

Challenges of Online English Literature Learning and Assessment in Private Universities of Bangladesh during Covid-19 Pandemic: Students' Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: November 19, 2021

Accepted: February 06, 2022

Published: April 30, 2022

Volume: 13 Issue: 2

Advance access: April 2022

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Key words:

Covid-19,

Literature Courses,

Online Learning,

Assessment,

Challenges

ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19 pandemic situation, the English literature learning and assessment have moved from classroom form to online form. This study emphasizes on the challenges of online English literature learning and students' experience and expectation regarding online English literature course assessment in private universities of Bangladesh. English literature students were invited to participate in the survey and 326 students from 10 private universities partook. Students dwelling in towns and villages addressed their problems what they experienced while attending online literature class and assessment. Previous researches shed light on abrupt transit to online education in different countries including Bangladesh, voices and views of teachers and students of English and other departments, even on language courses, but none of them addressed the situation English literature students of private universities undergo during the pandemic of Covid-19, which stopped on-site education across the globe. This paper determines to elaborate the challenges, experience, expectation and overall voices of English literature students from private universities of Bangladesh regarding online literature class and assessment. This qualitative research labels students' exact problems and recommendation which will help minimize the loss of students' learning, thus, will benefit the students of English literature of Bangladeshi private universities. The findings will also assist the instructors to overcome the challenges of online English literature teaching and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The role of teachers in tertiary level education is changing, particularly when transitioning from the traditional one-on-one classroom to online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Like other sectors, "the pandemic of Covid-19 caused several schools and colleges to remain temporarily closed. Face to face education has ended by numerous schools, universities and colleges" (Dhawan, 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) point out this situation and address online learning as "emergency remote teaching". The closed situation of classroom teaching forced to grow the online educational activities in order to cause no interruption to education. Keeping in mind to facilitate online teaching, many faculties endeavor to sketch the best online course materials, involve students and assess the students' performance.

To continue uninterrupted education has become more challenging for both students and teachers. In this situation, to mitigate the loss, online education or e-learning or distance learning was the only option to be adopted. Online education is defined by many scholars from different perspectives. Singh & Thurman (2019) write, "Online e-learning is described as learning experiences using various electronic

devices (e.g. computers, laptops, smartphones etc.) with internet availability in synchronous and asynchronous environmental conditions. Online e-learning could be a platform that makes the process of education more students centered, creative and flexible." Another definition of e-learning is that "e-learning is the use of electronic media for a variety of learning purposes that range from add-on functions in conventional classrooms to full substitution for the face-to face meetings by online encounters" (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005).

Many scholars differentiate e-learning, online education and distance learning. Tsai and Machado (2002) define e-learning as "mostly associated with activities involving computers and interactive networks simultaneously", online education as "associated with content readily accessible on a computer" and distance learning as "interaction at a distance between instructor and learners, and enables timely instructor reaction to learners" (p. 2). Though many differences are detected while discussing e-learning, online education and distance learning, the basic urge of these terms make no difference when only "online education" term is used. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2005) defines the term online as a system "controlled by

or connected to a computer or to the internet” (p. 1060). In 2006, Smart and Cappel investigated that “in search of better, more cost-effective ways to deliver instruction and training, universities and corporations have expanded their use of e-learning”. Though late, Bangladesh started to implement e-learning or online learning in 2020. Education Minister of Bangladesh Dr. Dipu Moni (2020) addressed the adopted method of teaching during Covid-19 as online learning and advised to cope with this system. She said, “Although we have faced some challenges while introducing online classes and examinations, but we have to overcome them as we have no other option.” “Many writers refer to “e-learning”, “online learning”, and “web-based learning” interchangeably” (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Throughout this paper, the term online learning or online education will be used to indicate distance learning using computer or smartphones with internet connection.

Online education system not only contributes to teaching and learning but also is applied for testing students’ learning. Black and William (1998, a, b) write, “assessment for learning seems to be focused on classroom strategies and techniques that are associated with classroom learning”.

