

Voices From the Virtual Classroom: Aspirations, Struggles and Transformations of Online M.Ed. English Students in Nepal

Guru Prasad Poudel

Tribhuvan University, Central Department of Education, Kirtipur

Email: guru.poudel@cded.tu.edu.np

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4735-1148>

Received: 2 April 2026

Accepted: 11 June 2026

Abstract

This study uncovers the aspirations and lived experiences of students who recently completed online Master's degree in English Education (M.Ed.) at the Department of English Education, University Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a significant shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning. Within this changing context, this study investigates online English language learners' aspirations, initial motivation, difficulties that they experienced, instructional support, future expectations and changes in their learning behaviour. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the study explored the experiences of five purposively selected students from rural areas who participated online learning despite having no previous experience with online education. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, reflective conversations and the researcher's observations. The findings show vivid experiences ranging from anxiety in the early stage to the greater digital competence, engagement and autonomy. The analysis also reveals a huge gap between their educational aspirations and actual learning experiences. Initially, they experienced fear, confusion and technological difficulty due to limited ICT skills, lack of technological devices and insufficient orientation in this regard. However, overtime, they demonstrated confidence, gradual development of ICT skills, adaptability and self-directedness in online learning. While online learning provided flexibility, cost-effectiveness and opportunities for learning from home, it was constrained by challenges such as poor internet connectivity, limited interaction as it happens in teacher-fronted instruction and inadequate institutional support. Practical components such as teaching practicum and thesis writing were particularly challenging in the online modality. The findings suggest that context-sensitive and institutionally supportive learning environment, and use of more interactive strategies and the equitable access of digital tools to the online learning groups can enhance the transformations in students' learning behaviour.

Keywords: Digital pedagogy, higher education, learner autonomy, narrative inquiry, online learning, student voices

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly transformed the educational practices across the globe, particularly due to the emergence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The conventional modality of face-to-face instruction was seriously challenged in higher education then. The integration of digital platforms, learning management system and communication technologies enabled institutions to provide flexible, accessible, and learner-centered educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2023). The universities of both developed and developing nations made attempts to initiate emergency teaching practices and reconfigure pedagogical approaches (Dhawan, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Several studies (Paudel, 2021; Rana, et.al. 2022) have explored that in developing countries like Nepal, the shift from in-person to online teaching, on the one hand, expanded the educational access; and on the other, reinforced the educational inequities for the insufficient digital devices in the learners, infrastructural constraints and lack of technological preparedness.

Within this changing context, Tribhuvan University (TU), Nepal started online master's level programs in 2077 B.S. (2020/21 A.D.) under Faculty of Education. This initiative was associated with the prior efforts of the Open and Distance Education Center (ODEC), established in 2015 to expand access to higher education through open and distance learning modalities (Gautam, 2016). ODEC aimed to cater to adult learners, in-service teachers and individuals unable to attend traditional on-campus programs due to geographical, personal and socio-economic barriers (Gautam, 2016). It is similar with global trends in open and distance learning, which emphasize inclusivity, lifelong learning and democratization of education (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Online M.Ed. program was an indicative policy and pedagogical transformation in Nepal's higher education system. Creating educational space to diverse learners, including working professionals and geographically marginalized students (Gautam, 2016) was the purpose of such initiation.

According to Anderson (2018), online education is a flexible, learner centered mode that enhances accessibility, autonomy and lifelong learning opportunities. It is not just a technological transition but a pedagogical and cultural one as it requires new competencies, practices and mindsets (Rapanta et al., 2020). Several studies conducted in different national contexts (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Martin et al., 2020) have argued that online learning can strengthen collaborative engagement, critical thinking and digital literacy in both teachers and students if that is supported by appropriate design and institutional preparedness. However, its effectiveness is affected by several factors. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) argue that technological setup, teacher competence, learner readiness and administrative support systems are always pertinent in affecting the effectiveness of online teaching and learning in higher education.

Research evidences in the Nepalese context display a complex relation between aspirations and realities in online education. On the one hand, online programs have enabled students from remote and rural settings to have an access of higher education without relocating to

urban centers (Khadka & Bhandari, 2023). On the other hand, studies also indicate existing challenges such as unstable internet connectivity, frequent power outages, limited access to digital devices and insufficient training for teachers and students, both (Devkota, 2021; Dawadi et al., 2020; Subedi et al., 2020). These challenges are quite frequent in English language education, particularly while engaging students in teaching practicum, seminars, report writing and proposal development through online support.

Despite the above-mentioned constraints, students enrolled in online M.Ed. programs at TU anticipated the virtual learning environment with varying degrees of success. They often expect increased access, flexibility and exposure to digital tools in and through online mode. They may also experience a burden caused by the insufficient skills in operating technologies, low level interaction and completing practical coursework. However, the research studies conducted in the field in Nepal, have not been focused on students' voices, aspirations and lived experiences, particularly targeting the M.Ed. English program at TU.

In this regard, this study explores the aspirations, motivation, opportunities, and challenges and of online English language learners, including their subjectivities and lived realities. It has uncovered perceived insights into the effectiveness and limitations of online learning in a resource-constrained context. By doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital pedagogy, equity and educational transformation in Nepal and beyond.

