

Cross Cultural Study of Foreign Language Teaching& Learning inthe Challenging Times of Covid-19: A Global Perspective

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Abstract:

The emergence of Covid-19 caused unfortunate changes in the educational system all over the world. The current research is a comparative analysis of fluctuations in the trends of online teaching and learning in EFL classes in two countries (Pakistan and Italy). This research examines the influence of geographic, socio-demographic and psychological factors in adopting the teaching methodology and strategies which will cater the needs of EFL learners. For this purpose, Harasim's online collaborative learning theory has been selected which helps in integrating the innovative ideas to develop new methods of teaching in order to facilitate student's learning. It is a mixed method research as the data was collected through questionnaires and interviews method while the data analysis was done by SPSS software. The research findings reveal that the psychological and social factors along with the cultural background and economic stability have varied effects on the motivational level of the online educational system with cultural differences in both countries contrarily. Moreover, the present study offers constructive insight to develop new teaching strategies in order to improve the learning experience of EFL learners.

Keywords: COVID-19, EFL learners, Online Collaborative Learning Theory, Online education, Socio-demographic, Learning strategies

I. Introduction

The pandemic Covid-19 has unfortunately led us to a world of segregation and isolation by cutting off all the channels of communications. Hence, the social life has been ceased to exist all over the world to maintain social distancing. It has adversely affected the social life as well as the educational system in Pakistan and Italy. Although online learning system was not a new practice yet it was quite rare and a few institutions followed this system. The current situation is in dire need to develop new teaching strategies in order to fulfill the needs of EFL learners. Organizational and educational

committees were also in trouble because they had no expertise in online teaching. Moreover, online teaching and learning demands many resources that are different from traditional learning. First of all, availability of internet was an important issue to be addressed as it was not available to every student. Moreover, socio-economic condition of majority of the students did not allow them to afford the expense of internet and many areas had signal problem which aggravated the issue and the students got disturbed.

Pakistan and Italy have two different cultures and both were affected by COVID-19 situation therefore, people of these two countries behaved differently in such situation. Pakistan is an underdeveloped country and Pakistanis belongs to high context culture while, Italy is developed country and Italian belongs to low context culture. Similarly, during the pandemic situation on the arrival of virus Covid-19, education system turned from traditional physical system to online system. There were different views of these countries regarding online system of education and they responded differently due to their cultural norms, ethics, customs, facilities and worldview.

The sudden appearance and prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic disturbed the world at large and resulted in lock-down which ultimately culminated in the closure of educational institutions. Therefore, the governments all over the world decided for an unplanned abrupt shift of education system that was primarily technology-led and dependent on digital literacy and skills of both the teachers and the students.

It was imperative to analyze the online systems of education and the factors that are creating hindrances in this regard at global level. Students in different parts of the world responded differently towards online teaching and learning due to the differences in socio-demographic, cultural and geographic situations. Within this context, the present study aims to analyze and compare the perception and experiences of students and teachers living in different parts of the globe, (here we have selected Italy and Pakistan to compare the online education and how cognitive, economic and psychological factors determine the satisfaction of stakeholders. Furthermore, the study is hoped to get better insights through comparison and recommend some significant strategies to help in resolving the issues and improve the overall quality of online learning system. The primary targets of the current exploration are:

- To explore the situation of online EFL learning system in Pakistan and Italy during pandemic.
- To examine the cognitive, economic and psychological factors that is the cause of problem for EFL learners in online study due to COVID-19.
- To investigate best strategies to overcome the hindrances in the way of EFL learners in online education.

The present research would answer the following questions:

- What are the views of the EFL students in Pakistan and Italy regarding online education during pandemic?
- Are there any cognitive, psychological and economic issues for students due to sudden transfer of education system due to COVID-19?
- What are the best strategies to make the online learning successful?

With the rise of Covid-19, social, economic and educational system disturbs because sudden outbreak of this unexpected virus stops every running normal system. Educational system is one of the main systems that were disturbed due to the outbreak of virus affecting out youth's education, life, career and future. Online system of education aimed to educate the students in such pandemic to fill the gap and maintain the continuity of education amid this crisis. However, several problems came on the way to new educational system that students faced due to the sudden and unplanned shift to online education system. The present research will analyze and compare those situations and problems resulted by such shift in the system and recommend the better strategies and steps that should be taken into account to improve the system. The findings of the study may help in highlighting the issues through the comparison of the two societies' educational system and better strategies may be devised to cope with the situation in future.