As teachers and students had all on a sudden transitioned to online education without any experience or proper training, online teaching-learning had become a burden for all. This emerged as a huge problem especially for English literature classes and assessment. Though many universities- both public, national and private- started taking online classes, students and even teachers faced many problems but they had no other option as it was solely an option of continuing education system. Private universities have been able to take online exam for midterm and even final examination in different forms. This paper aims at discovering the real scenario experienced by students while they attended online literature classes and exam staying in district or upazila towns, or even in remote villages. All dwellers faced problems but type, degree and intensity of their problems were not same. This study concentrates on the experience of English literature students and their expectation along with perspectives- regarding online class and assessment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the sudden and deadly onset of Covid-19 throughout the world, educational institutions were shut down as many other countries of the world did. The experiences of teachers and learners of different disciplines both in primary, secondary and higher education, have been analyzed, challenges have been sorted out and probable solutions have been suggested across the globe. The study of Adnan and Anwar (2020) discusses the effectiveness of online learning in Pakistan from higher education students’ perspectives and to highlight the challenges and obstacles of online learning faced by higher education students. Gallani (2020) writes about effectiveness of online learning based on students who have attended online lectures. The paper of Rakhmenina (2020) describes students’ perceptions of learning English online during the Covid-19 pandemic. An Indonesian study titled “Redefining language and literature learning in the

transformation era” conducted by Surayman and Kristiyani (2021) investigates the use of digital multimedia to arouse students’ learning motivation, the redefinition of strengthening the progress and of language and literature learning. Ariebowo (2021) evaluates the current English teaching and learning process in a school of aerospace technology. Hasan and Khan (2020) conducted a study based on Indian students’ online learning and teaching where they focused on learners’ experience, technological platforms and advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Xhelili, Ibrahim, Ruci and Sheme (2021) write on adaptation and perception of online learning by university students. Another study on Sri Lankan IT students analyzed students’ perception of online learning during Covid-19 (Akuratiya & Meddage, 2020).

In addition to many university level researches of the world, Bangladeshi researchers and academicians also conducted researches on overall aspects of online education, teachers’ perspectives, learners’ expectation and challenges. Khan et al (2021) writes a paper which investigates the perceptions of teachers and students of public universities, and examines their views on online pedagogy assessment and the major challenges faced. Bashir et al (2021) focuses on the transition to online education in the department of English in Bangladesh and discusses major challenges faced by students and suggested strategies to overcome. Akter (2021) conducted a research on online learning during Covid-19 to find out the struggle of Bangladeshi undergraduate students who are from rural background. This paper mentions specific problems which hinder rural background undergraduate students to enjoy full-fledged facilities provided by online education. She also suggested some ways which might reduce the severity of the problem. The paper of Shahriar, Arafat and Rahman (2021) sheds light on different problems private university students faced during online classes. Besides problems related to device, internet and cost, they mentioned psychological situation and technical comprehension problem. A qualitative research done by Islam (2021) investigates English literature teaching at private universities, analyzes how learners learn and react different genres of literature and finally focuses on students’ feeling and expectation. Islam (2021) writes, “The unique discipline of English Literature needs to find out the best possible ways of conducting the teaching-learning process in online classroom” (p.2). Seraj, Hasan and Habil (2020) discussed four specific types of barriers in “English teacher’s views on the barriers of implementing e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic at the private universities in Bangladesh” which are as follows: at the level of teacher, university, curriculum and students. Khan, Rahman and Islam (2021) researched on EEE students of a private university and shed light on online education system in Bangladesh during Covid-19, the current situation, possibilities and challenges of digital education method and mental health condition of students amid corona virus pandemic.

Majed, Jamal and Kabir (2020) writes an article in the daily star titled “Online education: Bangladesh Perspective, challenges and way forward”. They have mentioned the feasibility of e-learning in Bangladesh in addition to challenges. Another study depicts “the private univer-

sity teachers' and students' perceptions regarding various dimensions of accessing online instruction and coping strategies used by teachers" (Khan, Jahan, Sultana, Kabir, Haider & Roshid, 2021).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The technological advancement of online classes can reach a more geographically diverse students than traditional classes but there are problems with online classes that cripple students' success. Many researchers worked on challenges of online education in different levels both the in world and in Bangladesh. But none of the researches shed light on specifically English literature learning and assessment in private universities of Bangladesh, focusing on the location of students and varieties of problems and challenges faced by them. So, this study examines students' perspectives of online literature classes and assessment in private universities of Bangladesh.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This current research is guided by the following research questions which are descriptive and exploratory:

- a) What are the challenges of online English literature learning in private universities of Bangladesh during Covid-19?
- b) What are the adopted and preferred methods of assessment of English literature in online in Bangladeshi private universities?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A study was conducted from 7th August 2021 till 20th August 2021 at the private universities of Bangladesh covering both rural and urban areas in the department of English. The Private university students of English Department were invited to participate in the study. A convenient sampling method was used to collect the data. The sample size was 10 private universities and 326 students of English departments.

A structured electronic questionnaire containing three parts was used to conduct the research. First part consists of demographic information of the respondents as age, sex, name of the university, program and location of students. This part also includes the type of internet connection and device used to do online literature classes. Second part focuses on online literature classes and the respondents' experience in doing online literature classes and challenges towards online literature classes. Final part sheds light on challenges and barriers on online assessment for literature courses and students' suggestions regarding online classes and assessment.

The electronic questionnaire was designed on Google forms, and the invitation link for participation in the survey was shared via email and messenger to English department students through the department teachers of different private universities. In some cases, researchers directly shared the google form to students.

The questionnaire was tested on 20 students as a pilot study. Necessary modification, changes and corrections were

done to ensure ease of understanding and clarification of all questions. The necessary official permission was obtained from English Department of private universities by informing them about the purpose of the study and research objectives. Privacy and confidentiality were assured.

DATA ANALYSIS

First part of the questionnaire includes the demographic information of participants, type of internet connection and device used for online classes. Total 326 students from English department of 10 private universities participated in the survey. Among the students, the year-based percentage of BA Honors 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th year students are consecutively 33.7%, 53.3%, 7% and 6%. Post-graduate students did not participate in the questionnaire. The age of students who participated in the survey is depicted in the chart:

Among all participants, male students were 29.3% and female students were 70.7%.

There was a question about where students are currently living during the pandemic of Covid-19 and participating in online classes and assessment. It was a very important question of the survey to know the current dwelling place of students as based on their locations, their problems and degree and type of problems may vary. The following chart shows the living location of students:

Regarding internet connection, the data shows that 69.4% students got the facilities of using broadband connection while 30.6% students used mobile data. 81.9% learners used smartphones while 17.5% used computer- both laptop and desktop, and 0.6% used tablet to do online literature classes.

Students were given a statement in the form of Likert Scale that 'Internet speed is satisfactory to do online literature classes'. 6% students strongly disagreed, 20% disagreed, 45.1% were neutral, 26% agreed and 2.9% strongly agreed. Among the students, 85.1% afford the cost of their study from family, 8.9% from tuition, 3.8% from part-time job and only 2.2% had their own business and afforded the study cost from that business.

Second part of the questionnaire consists of online literature classes. To get the perspectives of students, they were given some questionnaires in Likert scale. The following chart describes students' perspective towards given questionnaire about online literature classes.

Students mentioned many difficulties they faced during online literature classes. The most redundant crux is poor internet connection. In addition, participants also sorted out some other major challenges they experienced are frequent load shedding, device problem, rough weather, loss of concentration and feeling distracted from the class. Some of them talked about getting much more introvert. There was a question regarding students' level of concentration during online literature classes. Students' level of attentiveness is shown in a chart:

Third part of the survey is about students' perception and expectation about online literature course assessment. Students were asked about online literature course assessment and to get their opinion, they were given

some questionnaires in the form of Likert Scale and the result is as follows:

Participants wrote about the method(s) of assessment for literature courses adopted by the respective universities, their responses comprise of viva voce, presentation, written exam, assignment, open book exam, MCQ, class test, surprise test and quiz- in the form of either MS word or Power point presentation or handwritten and/but converted into PDF, through email, google classroom and some other medium. When they were given some options and asked to choose their preferred method of online assessment, the result was as follows:

Students gave reasons behind their choice of preferred method of online literature course assessment. All the methods of assessment were justified by the students.