The research problem emphasizes the transition of the Nepalese higher education institutions to the online mode which has often been characterized as a mismatch between the theoretical expectations and the practical realities. The implementation of online learning in many contexts reveals notable challenges. The introduction of online M.Ed. programs in English Education at the Department of English Education signified a milestone in the modernization of higher education in Nepal, though the School of Education, Kathmandu University and Nepal Open University started such programs prior to T.U. However, this change was implemented with limited preparation, orientation and readiness of the resources. Both the teachers and students were abruptly required to use digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Zoom, and Google Meet without online course orientation and technological support. This lack of preparedness raises critical concerns regarding the quality, inclusivity and effectiveness in the Nepalese context. Another issue pertains to the limited use of digital tools for pedagogical purposes. While platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Moodle provide various features of interaction, collaboration and assessment, these are often unused. The online tools are frequently used for content delivery and assignment submission, but not as means of facilitating exploratory learning. This underutilization reflects technological constraints, lack of pedagogical integration and digital competence among teachers and students (Koehler & Mishra, 2006).

The existing literature indicates that while online education has expanded access, it has simultaneously increased educational inequalities, particularly for the students and teachers from rural areas and marginalized backgrounds (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023;

Rana, Greenwood & Henderson, 2022; Paudel, 2021). The issues of unreliable power supply, poor internet connectivity, insufficient training, instructional orientation, access to digital devices significantly hinder students' participation and engagement in online learning (Devkota, 2021). Similarly, the dependence on mobile data, smartphones, unstable broadband connections limit their ability to be engaged in interactive and practice-based activities. In addition, pedagogical and institutional issues complicate the online learning experiences. In this regard, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) suggest that many teachers lack adequate training in digital pedagogy. As a result, the replication of traditional lecture-based methods prevail even in virtual environments.

A noticeable gap can be observed in the literature regarding students' lived experiences in learning English online to develop both the linguistic and communicative competencies in Nepal. Some studies have examined the general impact of online education during the pandemic and only few have focused on the participation of M.Ed. English students. However, studies have hardly been carried out with the purpose of capturing students' aspirations, struggles, challenges and future expectations. The absence of such studies limits our understanding of how students perceive and negotiate the opportunities and challenges in the under-resourced and geographically remote areas. Therefore, this study addresses the existing gaps by exploring five key aspects: (i) students' initial motivation for enrolling in online M.Ed. English programs, (ii) the potential gains and struggles of learning online, (iii) the opportunities offered by online education, (iv) the nature and extent of teacher and institutional support, and (v) their expectations for improving online education in the future.

Literature Review

Discourse on online education in higher education programs has gained considerable scholarly attention in the post-2019. Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2023) state that the emergency shutdown of the pandemic catalyzed a rapid and unplanned transition to virtual learning environments. This shift in learning modality has generated rich evidence of theoretical, empirical and policy-based literature that interrogates the promises and paradoxes of online education. In the context of Nepal, only a few studies have been undertaken to examine emerging digital opportunities and institutionalized inequalities. This section has subsumed related theoretical frameworks and empirical findings.

In the global sphere, UNESCO has emphasized the importance of digital transformation in education. UNESCO's policy frameworks advocate for inclusive, equitable and quality education through the integration of digital technologies. UNESCO's key priorities particularly concerning higher education lie in improving digital infrastructure, enhancing teacher capacity and promoting open educational resources (UNESCO, 2023).

The theoretical grounds of online learning provide valuable insights into understanding transformations which are associated with constructivist and sociocultural perspectives. These perspectives conceptualize learning as an active, socially mediated process.

Social constructivism, for example, emphasizes the role of interaction, collaboration and active engagement in knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1987; Anderson, 2008). Similarly, connectivism explains the importance of digital networks and technological tools in facilitating learning in the digital age (Siemens, 2005). Transformative learning theory further presents the benefits of educational experiences to develop learners' perspectives, identities and practices (Mezirow, 2000). In the context of online English language education, these frameworks suggest that digital tools can serve not only as mediums of content delivery but also as spaces for interaction, reflection and meaning-making. Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that effective language acquisition requires opportunities for interaction, feedback and practice across multiple modalities.

Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), an approach to extend the use of computer technology in more diverse and pedagogically integrated form (Warschauer & Healey, 1998), explains that digital environments are not simply delivery mechanisms but they act as interactive spaces to facilitate co-construction of knowledge through dialogue, collaboration and reflection (Anderson, 2018). The Community of Inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) is one of the most influential models in this regard, positing that effective online learning emerges from the constant interaction of cognitive, social and teaching presence.

Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2006) provides a comprehensive model for understanding the integration of technology in teaching. It emphasizes the interaction between content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge. The teachers should possess subject expertise as well as the ability to integrate technology meaningfully into their pedagogy for the effective instruction (Koehler & Mishra, 2006).

However, the rapid transformation to online platforms during the pandemic has problematized these theoretical ideals. Hodges et al. (2020) distinguish between carefully designed online learning and "emergency remote teaching". Emergency remote teaching is characterized by pedagogical compromises and limited interactivity. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) further contend that this transition exposed systematic inadequacies in digital pedagogy, particularly in contexts lacking prior investment in eLearning infrastructure and teacher training.

As complementing in the different theories, the concept of the digital divide provides critical socio-economic lens. Recent research reconceptualizes the digital divides as multi-dimensional. It includes not only access to devices but also disparities in digital literacy, usage patterns and outcomes (van Dijk, 2020). In geographically and economically diverse countries like Nepal, this divide manifests in contrasts between urban and rural learners.

