

# Synchronous Online Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic: A Study on the Tertiary Level Students in Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** The study explored students' perceptions of synchronous online learning in the Covid-19 pandemic situation during 2020-2021. Mixed-methods approach, e.g., survey, interview, and content analysis, was employed to conduct this descriptive research on students studying in the English departments of different public universities in Bangladesh to find their perceptions of synchronous online learning. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The researchers found both positive and negative perceptions of students and recommended necessary steps to be taken, e.g., facilities of stable and speedy internet, providing free or cheaper internet packages for students and technical training for both teachers and students, training for teachers on online teaching material design, and the like.

**Keywords:** Online learning, Covid-19 pandemic, learner experience

## INTRODUCTION

Although education system improved all around the globe in the last fifty years, Covid-19 pandemic posed a great threat to it (Daniel, 2020). During the first wave of attacks of the Covid-19, different educational institutions in Bangladesh were forced to close and shift to online-based education (Uddin, 2020). However, there were many dissimilarities between an online class and a face-to-face class (Swan et al. 2000). Such as, teachers and students could not need to meet in person; online learning required a strong internet connection, technical and technological support, etc. Moreover, as it was a new platform for learning in Bangladesh, it was significant to explore and learn about tertiary level students' perceptions of online learning.

The general objective of the study was- to understand how the students at public universities perceive the synchronous online learning processes during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. The specific objectives of the study were: (a) to find how students view the differences between traditional and synchronous online learning activities and procedures, (b) to know the positive aspects, if any, regarding synchronous online learning from students' perspectives, and (c) to discover the challenges, if any, the learners perceive in synchronous online learning.

However, the research was limited to exploring the online learning perception by only Bangladesh's tertiary level public university students. Limitations also applied to time, resources, and criticality in data collection and grants. The study also had the scope to investigate existing online platforms being used in Bangladesh, online learning quality, online testing, online assessment procedures, students' satisfaction, etc.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic different countries across the globe switched from in-person classes to synchronous and asynchronous modes of e-learning (Hu, 2022). In the synchronous mode teachers and students join live classes using audio-visual tools (Händel et al., 2022) unlike the asynchronous mode where simultaneous online presence of students and teachers is not required (Daniel, 2020).

Since students are habituated to face-to-face classes, many learners and teachers confronted problems in shifting to online classes (Gopal *et al.*, 2021; Kim, 2020). Delayed responses from students (Petrides, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003), feeling of isolation, lack of discipline, less opportunity for practicing English skills (Vonderwell, 2003; Lin & Zane, 2005) etc. were found out as barriers of online learning. Specially, it was quite challenging for the students of the developing countries like Bangladesh to shift to online platform of learning (Saeed, 2020, as cited in Shrestha et al., 2022). Many students of Bangladesh did not have necessary technological device and proper internet connection to attend online classes (Shifat, Khan & Chowdhury, 2021; Das, 2021; Noor and Shaoun, 2021; Rahman, 2019). Also, many students from the rural and suburban areas of Bangladesh come to study in the universities situated in urban areas and after the sudden shut down of in-person classes, majority of them went back to their homes. As it was a sudden shift, they were not prepared either mentally and technologically to attend online classes (Al-Amin et al., 2021; Ramiz and Sultana, 2020).

However, in an emergency situation like Covid-19, online learning came to a great rescue for the continuation of educational activities (Sarkar et al., 2021). Also, online learning is observed as more flexible and convenient (Chizmar & Walbert, 1999; McCall, 2004; Petrides, 2002; Schrum, 2002; Klingner, 2003; Kim et al., 2005). Well-planned course content, prepared teachers, technological support, and clear guidelines can make online learning experience much better (Nguyen, 2015; Sun & Chen, 2016). In another study, Khan (2021) emphasized blended learning system in the post pandemic period.

Sufficient mixed method research was not available which focuses specifically on the perceptions of students studying in the English Departments of different public universities in Bangladesh regarding synchronous online learning. Therefore, the research was conducted to fulfil this gap.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers used the mixed-method in conducting the research. Survey, interview, and document analysis were employed to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Data from primary sources were collected through surveys and interviews, and secondary data were collected from articles, journals, reviews, and books.