The survey requested students to express their expectation on overall online literature class and assessment. They elaborated their ideas and finally, they were requested to say the best alternative option if campus remains off. Almost all of them found no other option but online class and assessment. Simultaneously they demanded the solutions of internet connection and some other.

DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impinged the education system like other sectors of the country but as a means of minimizing the loss of learning, online education was materialized across the country. Students of English literature faced many challenges while attending online classes or sitting for online assessment. The study investigates students' perspectives regarding online literature classes and assessment during the corona virus pandemic –induced hiatus in the private university of Bangladesh. The data that researchers got from participating students reveals types and levels of problems based on various locations of students. The findings are as follows:

Location of Students

In terms of the living condition of the students, the data reveals that most of the students live in district town and hence students can participate in online literature classes to a great extent. There are a good number of students dwelling in upazila town and remote villages. Many of them including city dwellers faced internet problem.

Device and Internet Problem

The data divulges that most of the students use smartphones to do online literature classes. Due to lack of proper device such as computer or laptop, the student's online literature classes are often interrupted. This is echoed in the studies of Khan et al (2020, 2021), which identified a similar lack of access to proper devices. Ertmer et al (2012) and Hansson (2021) previously identified similar barriers to technology integration. In addition, poor internet connection creates another barrier for uninterrupted online classes. Though in district town level, internet speed is quite adequate but

41.5% students live in upazila towns and remote villages. It is known that internet speed in Bangladesh varies greatly from place to place. So, these dwellers experienced acute internet problem. In some areas, mobile internet is reported to be extremely poor (Kamal et al., 2020). The participants in this study indicated their concerns about internet connectivity.

Financial Issue

During the pandemic, the financial condition of most of the families are pauperized. The study shows that most of the students' cost of study is borne by their families, a few by tuition, part-time job and business. Due to Covid-19, everything is in a standstill and students had to stuck at homes which created another burden for the family. In addition, students had to buy smartphones suitable for online class and afford the bill of data. While most of the family members are tired of affording daily cost of living, the cost of internet is obviously an additional burden for the students and their families.

Physical Problems Caused by Online Education

Data expressed that most of the students could not fully concentrate on online literature classes due to the want of buffering-free internet. Frequent stop of screens because of net connection create an implied pressure in the mind of students. In addition, looking at screens at a stretch causes students' severe headache and eye problem. So, as a result of online classes, students greatly suffer from eye problem and headaches.

Online Literature Course Assessment

As regarding to assessment, though the data expressed that most of the students are satisfied with online literature course assessment but majority of them also expressed their own opinion concerning advantages and disadvantages of online literature courses assessment. In the students' opinion, most of the students preferred offline exam rather than online exam. The students gave various reasons behind offline exam rather than online exam. In case of online literature course assessment, students voted for written like offline exam, assignment, MCQ, oral test or viva voce and open book exam and showed reasons behind their choice which are as follows:

Firstly, written like offline exam was the most traditional way of assessment and students are habituated with it for a long time. Students think, if the traditional method is used even in online, they feel like they are in the "physical exam room". They "can explain thoughts properly". A participant commented, "I prefer to sit for the exam at a specific time and complete it." He added, "A lot of things go wrong in Viva and teachers' mood is to be considered. Sometimes the question might not be clear or audible to us. Lastly an open book exam can never prove our levels of learning." Another one said, "Written exam like offline is the best method for online literature assessment because

students are habituated in written exam though oral test is also a good choice.” Another relevant reason is that “since I am a student of literature, I strongly feel that writing helps a literature student to get better as there is a lot of topics where we can debate”.

Secondly, the highest portion of students voted for assignment. The reason for choosing assignment is, according to a student, “in assignment, cheating is almost impossible”. Another significant cause of preferring assignment is, “in assignment, we get enough time to research the topic for getting more knowledge. That’s why I prefer assignment method for online literature course assessment.” Many students repeated the same issue and said that to do an assignment, students are to read through the books, take help from other available materials such as, website and different articles which creates an opportunity to enrich themselves. Students can prepare an assignment for a minimum couple of days and they get ample time to write what they want to input. One participant said, “when we prepare an assignment, we have to do lots of research, search, editing, copying etc. That’s why we get more time to study and lot more to know.” One more student repeated that “it gives me proper time to plan and outline my essays/reports or answers. In exams I feel like I make the dumbest mistakes due to anxiety and time constraint.”