Globally, online education has been commended for its flexibility, accessibility and potential to democratize higher education by transcending spatial and temporal constraints (Dhawan, 2020; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023; Kadel & Tiwari, 2025). It enables

learners, those working professionals, to pursue higher education without disrupting their socio-economic commitments. However, the literature also shows significant challenges. Martin et al., (2020) explore issues related to learner engagement, self-regulation and the absence of meaningful interaction in virtual environments. Similarly, Aristovnik et al. (2020) report that students experienced anxiety, reduced motivation and dissatisfaction with online learning due to technical and pedagogical constraints. Studies have also shown that learners frequently face troubles in participating actively, expressing themselves confidently and engaging in collaborative tasks in online language classes (Blake, 2016; Hampel & Sticker, 2012).

In Nepal, the shift from the physical mode to online during COVID-19 pandemic has been studied, to some extent. A systematic review by Lamichhane (2023) found that online learning presents mixed results, with both opportunities and challenges. In the one hand, online learning has expanded access to education and, on the other, it promoted digital divide, particularly for students in rural areas. Similarly, Dahal (2025) reports that although digital integration is valued in education, significant disparities exist in terms of the access to technology and integration skills. The study presents that a considerable proportion of students lack access to quality e-resources and require training to handle digital tools. Paudel (2021) observed that while online education ensured continuity during instructional closures, it was fraught with challenges such as poor internet connectivity, lack of digital competence and uneven access to digital tools. In the same strength, Devkota (2021) presents the struggles of students in rural areas, where unreliable electricity and dependence on mobile data significantly hinder participation. Similarly, empirical studies on online language learning suggests that digital platforms can enhance language acquisition by providing opportunities for multimodal interaction, authentic communication and collaborative learning (Hampel & Sticker, 2012). However, the effectiveness of online language learning depends on the design of tasks, the use of interactive tools and the level of student engagement.

The studies by Rana, Greenwood and Henderson (2022), Khadka and Bhandari (2023) and Kadel and Tiwari (2025) emphasize the structural nature of these challenges, linking them to broader socio-economic inequalities. Students from remote regions often rely on smartphones rather than laptops. It restricts their ability to engage in complex academic tasks such as writing assignments, participating in discussions, and accessing learning management systems (Dawadi, 2023). Some discipline-specific challenges have also been pointed. In English language education, the development of communicative competence, critical discourse skills and language skills proficiency development necessitates interactive and experiential learning environments. Studies indicate that the absence of face-to-face interaction and limited opportunities for practicum-based learning undermine these objectives (Poudel, 2018; Joshi & Poudel, 2019; Subedi et al., 2020). Consequently, students often experience a distinction between theoretical knowledge acquisition and practical skill development.

Similarly, some studies present applicable strategies and prospective opportunities. Learners have shown flexibility by managing technological constraints, developing digital literacy skills and utilizing online platforms for collaborative learning (Khadka & Bhandari, 2023). These findings indicate that online education, despite its limitations, can promote new forms of agency and self-directed learning. Online communication applications and collaborative information shared platforms can facilitate diverse forms of interaction and support learner autonomy (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

From the policy perspective, the expansion of online education aligns with global and national agendas aimed at expanding access, equity and equality in higher education. In Nepal, policy initiatives have been undertaken to promote online education such as establishment of open and distance learning centers and the implementation of online class regulation directives by universities evidence a growing institutional commitment to digital transformation. The establishment of ODEC under Tribhuvan University represents a significant step towards expanding access to higher education. Additionally, the formulation and endorsement of online class directives during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects institutional efforts to adapt to changing circumstances. However, policy analysis reveals an explicit gap between rhetoric and implementation. The rapid shift to online education during the pandemic was highly reactive, with nominal strategic planning or stakeholder consultation. Furthermore, institutional responses have been unequal, with variations in the availability of technical support, teacher training and student support. Studies indicate that many teachers were inadequately prepared for online teaching and they just continued the traditional lecture-based approaches in virtual classrooms (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). This pedagogical practice challenges the transformative potential of online education and perpetuates passive learning practices. In addition, assessment practices in online education remain a contentious issue. The concerns regarding academic integrity, reliability and validity of online assessments have been widely reported (Dhawan, 2020).

Some notable gaps dwell in the existing literature in relation to the Nepalese context and postgraduate English education. For instance, there is a lack of research focusing on English language education and student participation in online learning. The existing studies tend to follow generalized perspectives on online learning, thereby undermining the specific pedagogical and experiential aspects of English language teaching and learning. Similarly, much of the existing research is quantitative and survey-based, which have just provided limited insight into the lived experiences of learners. Thus, there is a pressing need for qualitative, narrative inquiries that encompass students' voices, emotions and subjectivities. Understanding why students prefer online programs and how they envision their academic and professional growth is applicable for designing responsive policies. Further, the literature inadequately addresses the role of teacher and institutional support systems from the learners' perspective. Next, there is limited research on the interrelation of digital divide and learner agency. While barriers are widely explored, the ways in which students mitigate or transform these constraints is not explored. Another significant gap exists between policy provision and lived realities.

Methods and Procedures

This study followed a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of the students. As the emphasis was on participants' personal meanings and experiential realities, a narrative inquiry research design was employed. Narrative inquiry envisages the exploration of human experiences as storied accounts situated within specific socio-cultural contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It was particularly suitable for uncovering students' first-time engagement with online learning in resource-constrained settings. It encourages the researcher to understand how participants construct their realities, negotiate challenges, and make sense of their learning journey within specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts. The choice of narrative inquiry suits the purpose of this study, which was to uncover students' voices and examine the complexities of their experiences in online environments.