A questionnaire with 21 close-ended questions were used as instrument for survey and a set of questions was used as tool for interview. Through Google Form, the survey data were analyzed, which provided the automatic percentage of the responses. Students' interview reports, different books, articles, and journals were analyzed through logical interpretation by comparing and contrasting.

The study area covered five Bangladeshi public universities from Dhaka, Chattagram, Rajshahi, Khulna, and Rangpur. A random sampling method was employed to select the population from the English Department of public universities. The study took twenty-five students from each of five public universities. So, the sample size of the study was 125. The participants were assured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their information and responses. They were also informed about the purposes and goals of the current study before conducting the survey.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Survey Report

**Table 1.** Demographic Background, Technological Equipancy, Language Skills, and Interaction

Variables	Percentage
<b>Residence</b>	
Urban	43
Suburban	29
Rural	28
<b>Having Necessary Technological Device</b>	
Yes	84
No	16
<b>Scopes of Practicing Four skills in English</b>	
Online Classes	6
Face-to-face classes	94
<b>Scopes of Interaction with Teachers</b>	
Online Classes	8
Face-to-face classes	92
<b>Scopes to interaction with Classmates</b>	
Online Classes	1
Face-to-face classes	99
<b>Doing Group Activities in Face-to-Face Classes</b>	
Yes	69
No	31
<b>Doing Group Activities in Online Platform</b>	
Yes	27
No	73
<b>Getting Financial Support from Educational Institutions</b>	
Yes	62
No	38

**Table 2.** Survey Report of Questions based on 5-Point Likert Scale for Agreement

Variables	SA	A	N	D	SD
Students have quality internet connection	5	25	23	39	8
Students have technological skills for attending online classes	10	46	18	22	4
Students have appropriate environment at home to attend online classes	8	22	5	50	15
Students can successfully block distractions during online classes	5	14	39	31	11
Students can bear the expense of online classes	37	41	9	12	1
Being able to do online classes from anywhere is beneficial	14	15	21	35	15
Students are motivated for doing English language classes online	1	7	19	48	25
Adding multimedia facilitated contents can make online classes better	29	53	12	5	1
English lessons can be well understood in online classes	7	24	39	25	5
Online classes can ensure timely feedback	2	19	25	36	18
Having class recordings is beneficial	29	42	12	12	5
Course on technology is necessary for students	19	56	15	10	0
The challenges of online classes can be overcome	4	64	22	6	4

### Interview Report

#### *Positive Experiences of Students*

Most students said that the online education system helped them gain more technological knowledge. For example, one said, "We wrote the assignments by hand, scanned and converted into PDF files, and sent them to our teachers. These activities have helped to get to know the Technology better."

Many students mentioned that they could participate in classes from anywhere; no journey is required. Another said, "Without online classes, our studies would have stopped. Instead, online classes gave us a chance to continue our study."

### ***Negative Experiences of Students***

Due to poor internet speed, many students could not participate and get proper feedback from their teachers. One said, "I have to remain anxious about internet interruption. It is hard to manage a continuing class." In addition, many talked about the costly data packages, which are not affordable for many.

Many reported that the interaction between teacher-student and student-student were less in online classes. Many did not have separate study rooms. One said, "I have to be alert always of the background noise that affects communicating with teachers." Many talked about the insufficient technical knowledge of the students. One mentioned, "I fail to react instantly in the class because of the continuous switching on and off the microphone."

Many said that they often did not get the recordings of online classes. Another complaint was they could not keep concentrating when the classes became lengthy. Many talked about their health issues. One said, "Online classes require constant staring at electronic devices, which causes headaches, migraine, eye problems, etc."

### ***Suggestions of Students for better Synchronous Online Learning***

Many students suggested that reducing Internet data prices and ensuring a strong internet connection can improve the synchronous online learning experience. One said, "Data price should be reduced, and a better networking system should be built up"

Many have spoken of help from the government. One mentioned, "The government should pass a special budget for the unprivileged students so that they can get electronic devices to continue online classes."

Long-time exposure to electronic device was problematic. One said, "Sitting in front of an electronic device for long checks patience in online classes. So, we need a break in the middle of a long class and breaks in between two classes as well."

Many students confessed that they kept their video cameras off to do other activities during class. One student said, "A proper guideline should be introduced for participating in online classes, e.g., turning the camera on should be mandatory."

Students pointed out the need for arranging practical training sessions on synchronous online teaching and learning.