Thirdly, Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) was also a preferred method of online literature course assessment. Students’ reason basically concentrate on the fact that this one is comparatively easier and more comfortable. A student opined, “If MCQ type assessments are taken from us, we have to learn from every corner and every little thing and that will be more effective for our study.” This method is preferred as it takes less time and effort. Another student elaborated his/her idea for choosing MCQ and wrote, “we have less chance for cheating as we will get short period of time. Even if we are having internet problem, can quickly send the answers when it’s back and can attend it anytime anywhere however to answer MCQ, we have to have a clear idea and need to study every single detail of the topic. This is way I prefer MCQ to assignment.”

Fourthly, oral test or viva voce was also preferred by a good number of students. One said, “Nobody can cheat in viva”. Another student emphasized on this method as it contributes to reduce nervousness. According to many students, if this method of assessment is implemented, teachers can easily judge students’ learning level. One participant opined, “Because in oral test, students can’t cheat and they at least study properly. Here, teachers also can understand the study condition of a student and as per the situation, a faculty can take proper steps.”

Finally, open book exam was also justified by 11.3% students. According to them, “in open book exams, the questions are more critical and it’s analytical. So, we have to think about the questions and have to relate it with the text.” Another student focused on the fact that as students do not read attentively due to online class, open book exam will encourage them to study deeply. Another participant wrote, “It can promote the development of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills over the rote memorization of

factual information.” To summarize, students shared their opinion for choosing specific method of assessment for online literature courses.

Students’ Suggestion Regarding Online Literature Class And Assessment

Expectation of many students were to take necessary steps to decrease the cost of data and increase the speed of internet connection even in village level. One student raised the issue of mental health and said, “in this pandemic situation, everyone is in a mental pressure, network problem is also our big problem. So, if teachers help us to hear our problem,