Therefore, the study focused on lived experiences such as motivation, engagement, challenges and expectations. A qualitative narrative approach seems significant to use as it emphasizes on depth, richness and contextual sensitivity that quantitative methods may not capture effectively (Lindsay and Schwind, 2016). Guided by qualitative framework of Creswell and Poth (2018), the study followed an interpretivist paradigm. It recognizes knowledge as socially constructed through interaction and reflection. The researcher's dual role as an online instructor and investigator also informed the co-construction of participants' narratives.

The research was conducted within the context of the M.Ed. English Education program offered by the Tribhuvan University, Faculty of Education at the Department of English Education, Kirtipur. The program was initiated following the university's decision to implement online education in response to emerging needs and contextual difficulties, particularly during the period influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The online classes were delivered through Microsoft Teams, with supplementary use of other tools. The program included both theoretical and practical courses, such as ELT Seminars, Teaching Practicum, and Thesis Writing, which require high levels of interaction and teacher's guidance. The participants in the program were geographically dispersed across various districts of Nepal, mainly from rural and semi-urban areas outside the Kathmandu valley (the capital of the country). Most of them were in-service teachers. The context was characterized by limited digital infrastructure, inconsistent internet connectivity and varying levels of digital literacy among both the students and teachers.

Altogether, five participants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives considering that they could provide rich and relevant information (Patton, 2025). All participants were from rural districts and had completed their M.Ed. through online mode without prior experience of digital learning platforms. They were enrolled in the online M.Ed. English Education program in the academic year 2077 B.S (2022 AD) and willing to share their experiences in depth. The participants relied on smartphones and mobile data because of not having laptops and stable internet. Such a

situation made the information-rich cases for the study. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, reflective dialogues and researcher's reflective notes. In addition to interview, reflective dialogues were conducted to deepen understanding and clarify emerging themes. Besides, the researcher maintained reflective notes based on personal experiences as an online facilitator to the selected students. The combination of these different data enabled methodological triangulation to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The multiple tools allowed participants to narrate their motivations, experiences, opportunities and challenges. Additive data sources included the researcher's reflective notes and classroom observations. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in the form of verbatim.

A thematic narrative approach was followed for the data analysis and interpretation. Initially, open coding was conducted to identify key ideas, followed by axial and selective coding to develop broader themes. So, thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed and it was further informed by social constructivism, connectivism, transformative learning and digital pedagogy as the theoretical perspectives. The strategies such as triangulation, participant validation and reflexivity were used to ensure credibility. Participants reviewed transcripts and interpretations to enhance trustworthiness of the results. Ethical considerations were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality and right to withdraw at any stage. The study was confined to small sample size and focus on a specific program within a single institution. So, the findings may not be generalizable to all contexts of online learning in Nepal or beyond.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study are explained across four major themes, along with participants' voices, the researcher's reflexive insights and relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Participants' Profile: Contextualizing the Voices

Students' voices represent perspectives, experiences and reflections on their educational processes, which are essential for informing pedagogical practices and institutional policies (Cook-Sather, 2006). In online education, uncovering student voices becomes even more important, as the absence of physical interaction may obscure learners' experiences and challenges.

All five graduates, three males and two females, selected for this study had completed their M.Ed. in English education through online mode from the Department of English Education, T.U. All were from rural districts, including Dhading, Rasuwa, Taplejung, Pyuthan, and Myagdi districts. They were engaged in teaching, mostly on a contract basis. Notably, none had prior experience with online learning platforms, formal ICT training and access to personal laptops at the beginning of the program. They attended online classes using smartphones and mobile data, very often under unstable network conditions. Their experiences from digital unfamiliarity to gradual competence forms the experiential reflection of this study.

Experiences of Learning English Online: From Disorientation to Gradual Transformation

Participants' initial experiences were characterized by anxiety, hesitation, technological confusion, and a sense of "digital shock". All participants described entering the online classes without prior exposure, training and confidence. Their narratives reflect a transition that was abrupt rather than scaffolded. The absence of orientation and training maximized these challenges. One of the participants (P1) recalled, "I was afraid even to click *join* and **share** buttons. I don't know how to join properly. I just followed others silently. I thought I might disturb the class." Another (P2) added, "We were just told to join Teams. No one taught us how to use it. Even unmuting felt like a big task." Next participant (P3) stated, "Teachers were also not confident. Sometimes they struggled with screen sharing. Teachers started teaching directly. We were not trained on *how to use Teams*. It was very difficult in the beginning. We felt like we were learning without preparation."

These narratives reflect what Hodges et al., (2020) describe as "emergency remote teaching," where pedagogical readiness is compromised. From a social constructivist perspective, the lack of interaction and scaffolding limited opportunities for collaborative knowledge construction (Anderson, 2018).

As an online facilitator, I observed that students rarely turned on their microphone or cameras during the initial days. Even when promoted, their responses were minimal or delayed. I initially interpreted this as a lack of interest. However, over time, I realized that it was rooted in fear, unfamiliarity and lack of confidence. This challenged my own assumptions about student engagement and signaled the importance of creating a psychologically safe online learning environment. Classroom interaction in early phase was questionable. Students described themselves as "passive listeners," and disengaged. In this regard, P1 shared, "sometimes I slept during class because it felt like listening to recorded audio. Teachers muted video and spoke continuously. It didn't feel like a real classroom." Such experiences show low social presence, a key component of effective online learning environment (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Myself, as a researcher and teacher of those students in online, I too observed limited interaction. Students used to rarely ask conceptual questions and they had a few queries related to assignments.