II. Literature Review

Aristovnik et al. (2020) argue on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life of Higher Education students and they conclude that student is somehow satisfied due to the teacher's cooperation during online learning. Moreover, efficient students, sincere about their career, are also satisfied. However, some students are less satisfied due to the socio-demographic factors. Non-availability of resources and lack of technology use are some main issues. The present research is in line with the study and discusses these points of hindrances in online learning. Ramij and Sultana (2020) talk about the issues of online learning system in their articles. They argue that lack of resources is creating hindrances in the success of online education. Moreover, there are some cognitive issues with students in the acceptance of online education system. The present research also points out the issue of fewer resources for online education system.

Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013) argue that experiences of students towards online learning vary. With the passage of time, they move towards positive attitude of using computer mediated communication (CMC) in order to develop academic literacy. Their results show that Computer Mediated Communication facilitated interactions. The present research also argues that students who have availability of internet, resources and expertise in the use of technology present positive views towards online learning. But majority of the students are lack of facilities and expertise that creates problems for them. Wood et al. (1976) describes about the term scaffolding in the literature and also describes the way in which teachers interact with learners and how they solve their problems. It was further given by Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, who emphasizes existence of mental activities in context of social interaction. An article given by Northern Illinois University discusses that one benefit of instruction of scaffolding is that it gives opportunity to a supportive learning environment. The present research recommends different strategies to enhance interaction of students between themselves and with teachers.

Meyer and Turner (2002) argue that there are three fundamental highlights of framework that assists in learning. First element is communication among student and teacher that proves effective for learning. The second feature is that learning should occur in student's zone of proximal turn of events. For this, educator's ought to be mindful of the student's present level of information and allocate them undertakings as per their even out and set them up past their level. Bataineh, Banikalef and Albashtawi (2019) state that

positive effect relies upon the student's English sentence structure execution, inspiration and fulfillment. They are of the view that mixed learning is a successful strategy for showing English language structure in EFL learning. Cohen (2018) states that "innovation is an instrument: it is not the arrangement". For instance, innovation is utilized just when it is required either in a flipped classroom or blended study hall setting. Hammad (2020) argues that students prefer regular classroom and students' electronic tests are much better than paper tests. Students more learn from classmates' discussion in class. The present research also argues that there is lack of interaction in online learning that results in less understandings of the students as compared to the traditional learning.

Khan, Raza and Sibtain (2021) have also discussed strategies which could motivate the EFL learners in the new scenario of online learning at the university level in Pakistan. Their results have indicated that teachers are encouraging student-centered teaching to provide more chances of interaction to the learners while on the other hand, learners are not completely ready to adopt this new way of learning which might be the cause of mental stress due to pandemic and sudden shift of medium of education. Therefore, Pakistani students are not motivated due to the e-learning due to some major causes and teachers have a huge responsibility in this regard.

The psychological impact of Covid-19 on the language learners has been presented in the work of Khan, Chaudhary and Chaudhary (2020). As the pandemic has caused anxiety in the masses, its impact on the language learners cannot be ignored. The study has concluded that the majority of the learners have felt stressful due to pandemic. Moreover, girls as compared to boys are feeling more stressed as this study has indicated. Khan et al. (2020) have suggested that language learning and stress are to a large extent, dependent variables while Covid-19 an independent one.

Another study conducted by Khan and Tufail (2020) shows that Pakistani learners at the higher level, are aware of the importance and use of digital devices like Smartphone and they are using it for language learning during Covid-19 lockdown. The study shows that the scope of mobile assisted language learning (MALL) is quite wide for the language learners as they can easily access and use their Smartphone for language learning. Moreover, it has been pointed out that both the faculty and students need proper awareness of digital devices to get maximum benefit out of it.