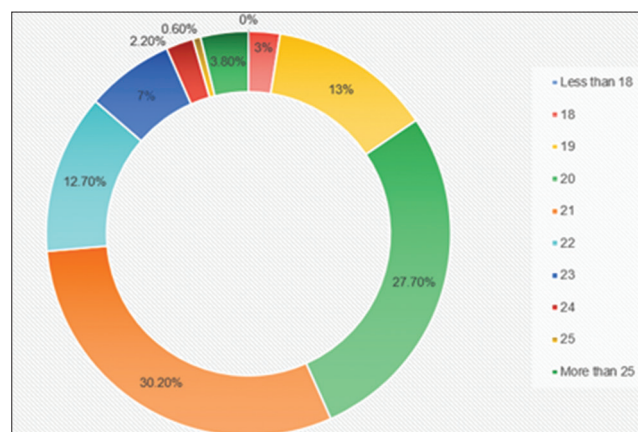


Figure 1. Age of students

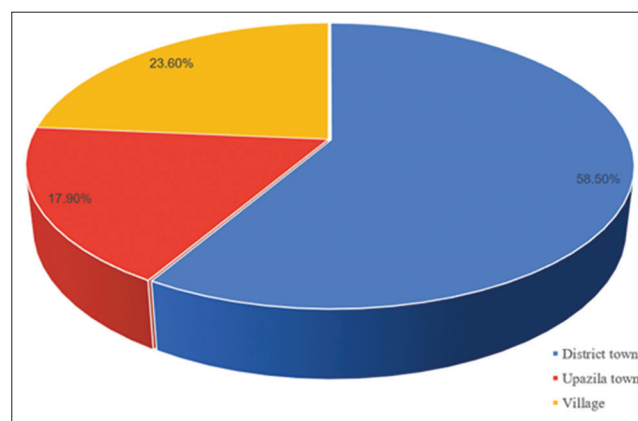


Figure 2. Living location of students

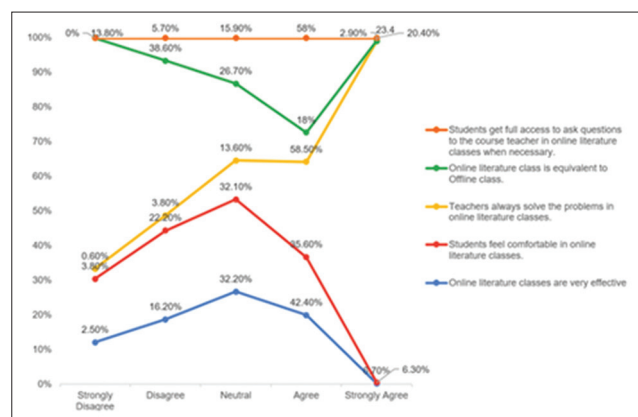


Figure 3. Students' reaction about online literature classes

that will be enough.” Another student expected that “the assessment should be effective but creative and easy to complete.” Another student talked about providing financial help so that they can afford their extended cost of study comfortably. Lessening the duration of class time was also a demand of many students. Another suggestion of a student was, “I would prefer if less important topics are avoided.” A learner emphasized on the role of teachers and said, “teachers should be more sympathetic, helpful, motivative and loyal; they should also take care of all students equally. Sometimes they do partiality which is really not appreciable.”

A student talked about assessment and suggested to “give us technical question so that we can analyze and give creative answer.” To shorten the syllabus was also some students’

suggestion. “Recording classes need to be uploaded properly” was another proposal. A student repeated the issue by saying “Online classes must be recorded regularly as many of us can miss certain parts due to poor net connection and load shedding. We should be given proper time to finish our exams, specially for submission. Submitting answer sheets in online is a huge task specially if there are net issues or load shedding”. A student raised an issue of group study and said, “online class doesn’t promote group study as offline class does.” In case of online exam, a good number of students demanded “more time because sometimes we have net issues in submission time.” Students not only suggested what to do if online learning method continues but also raised their voices for offline exam. One proposed that “assessment should be offline. Everyone should be seated for the exams physically in university.”