However, over time, participants began to adapt. By later semesters, some demonstrated increased confidence and active engagement in topic contribution, "in the beginning, I was nervous to present. But later, I could prepare slides and speak confidently even ask some questions related to the topic of discussion to the teacher" (P4). This shift suggests for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1987), where learners gradually reconstruct their perspectives through experience and reflection.

The practical components such as teaching practicum and thesis writing became highly challenging to them. One of the participants said, "We didn't get enough supervision during online micro-teaching and peer-teaching sessions. Feedback was delayed." Another reported, "I felt extreme difficulties for Academic Writing for Thesis Development course because online writing classes were just theoretical. We were not exposed much with

demo-writing classes, sometimes emails were not answered by teachers for weeks.” The study of Subedi et al. (2020), Dawadi (2023) and Kadel and Upreti (2025) also presented similar limitations of online platforms for experiential and supervised learning.

Experiences Across Semesters: From Silence to Gradual Participation

Passes through the time, students began to adapt to the online learning environment, although the process was uneven and contingent upon access to resources. In this regard, P4 reflected, “In the first semester, I was totally silent. But later, I started asking questions and contributed for topics.” Similarly, P5 shared, “After buying a laptop, changed a lot. I could participate more, prepare better, and even enjoy learning.” Likewise, P2 noted, “We learned slowly, by making mistakes. Now, I feel more comfortable using digital tools.”

The narratives illustrate gradual adaptation and skill development. Gaining of digital devices (e.g. laptops) played a crucial role in enhancing participation. This transformation can be interpreted through Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory, where learners reconstruct their perspectives through new experiences. I observed that students who initially struggled began to show improvement in later semesters, particularly in presentation skills and habit of raising questions. However, the improvement was not entirely due to pedagogical intervention but due to their personal involvement in learning independently using digital tools. This made me reflect on the inequitable nature of online learning.

Experiences of Doing Assignments and Student-led Presentation

Assignments and presentations were mandatory to students’ learning assessments in semester system. Students perceived it both as challenges and opportunities for growth. P3, in this regard, stated, “Preparing slides on mobile was very difficult. Sometimes I gave up. But later, I learned to use different apps. The completion of assignment on time was too much of a headache because of unstable internet. I didn’t have books so I had to search in internet.” Similarly, P1 shared, “Presentation time was very stressful. Internet problem made it worse. But after some attempts, I improved.” Similar to this, P4 reflected, “Presentations helped me gain confidence. I learned how to organize ideas and speak in English. I was unable to submit within deadline because I didn’t have ideas self and later took friend’s support and completed.”

These excerpts show a shift from frustration to competence. Assignments created opportunities for “learning by doing” and enhanced academic and digital skills. Participants also noted that feedback was delayed and limited. This partially aligns with Garrison’s (2011) Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, where cognitive presence is developed through active engagement.

I also observed that students initially relied on copied content from online sources. Over time, some began to develop original ideas when encouraged to reflect and discuss. However, the lack of consistent feedback mechanisms was a barrier to them. This made me question the effectiveness of assessment practices in online settings.

Opportunities Gained: Emerging Digital Literacy and Learner Agency

Digital literacy has been one of the components of 21st century skills. The issue of digital divide has been seen. It refers to disparities in access to digital technologies, internet connectivity and digital literacy (Koheler & Mishra, 2006). In developing contexts such as Nepal, digital divide affects students' experiences of online learning. Studies indicate that unequal access to devices, unreliable internet connectivity and limited skills create barriers to participation and learning (Baral, 2022).

Despite the challenges, students reported significant gains in digital literacy and self-directed learning. P5 shared, "I learned to prepare PowerPoint using mobile apps. Later, I bought a laptop and improved more using www.slideshare.net. Now I can use many different tools. I even use them in my teaching." Similarly, P3 stated, "I watched YouTube videos and used websites to understand topics. I used chat box to share questions. It helped me more than slides. I learned how to search for materials, prepare assignments and collaborate online." In the same way, P4 reflected, "Online learning made me more independent. I don't rely on textbooks and teachers, only."

The participants' experiences correlate with the principles of connectivism (Siemens, 2005), where learning occurs through digital networks and diverse information sources. Collaborative learning also emerged, though informally, among the students. P2 shared, "We used Messenger and WhatsApp groups to discuss assignments and help each other." Similarly, P5 stated, "Sometimes we checked each other's writing in Google docs and screen share."

These verbatims indicate partial realization of collaborative learning. It aligns with Dhawan (2020), who argues that online learning extends autonomy and self-regulation. Students developed practical digital skills that extended beyond academic contexts. I observed that students became more resourceful over time, often exploring tools and platforms independently. This was a positive outcome. I experienced their active engagement and motivation in the later semesters. When I used chat box and whiteboard, some students engaged actively. In the opinion of the participants, flexibility and cost-effectiveness were major advantages of online classes. P3 shared, "I could study without leaving my job. I saved money for travel and room rent. Similarly, P1 noted, "I have utilized my leisure time for the study. I have to prepare for teaching in the morning, go to school to teach whole day and I have time for learning in the evening. Online learning is quite flexible to me as I get time to take classes. That was the biggest advantage." The participants also argued that overcoming challenges also promoted their confidence. P2 added, "Online classes saved travel and living costs. Otherwise, studying in Kathmandu would be expensive". Likewise, P4 reported: I could attend classes from home, which was convenient. I feel I can learn anything online. Earlier, I was afraid of technology."

This reflects the development of learner autonomy and agency, which is one of the key goals of digital pedagogy (Dobson, & Willinsky, 2009). Digital learning environments require students to take greater responsibility for their learning, manage time effectively

and engage with resources independently. The study of Dhakal (2013) also concluded that online learning extends autonomy and self-regulation when supported by appropriate pedagogical strategies.