Above all, the students mentioned that there should be a specific government policy to regulate and operate the 'online class system' considering both teachers' and students' problems. In addition, the government should make the online platform more up-to-date by solving all emergency issues.

## **DISCUSSION**

Many students mentioned that being able to do classes from any place, even if they were sick, could save time, energy, and cost of making journeys which were benefits of online classes. Online classes improved their digital literacy and in the pandemic situation the synchronous online classes played a significant role in continuing their studies.

However, students' survey and interview reports revealed various differences between synchronous online classes and face-to-face classes. Students thought there were more scopes for student-teacher (92%) and student-student (99%) interactions in face-to-face classes. One of the major reasons behind such poor student-student interaction is that group activities were done less (31%) in synchronous online classes. Students thought the long virtual classes were tiring and they also confessed of being distracted by different social media contents and doing other activities turning their cameras off during synchronous online classes.

Also, the technological issues impeded synchronous online learning. 57% of students participated in online classes from outside of the metropolitan areas where high internet speed was unavailable. Only 30% students expressed that they had quality internet connection. Some students struggled to manage

the cost of online classes (13%). However, many (62%) of the students responded that their educational institutes helped the students financially for attending online classes.

Some students lacked digital literacy (26%) for attending synchronous online classes. Students expressed that at times their classmates unknowingly turned microphones on, disturbing the class. Also, many (65%) did not have noise free environment at home to attend online classes. Overall, students lacked motivation (73%) in synchronous online classes. English lessons could not be understood properly and most of the students (94%) thought there's more scope for practicing the four English skills in-person classes.

However, despite of all the limitations, majority of the students (64%) believed that they could cope with the challenges of synchronous online learning if proper steps are taken by the government, universities and also from personal levels.

## ANNOTATIONS

- a. Students can attend online classes from convenient places.
- b. Online learning enhances students' digital literacy.
- c. Many students, specially, those who attend online classes outside of the urban areas have weak internet connections.
- d. Internet data package are not affordable for some students.
- e. Due to poor internet connection students fail to interact with their teachers, do not get proper feedback, and struggle to understand English lessons properly.
- f. Many students do not have a suitable environment at home for attending synchronous online classes.
- g. Students cannot concentrate on lengthy online classes.
- h. Many students are not successful at blocking various distractions during online classes.
- i. There is less opportunity for group work in synchronous online classes.
- j. Student-teacher and student-student interactions are more in face-to-face classes.
- k. Face-to-face classes are more motivating to the students.
- l. Students feel English language skills can be better understood and practiced in face-to-face classes.
- m. Most of the students are optimistic that if proper steps are taken, then synchronous online learning can be more successful.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) The government of Bangladesh should take proper steps to ensure that students of all parts of Bangladesh get access to low-cost and high-speed Internet data.
- b) There should be more specific, detailed, and clear guidelines about synchronous online classes from the government.
- c) The government should help economically deprived students. Besides, universities should provide financial aid, gadgets, or other support to facilitate online learning.
- d) Training sessions on synchronous online classes should be arranged for both teachers and students.
- e) There should be small break within the long classes and also there should be a break between two classes.
- f) Teachers should plan activities for online classes in a way that the four skills of English can be practiced.
- g) Scope for group works and pair works should be provided by teachers in online classes to enhance student-student interactions.
- h) Multimedia facilitated content (video clips, songs, etc.) should be included in online classes to motivate the learners.

- i) Students should have cooperative attitude to make synchronous online learning effective. They should interact with teachers properly.
- j) Students should be aware of the applications of microphones, so that other students do not feel any disturbance.
- k) Family members should help the students to attend synchronous online classes properly and arrange separate rooms for them, if possible.

## CONCLUSION

When the Covid-19 pandemic spread on a large scale, synchronous online classes were introduced in Bangladesh like other countries (Alamgir, 2020). However, since it was a new platform, there was a need to discover the students' views, what they felt, and found challenging, how they benefited from online classes, etc. The researchers found different optimistic perceptions of students, such as flexibility and convenience of synchronous online learning. On the other hand, many students also reported that online classes can be challenging for many reasons including technological limitations, lack of interaction, continual distractions etc. Based on the finding, the study suggested necessary steps, e.g., stable and speedy internet facilities, cheaper internet packages, technical training for both teachers and students, training for teachers on online teaching material design, etc., to overcome the shortcomings.

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