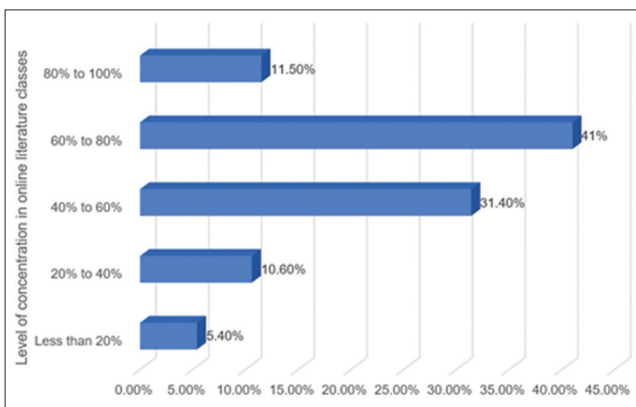


Figure 4. Concentration level of students

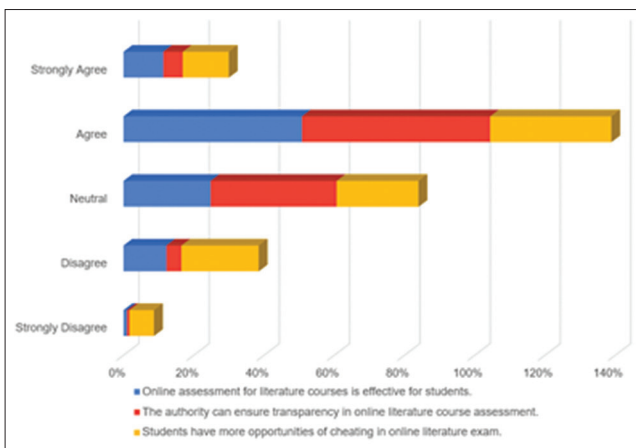


Figure 5. Students’ reaction about online literature course assessment

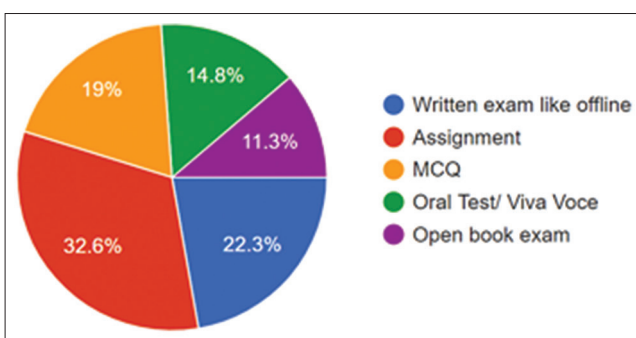


Figure 6. Students’ preferred method of online assessment

Alternative Option Except Online

Students were asked about the best alternative option for completing their literature courses if campus remains off for sine die, almost all of them found no other option but online class and assessment. One student said, “I think, there is no alternative option without online class.” Another student raised the issue of unstable internet connection but failed to find out a new option. He says, “online class is the best option I think if we put the net problem aside.”

Regarding assessment, students suggested assignment, write exam like offline, MCQ, viva voce and open book exam. A participant commented, “we have actually nothing to do with it. So, we need to prepare ourselves for every situation.” Another student said, “Online classes, live viva, assignment and written examination can be the alternative options.”

A student proposed to find out a new platform for online class and assessment. According to that student, “classes on Google Meet and Zoom are fine but a good platform should be prepared for taking exam and a folder for each course in drive that contains all the files needed to complete the course.” Another student said, “online class is the best option for literature course since it doesn’t have any practical or lab work.”

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

To conduct the research, researchers had to face some limitations. Firstly, all private universities could not be accessed because of their confidentiality. Secondly, as there was no funding for this research, it was difficult for researchers to contact English literature students of all private universities in person. In short, there were some limitations which hinder the smooth research but it was not impossible, rather despite all limitations and drawbacks, this study has come to an end with exploratory result.

RECOMMENDATION

Analyzing the responses of students in the survey helped the researchers sort out some recommendation what students

expect from universities, and above all from the concerned authority of the government. The following recommendations are made for the betterment of online literature class and assessment:

- a. Strong internet connection should be ensured everywhere- both in towns and villages.
- b. Internet connection should be free for students, or at least internet cost should be cheaper for them.
- c. Role play, group work and presentation should be increased to make students concentrate on online lectures.
- d. The syllabus should be shortened and class time should be reduced.
- e. Online literature classes should be interactive to ensure more active participation from the students. Students' interaction will increase their concentration level on lectures and they will be able to ask questions freely to teachers.
- f. Reasoning based questions should be given in assessment- whether written exam, assignment, oral test, MCQ or open book exam, rather than questions which can be simply memorized or copied from books.
- g. Submission of copies of online assessment should be made easier and trouble-free and if students fail to submit their scripts within fixed time due to the fall of internet connection, their copies of assessment should be granted when internet will be available. In this case, students must contact the concerned teacher(s) whenever they face this type of problem.
- h. Online literature learning process should be buttressed with advanced technological instruments and digital materials should be used in online classes.
- i. Teachers should provide students with recorded class so that students can get access of the class if missed.
- j. Students should be suggested to watch literary text related movies, lectures on specific topics available in YouTube to ease their learning and reduce boredom.
- k. To take care of students' mental health, awareness program can be conducted by psychiatrists.
- l. To afford the extended cost of internet or buying devices, students should be provided with stipends and scholarships.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic stopped physical class system as it is a contagious virus disease, despite this, people of Bangladesh started a new epoch-making journey which is online education. People lost the rhythm of life due to this pandemic, but one good thing happened due to this virus and that is, the sudden transit to online education, though without any formal training. Private universities of Bangladesh, especially English department of these universities adopted online literature class and assessment system. Many students battled with shortage in resources, facilities and equipment for attending online class and assessment but nothing put off them. This qualitative study investigates the experience of English literature students of Bangladeshi private universities regarding online class and assessment. This paper also

discusses different challenges faced by students as well as their suggestions what can contribute to solve the problems. This study can be informative for other students and educators thinking about their own online literature class and assessment as it presents a unified framework to overcome the challenges and barriers of online literature class and assessment based on students' perspectives.

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