Experiences of Pursuing Practical Courses and Thesis Writing

The practical courses, including teaching practicum, seminar and thesis writing posed significant challenges to the students because of their interactive and supervisory nature. Sharing the experience of doing practical activities online, P2 explained, “In teaching practice, we needed real-time guidance, but online support was not enough.” Following the same line, P5 stated, “For academic writing and thesis development, communication with the supervisor was nominal. Sometimes I felt as if I was unable to do thesis writing task.” Likewise, P3 added, “I depended more on YouTube and online resources than on my supervisor.”

These experiences depict a mismatch between course requirements and pedagogical delivery. Practical courses require intensive mentoring, which was not adequately facilitated in the online mode. From a connectivists’ perspective (Siemens, 2005), students compensated for this gap by accessing external digital resources, However, this self-directed learning was not systematically guided.

As a supervisor, I faced difficulty in providing timely feedback due to technical and communication constraints. Students contacted me using social media channels when in offline. I realized that students needed for proper online-supervision mechanisms.

Peer Collaboration and Informal Learning Networks

Students developed informal networks for collaboration through digital platforms. As evidence, P4 shared, “We created Messenger groups to discuss assignments. We had great discussion in ELT Seminar and Report Writing course as we had to do seminar in groups and comment to each other’s seminar progress.” Similarly, P3 added, “Friends helped me more than formal classes sometimes. We shared each other’s’ lesson plans, teaching materials and even research proposal for learning.”

The above responses align with constructivist principles, which state that learning occurs through collaboration. However, such interactions were informal and not integrated into formal pedagogy. I realized that students were engaging in collaborative learning outside the formal classroom. This made me reconsider the boundaries of “classroom learning” in online learning contexts.

Institutional and Pedagogical Constraints as the Barriers

Participants’ experiences were influenced by institutional support system and structural inequalities. Issues of connectivity, electricity, device access and administrative support were quite persistent to them. P1 shared, “During rain, network frequently disappeared. I was terminated from the classes, even while presenting on a topic, left classes incomplete. I missed classes for many days. Sometimes I had to go outside to get network signal.” P2

reported, “Mobile data was expensive and not reliable.” Similarly, P5 added, “Without a laptop, it was very difficult to do assignments.” Likewise, P4 shared, “In fact, we didn’t get effective support from the administration and even from the Department. No one received phone in case of difficulty and even received, asked to call and report the problem to many others. I didn’t get IT support from the Department.”

These findings exemplify the digital divide (van Dijk, 2000; Dobson, & Willinsky, 2009), particularly visible in rural settings of Nepal (Rana, Greenwood & Henderson, 2022). The participants shared that pedagogically, classes were mostly teacher centered. In this regard, P2 shared, “Teachers only shared slides. There was no detail explanation.” In the same way, P5 said, “We were just taking screen shot and a few notes, not really understanding but didn’t share to teacher as we didn’t get the ideas because of fear.” Quite differently from the others, P5 shared, “Neither we, nor the teachers fully used the available digital tools. When I get ideas on available applications in Teams, I know that teachers don’t fully use the applications of Team. Tools were used only for sharing, not for exploring or practicing language. Teachers focused on finishing the course rather than engaging students.”

Even in my case as a teacher to them, my own teaching initially relied heavily on slides. I later realized that students needed more interactive and exploratory activities. I frequently received calls from students seeking technical and administrative support, which was beyond my role. This shows systemic gaps and the burden placed on individual teacher.

The participants perceived institutional support as disappointing, for evidence, P3 said, “We contacted administration many times, but support was not practical.” Another expressed, “We paid more fees for online classes compared to those in face-to-face classes, but got less support.”

The narrative excerpts indicate that students faced many barriers in learning of English because of technology, access of tools, support system and pedagogical choices. This distinction between policy and practice reflects wider systemic issues in online education implementation (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Expectations for the Future: Toward Transformative Online Pedagogy

The students completed M.Ed. in online expected systematic reform along effective institutional support. As an evidence, P1 shared, “There should be proper training for both students and teachers before starting online classes. Online classes should make us think critically, not just complete assignments and course contents.” The students also emphasized the need of blended learning. In this regard, P4 stated, “Online alone is not enough. Some physical classes are necessary, especially for practical courses.” Similarly, they expected a shift in pedagogical roles, in this regard, P3 expected, “Teachers should guide us to use technology, not just teach content. They should use different methods to engage students so that we could learn variety of methods for teaching in our future career of teaching.” They explained the need for meaningful learning. P1 shared, “Learning

should help us think critically and apply knowledge, not just pass exams.” I myself also realized that teaching online or face-to-face at master degree level should not be about completing courses but about facilitating transformation. Students also expected agency from teachers and innovation in pedagogy as such, “We should be encouraged to create, not just follow instructions” (P2).

The different expectations shared here align with transformative learning and digital pedagogy frameworks, which advocate for critical engagement, collaboration and learner empowerment (Warschauer, 2009). Different trajectories of learning online have been seen from students’ initial struggle to partial adaptation, guided by both constraints and opportunities. Students developed coping capacity and digital competence despite facing some difficulties related to devices, pedagogical gaps and weak institutional support. The narratives imply that online education in Nepal holds transformative potential. Myself, as a teacher and researcher also realize the need for pedagogical transformation. I realized that the effectiveness of technology depends on how we use it.