III. Theoretical Framework

"Online collaborative learning theory" is the main theoretical framework for the present research. This theory centers around the offices of the Internet that are being given to the understudies Haredim portrays OCL that argues about: "a new theory of learning that focuses on collaborative learning, knowledge building, and Internet use as a means to reshape formal, non-formal, and informal education for the Knowledge Age" (Harasim, 2012, p. 81). In this theory, there are three periods of information development including idea generating, idea organizing and intellectual convergence.

A. Idea generating

Ask students to work in groups and assign them tasks of brain storming that make them able to think in groups and to generate ideas.

B. Idea Organizing

Talk about different works and ask students to discuss their views about them. In this way, students would analyze and organize their views.

C. Intellectual convergence

Engage students in creativity by engaging them to write on any issue or to recommend any ways to get rid of these issues etc.

The present research is based on this theory as it discusses internet issues faced by students and recommend collaborative learning and intellectual convergence to enhance the effectiveness of online learning.

IV. Research Methodology

The research design for the present research is mixed-method approach as both qualitative and quantitative techniques have been applied to collect data within pragmatic lens following non-probability sampling techniques. After the pilot study, final questionnaire consists of thirty questions, was converted to Google docs and distributed among one hundred intermediate students of Multan and Milano. Interview of the teachers from both countries were conducted through ZOOM. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and themes were extracted through thematic approach.

V. Results and Discussions

The data for the present research has been analyzed through SPSS software and results are displayed in the table. The present study was designed to explore the relationship between the view of EFL learning culture of two countries as it is a comparative study of covid-19 related online EFL education in Pakistan and Italy. The analysis of the data through questionnaire is as follows:

Table 1

S. No	Categories	Italy	Pakistan
1.	Economic issues	34.7%	65.3%
2.	Cognitive issues	45%	55%
3.	Availability of internet connection	25%	75%
4.	Issue of physical absence	40%	60%
5.	Compatibility between students and teachers	50%	50%
6.	Expertise in the use of technology	70%	30%

The situation of online education of both countries has been analyzed and it is seen that students of Italy responded well and in a positive way as compared to Pakistani students. There are following reasons due to which Pakistani's students were found to be facing more problems.

A. Economic issues

Majority of the respondents from Pakistan reveal that they are facing economic issues. Majority of the students are unable to afford the expenses of internet to continue online education. The ratio of Pakistanis facing economic issues is 65.3%. Italian people are also facing economic issues but ratio of economic issues in Italy is less than Pakistan and is 34.7%.

B. Availability of resources

Pakistani's students have less resources comparable to Italy's students. Pakistani educational institutes are unable to provide enough resources to meet the satisfaction of students in online education.

C. Internet connections Issues

In Pakistan, there is no proper connection system in Pakistan. There are many areas in which students are facing connection problem that divert their attention during online education. While there is proper organized system of internet connection in Italy. The ratio of students in Pakistan facing this issue is 75% whereas the ratio of the Italian students, facing this problem is comparatively low which shows the difference in socio-economic condition of the students in both countries.

D. Psychological Issues due to the Physical absence of the Teachers

Majority of the Pakistani respondents expressed their dissatisfaction due to the lack of interaction and physical absence of teachers. Italian students also face this issue but the ratio is comparatively low i.e., 40%. While the ratio of Pakistani's is 60%. Physical appearance matters a lot for students to maintain their attention.

E. Compatibility Issues

The respondents of both the countries have shown their inclination that there is an issue of compatibility in online education. The ratio of students facing this issue in both countries is same. During online education, students are unable to create compatibility between themselves and with teachers due to the physical absence. Teachers mostly in online classes are unable to comprehend the mentality of students.

F. Expertise in the use of technology

As far as, use of technology is concerned, a student cannot learn perfectly if he/she is not well versed in the use of technology through which learning process is taking place. This problem is faced by majority of the Pakistani EFL learners. The ratio of Pakistanis facing this issue is 70%. Majority of the students of Pakistanis have less expertise in the use of technology as compared to the Italian students i.e., 30%. Moreover, the institutions do not arrange formal training for the students. The Italian EFL learners were found to be digitally literate but still they are struggling to cope with the situation. Italy has more experts of technology than Pakistan. Pakistani students are not expert in the use of technology due to which they face problems in online education. While, students of Italy are technology users and knows well the use of technology due to which they are facing this problem.

