunt me that I used my smartphone the whole day and didn't work with my brothers in the fields."

MB3 highlighted, the issue of noise at home. "Once I had to do a short writing task but it took me 2-3 hours as I couldn't concentrate and had to start over again."

3.5. Feedback from teacher:

Although participants reported that they received feedback from the teacher, both written and oral, it didn't work for them well because of various factors. The first in this regard was 'voice issue'.

Participant MB1 said,

"We also couldn't get verbally explained feedback on our essay writing and because of some kind of voice issue because of internet issue we couldn't ask questions properly".

MB6 referred to the lack of one-on-one discussion due to a shortage of time as the key factor behind feedback being ineffective for him.

"In online mode, the teacher uploaded the feedback and marks…I believe for every piece of writing I write, I should be guided but it is not possible in online mode…talking with every student personally takes quite a lot of time and any teacher can't do that in just one day".

3.6. Limited interaction with peers & other resources:

Participants' comments exemplified the importance of peer assistance and environment for improving writing skills. They believed that lack of interaction influenced not only their writing skills but also their confidence as a writer.

FE4 said, "Another challenge [for me] was that I was unable to connect with my friends to get tips and tactics for essay writing. Without being in a particular environment … it was more challenging to learn essay writing easily".

MB1 said, "In the physical classes we are surrounded by our friends and classmates which gives us confidence and the teacher also supports us to write more and more but in the online classes we won't get motivation."

4. Discussion

The study reveals that undergraduates faced challenges in English essay writing during the pandemic, including technological gadgets, internet access, house chores, family attitudes, teacher feedback, and limited peer interaction.

Regarding technological gadgets, the findings of this study point out that the challenges are associated with having no laptop, low-quality smartphones, and unfamiliarity with LMS and other applications for educational purposes. Some of these findings corroborate other studies (Adnan & Anwar, 2020, p. 47; Efriana, 2021, p. 42; Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020, p. 73) in the field. Another finding of this study is about the unavailability of the Internet or its poor connection which hampered educational activities during the pandemic. These findings are in line with the findings of other studies in the literature (Aboagye et al., 2021, p. 4; Efriana, 2021, p. 42; Nashruddin et al., 2020, p. 190). Likewise, students in this

study reported to have faced challenges due to no peer (social) interaction. Such issues have also been raised in the studies conducted by Adnan and Anwar (2020) and Aboagye et al. (2021).

Apart from this, participants of the present study stated that the attitude of their family members towards their (students') learning during the pandemic was challenging. Although a similar finding can be seen in the study of Aboagye et al. (2021) where parents and students were more concerned about necessities than education the points highlighted in this study are significant findings of the study. It is because they reflect the typical house environment of eastern countries where a combined family system still exists and people live in small spaces together. Naturally, students, particularly females, in eastern contexts became more responsible for house chores when utmost care and hygiene were required to combat COVID-19. The most important finding of this study is the insights on teacher feedback from the participants of the study. The views suggested that the participants received oral as well as written feedback. However, some of them faced problems in understanding it because of lengthy or unclear comments or they couldn't listen to oral feedback due to poor connectivity issues.

Although the majority of the issues found in the study are common in third-world countries like Pakistan, their significance increase manifold in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, on the one hand, teaching standards and the national curriculum in Pakistan require teachers to use information communication technologies (Butt et.al., 2020, p. 343) and on the other hand, the classrooms are full of the digital divide as most students lack access to technology. Students lack the financial and educational resources necessary to advance their technological literacy (Jamil, 2021, p. 01). Moreover, students' presence at home blurred their socio-cultural and academic roles. Girls remained occupied with house chores and boys helped with any economic activity to supplement the family's income. This softening of boundaries between different roles demanded greater time-management, communication, and problem-solving skills which must have increased the burden on students. Salimi et al. (2023) also stated that this situation impacted college students' mental health, particularly in adapting to a virtual learning environment and dealing with socio-economic uncertainties. Additionally, despite teachers' best efforts to provide one-to-one feedback to students, the lack of face-to-face interaction and communication between instructors and students created obstacles for students in online learning. A possible reason might be the lack of online assessment practices in universities (Akram et al., 2021, p.273).

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

To conclude, this study explored the challenges undergraduates faced in learning essay writing online during the Pandemic. The data collected through semi-structured interviews from six participants in essay writing class revealed that while studying English essay writing during the pandemic undergraduates experienced challenges related to technological gadgets, access to the internet, house chores, attitude of family members, feedback from the teacher, and limited interaction with peers and other resources. Although many of the findings add

to the existing literature on the field, the themes of attitudes of family members, house chores, and feedback from the teacher are key contributions of the study. This study only looked at the viewpoints of students. Future research could include all other actors involved in the teaching–learning process to broaden the sample. To get a full picture of the problem, researchers could look into the perspectives and experiences of teachers. Future research may uncover teacher-related characteristics that influence students' online learning experiences. Also, students' age, gender, and degree programs can be looked at in connection to the specific issues and methods they face.

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