Conclusion and Implications

The participants’ narratives, together with the researcher’s reflections from the field, lead to the conclusion that students enrolled in the online M.Ed. English program experience both challenges and opportunities. In the initial stages, the students faced considerable difficulties in adapting to the online learning environment. However, through extended participation and continuous exposure, they developed the capacity and confidence to navigate the digital world of information and learning. Based on the findings, this research revealed that online learning enhanced access to higher education. Nevertheless, the students experienced a number of constraints during learning for not having a good access of internet connectivity, digital devices, institutional support mechanisms, less interactivity in online classes and low-level preparedness from the side of both teachers and students. The most important fact this study revealed is online education should not be understood simply as a technological shift but as an opportunity to provide better access to the students of remote settings, and lead them for pedagogical transformation.

The transition to online learning, introduced in response to COVID-19 pandemic, was relatively abrupt and insufficiently prepared. Consistent with Hodges et al. (2020), the findings suggest that the form of online instruction implemented during this period was closely aligned with emergency remote teaching than with carefully designed online education. The absence of prior training, inadequate orientation and uneven institutional support affected students’ initial experiences. As a result, many students experienced anxiety, disengagement and passive learning. Although online learning has the potential to promote learner autonomy, collaboration and critical engagement (Anderson, 2018; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), the narratives revealed a predominantly teacher-centered one-way delivery through ready-made PowerPoint Texts (PPTs) creating barriers in interactive engagement. Such a situation may partly be resulted for the inadequate technological and pedagogical support. Online platforms should be appropriated as a space for engaging

students and teachers in knowledge construction, not just as a delivery channel. However, pedagogical rigidity, limited opportunity for collaboration and communication and lack of reflective practice lead the students to be “passive listeners” (Martin et al., 2020). The students’ reflection regarding weak institutional support, orientation to online learning, poor connectivity and limited interaction and sharing between peers and teachers indicated “pedagogical mismatches” (Paudel, 2021) reinforcing the underuse of cognition in learning.

Despite these challenges, a visible shift occurred in the course of their participation in online learning. For example, students gradually developed digital literacy, autonomy and collaborative skills. Their movement from simply engaging in ‘copy and paste’ toward more reflective use of knowledge in practical courses and final-semester assignments suggests that there is a strong transformation in their learning. Further, the extended engagement of students in online learning during the prior semesters gradually promoted a sense of agency in them to direct their learning autonomously.

Of course, the barriers experienced by the students in their prior semesters had caused a “digital divide” to those participating from the rural areas. However, the extended engagement supported them to enhance their digital competence, flexibility and collaborative learning. As argued elsewhere in this paper, their experiences imply that online learning contributed to the development of their agency, creativity and motivation in learning. Still, the students expressed a need for greater institutional responsiveness, orientation specifically designed for online learning, teacher training, opportunities for blended learning and more interactive engagement. Moreover, this research has identified a gap between policy intentions and the realities of implementation. Although institutional initiatives sought to expand access to higher education through online classes, such initiatives were proved inadequate to provide required support. This gap invites the need for a situated, context-sensitive and comprehensive approach to online education policy in Nepal.

From the conclusions above, some implications can be inferred for policy, pedagogy and future research. At the policy level, there is a pressing need to move beyond reactive responses toward more strategic and sustainable approaches to online education. Universities should invest in digital infrastructure, particularly for students in rural and remote areas, in order to address the emerging digital divide. Institutional policies need to correspond to the realities and needs of learners and teachers. In this regard, the integration of blended learning models may provide a contextually appropriate approach for strengthening online teaching, learning and practicum in M.Ed. English program. From a pedagogical perspective, the study calls for a shift in the instructional paradigm, from content transmission toward transformative and learner-centered approaches. Teachers need to reconceptualize their roles as facilitators for enhancing student interaction, critical inquiry, collaboration and reflection on online learning.

For preparing student readiness for the effective participation in online class, orientation programs can serve as helpful means. Such programs can help participants develop their

technological knowledge and confidence in using ICT tools for effective online learning. At the same time, students can be encouraged to apply online learning skills to self-directed inquiry and to be active participants of knowledge construction.

Finally, the study opens several avenues for future research. A crucial one is that future researchers can compare students' experiences of online education across different academic disciplines and educational contexts. Second, they can also examine the long-term effects of online education on students' learning achievement. Further, they can equally explore how the institutional support, teacher preparedness, digital competence and access to digital tools/materials affect learning outcomes in higher education.

References

- Adhikari, B.P. (2023). The impact of dimensions of e-learning on the successful implementation and development of digital pedagogy in Nepalese higher-level educational institutions. *OCEM Journal of Management, Technology & Social Sciences*, 2 (2), 15-55. <https://journal.oxfordcollege.edu.np/index.php/ojmts/article/view/21>
- Adhikari, J., Sharma, S., & Pant, B. (2021). Challenges of online learning in Nepal during COVID-19. *Journal of Education and Research*, 11 (2), 45-60.
- Anderson, T. (2018)). *The theory and practice of online learning* (3rd ed.). Athabasca University Press.
- Anderson, T. (Ed.). (2008). *The theory and practice of online learning*. Athabasca University Press. <https://www.aupress.ca/books/120146-the-theory-and-practice-ofonline-learning/>
- Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N., & Umek, L. (2020). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life of higher education students. *Sustainability*, 12(20), Article 8438. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208438>
- Baral, R.P. (2022). The digital divide in online learning: A case study of university students in Nepal. *Prithvi Academic Journal*, 88-99. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360553944>
- Blake, R. (2016). Technology and the four skills. *Language Learning & Technology*, (20)2, 129-142. <https://llt.msu.edu/issues/june2016/blake.pdf>
- Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to Corona Virus Pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15 (1), i-vi. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3778083>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power: "Student voice" in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36 (4), 359-390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/>