G. Cognitive issues

Owing to the sudden change of situation and abrupt shift from face-to-face to online education, students around the globe are facing cognitive issues. Almost students of both countries are facing these issues. First of all, it is difficult for them to accept new mode of education. Moreover, they are already mentally disturbed due to pandemic situation. They are not able to get attention in online class as they get in traditional classes thus results in lack of motivation and confidence. They feel themselves ignored in class.

Teachers of both countries responded almost differently to the interview questions. After a rigorous analysis of the interviews, themes emerged like availability of resources, institutional support, students' motivation level and interest and psychological issues etc. The difference of the responses has been quantified and presented in the following table 2.

Table 2

S. No	Categories	Italy	Pakistan
1.	Availability of resources	90%	50%
2.	Support of government/ institution	85%	60%
3.	Student's motivation & interest	80%	50%
4.	Psychological issues	10%	60%
5.	Disturbance due to lack of social existence	5%	70%
6.	Hoping for improving online education	80%	30%

Italian teachers agree that they have enough resources to continue online education system successfully. While Pakistani teachers argue about the lack of resources to maintain the standard and effectiveness of online education system. Italian government plays a great role during this pandemic by providing them facilities. Whereas, Pakistani government is not capable to provide such facilities to their citizens. Pakistani teachers argue that students do not take attention during online education. It is difficult for them to grab the attention of all students in online education because they are physically absent and are not able to analyze physically to all students. While, Italian teachers agree that their students show mature behavior towards learning. Pakistanis do not have experts to learn the use of technology to continue online education as compared to Italian students. Italian students and teachers do not pay focus on social absence and can interact easily without physical appearance in learning process. While, Pakistani teachers and students both are facing problem due to the absence of social existence. It is seen that Italian teachers are hopeful that with time they would adjust with online education perfectly but Pakistani teachers are hopeless and argue that online education cannot become as effective as traditional education.

Lack of resources, digital expertise and connectivity problems result in the loss of motivation of Pakistani students, whereas, students of Italy respond well to online education as compared to Pakistani students. After analyzing the present situation of online education of both the countries, the present research recommends the ways to make the online education effective by focusing on Harasim's theory (2012) "Online Collaborative Learning". Collaboration learning is useful for making the online learning successful. As language learning is different from other learnings and cannot learnt by imitating the course outline. Therefore, there are three phases of information development that should be kept in mind during learning including idea generating, idea organizing and intellectual convergence. The analyzed data has shown an overall negative impact on learning during pandemic situation. There are socio-demographic, economic and psychological factors that are creating hindrances in online learning of EFL students. Both the countries are facing these issues but the ratio of Pakistan is significantly higher as compared to Italy due to the economic and socio-demographic factors.

VI. Conclusion

The present research has discussed the comparison of online teaching on student's learning. The present research compares the effect and perception of online teaching on students' learning and the possible avenues of improvement or enhancement of the teaching-learning experience of online education during the current pandemic. In this crisis of COVID-19, both Pakistan and Italy experienced a sudden transfer of education practices from traditional methodologies to online system. However, the level of satisfaction was found to be lesser in Pakistani teachers and students.

By comparing the situation of online education system of two different countries, it can be concluded that socio-demographic situation influences learning. Findings of the present research reveal that some issues like internet facility, student psychology, student motivation and confidence on the part of teachers as well as level of teachers' experience are common determining factors that globally effect the interest/attitude of the students towards online learning.

Even though students and teachers around the globe are struggling to cope with the situation but the difference lies in the perception towards online teaching and learning. A key finding was that the digital literacy of Pakistanis teachers is lacking, and they show resistance in accepting new mode of teaching and assessment. Also, Pakistani students reported the need for onsite discussion with teachers regarding the lecture while this was not the case in students from Italy. Moreover, students in Italy showed less inclination for onsite discussion which may be due to higher levels of fear of contracting the virus.

Present research provides insights regarding the challenges and problems which are present in the new normal online education amid Covid-19. Moreover, as this study has also discussed various cognitive, psychological and economic factors which have caused problems in the present online system, therefore, it might be helpful for the academics, scholars and relevant authorities to get benefits out of this research to improve the online educational system and to eliminate the hindrances and problems in this regard.

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