j.1467-873X.2006.00363.x

- Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Dahal, S. (2025). Digital integration in higher education: A survey research in Nepal. *Journal of Janta Multiple Campus*, 4(1), 87-104. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jjmc.v4i1.77995>
- Dawadi, S., Giri, R. A., & Simkhada, P. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Nepal: Challenges and Coping Strategies. *Education and development*, 29, 2835.
- Dawadi, S.D. (2023). Teaching mathematics through online at the university level: An ethnographic inquiry. *The educator Journal*, 11 (1), 98-113. <https://doi.org/10.3126/tej.v11i1.54458>
- Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437186>
- Devkota, K.R., (2021). Inequalities reinforced through online and distance education in the age of COVID-19: The case of higher education in Nepal. *International Review of Education*, 67 (1), 145-165.
- Dhakal, B.P. (2023). Digital pedagogy for self-paced learning in mathematics education. *Journal of Mathematics Education*, 5(1), 1-14. <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/jme/article/view/60846>
- Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49(1), 5-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018>
- Dobson, T., & Willinsky, J. (2009). Digital literacy. In D. R. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of literacy* (pp. 286–312). Cambridge University Press.
- Dron, J., & Anderson, T. (2023). Pedagogical paradigms in open and distance education. In *Handbook of open, distance and digital education* (pp.147-163). Springer Nature Singapore.
- Duwal, B.R. (2023). Factors affecting the online learning outcomes of higher education institutions in Nepal. *The International Research Journal of Management Science*, 8 (1), 57-70. <https://doi.org/10.3126/irjms.v8i1.60695>
- Garrison, D. R., & Vaughan, N. D. (2008). *Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines*. Jossey-Bass.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Garrison, D.R. (2011). *E-learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Gautam, G.R. (2016). Open and distance education in Nepal: Practices and challenges. *Tribhuvan University Journal*, 29(1), 123–134.

- Godwin-Jones, R. (2018). Using mobile technology to develop language skills. *Language Learning & Technology*, 22(3), 3–17. <https://llt.msu.edu/issues/october2018/emerging.pdf>
- Hampel, R., & Sticker, U. (2012). The use of technology in teaching languages online. *Language Teaching*, 45 (3), 311-326. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144481200008X>
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*, 27(1), 1-9. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergencyremote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Joshi, D. R., et al. (2023). Effectiveness of online training on digital pedagogical skills of remote area teachers in Nepal. *International Journal of Professional Development, Learners and Learning*. <https://www.ijpdl.com/article/13666>
- Joshi, K. R., & Poudel, G. P. (2019). Role of ICTs in promoting learner independence and motivation in English language classes. *Interdisciplinary Research in Education*, 4(1), 67-76.
- Kadel, P. B., & Tiwari, H. P. (2025). Integration of Digital Pedagogy in ELT: Teacher Perception on Learning Achievement and Professional Development. *Tribhuvan University Journal*, 40(1), 110-124.
- Khadka, S., & Bhandari, L. (2023). Access and equity in online higher education in Nepal. *Higher Education Research Journal*, 12(1), 77–95.
- König, J., Jäger-Biela, D. J., & Glutsch, N. (2020). Adapting to online teaching during COVID-19. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 608–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1809650>
- Lamichhane, Y.R. (2023). Online learning in Nepal: A systematic review. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 5 (3), 1025-1045. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-023-00360-5>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Lindsay, G.M., & Schwind, J.K. (2016). Narrative inquiry: Experience matters. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*, 48(1), 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0844562116652237>
- Martin, F., Sun, T., & Westine, C. D. (2020). A systematic review of research on online teaching and learning. *Computers & Education*, 159, Article 104009. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104009>
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for teacher knowledge. *Teachers College Record*, 108(6), 1017-1054. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00684.x>
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning*

(3rd ed.). Wadsworth.

- Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Paudel, P. (2021). Online education: Benefits, challenges and strategies during COVID-19 in Nepal. *International Journal on Studies in Education*, 3(2), 70–85. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.32>
- Poudel, G. P. (2018). Integrating ICTs in English language teaching: Teachers' perception, strategies and challenges. <https://neltaeltforum.wordpress.com/2018/01/07>
- Rana, K., Greenwood, J., & Henderson, R. (2022). Teachers' experiences of ICT training in Nepal: How teachers in rural primary schools learn and make progress in their ability to use ICT in classrooms. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 31(3), 275291.
- Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2020). Online university teaching during and after the COVID-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 923–945. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00155-y>
- Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T.S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2(1), 3-10.
- Subedi, S., Nayaju, S., Subedi, S., Shah, S. K., & Shah, J. M. (2020). Impact of e-learning during COVID-19 pandemic among students in Nepal. *Journal of Patan Academy of Health Sciences*, 7(3), 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jpahs.v7i3.33821>
- UNESCO. (2023). *Global education monitoring report 2023*. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report>
- van Dijk, J. (2020). *The digital divide*. Polity Press.
- Warschauer, M. (2009). Digital literacy studies: Progress and prospects. In M. Baynham & M. Prinsloo (Eds.), *The future of literacy studies* (pp. 123–140). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Warschauer, M., & Healey, D. (1998). Computers and language learning: An overview. *Language Teaching*, 31(2), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800012970>