

## **Transition to Online Mode for English Teaching: Challenges in the Kashmir Context**

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### **Abstract**

The English language has become an indispensable part of our life. It connects us to the outside world. Given its global status, the demand for English is continuously increasing. Kashmir Valley was already experiencing curfew, school closure, and internet shut down. Later the government approved the use of 2G internet speed. The Covid-19 lockdown added to the already existing miseries. This article discusses Kashmir valley's challenges in transiting to online mode. Some of these challenges are the lack of systematic planning, preparing schools, training of teachers, orienting learners, and a few technical issues.

**Keywords:** English, teaching, learning, offline, online issues

### **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on education in the world. According to the World Bank (Munoz-Najar et al., 2021), it has disrupted education in over 150 countries and affected 1.6 billion students. In India, schools were shut down post-lockdown, and students were deprived of education. Many countries, including India, took this as an opportunity and turned to online teaching. But it was difficult for the Kashmir valley to leverage this opportunity. This article examines the challenges in the online teaching of English in the Kashmir valley.

### **The Kashmir Context**

Lockdowns and curfews are not new in the Kashmir valley. The valley has been a witness to instability and political turmoil since 1947. The

problems aggravated in 1989-90 due to insurgency during which schools and educational institutions were closed. In August 2019, Article 370 was revoked, removing Kashmir from its autonomous status. The entire region was locked down to contain the backlash, and phone networks and Internet services were suspended. Students' deprivation of education intensified. According to Qadir and Shah (2020), this was the fifty-first time the government shut down the internet, and this is the most prolonged internet lockdown. They add that since 2011, the Kashmir valley has witnessed more than 170 lockdowns. In January 2020, "the government allowed the limited use of 2G internet access to 301 "whitelisted" websites with no access to any social media platforms" (Sareen, 2020, cited in Nadaf, 2021, p. 343). When the Covid-19 lockdown was declared, it coincided with the existing lockdown, creating a "lockdown within lockdown situation" (Nadaf, p. 344). The consequence of these happenings was that students in Kashmir could neither access education nor technology. Gilliard (2017, cited in Nadaf 2021) refers to the Kashmir situation as "digital redlining, an intentional discrimination against selected communities or specific groups through unfair technological policies and practices to perpetuate inequalities of access to the Internet services, digital technologies, and digital content". (Para 4). Given these circumstances in the Kashmir Valley, the present article discusses the challenges in online teaching-learning of English.

### **English in Kashmir**

The 2011 Census (Census, 2011) showed that English is the primary language—mother tongue—of 256,000 people, the second language of 83 million people, and the third language of another 46 million people making it the second-most widely spoken language after Hindi. The demand for the English language is growing daily, which is why there are separate English departments in the universities, and many institutes are working on the English language. The English language is taught as a core subject of study in Indian schools from Class 1, and the same is the case with the schools in Kashmir Valley. In the valley, the medium of instruction is English, and English is also taught as a subject. Various organizations and institutes like the School Education Department, Jammu and Kashmir, State Council of Educational Research and Training and District Institute of Education and Training teach the English language. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutes

worldwide were closed for offline teaching and learning, and the same was the case with the educational institutes of Kashmir Valley. There was a transition from physical to online teaching of the English language. The transition was not smooth. This article explores the challenges in teaching English as a second language in the online mode in Kashmir Valley.

### **Challenges in Transiting to the Online Mode**

The lack of systematic planning is the main challenge in the transition from offline to online. The lack of planning made the transition abrupt and rough. Systematic planning includes expenditure provision, allocating funds to different schools, training teachers, orienting students to the software, purchasing software, adjusting the English language curriculum, etc. Planning will help Kashmir Valley to move to blended learning eventually. The World Bank report observes that “remote learning to be effective it requires three complementary, critical components: effective teachers, suitable technology, and engaged learners” (Munoz-Najar et al., 2021, p. 4). Online learning in the Kashmir Valley has challenges on these three fronts. Besides, planning is considered a futile exercise because of the volatile and uncertain situation in the valley.

Schools are the main partners in the teaching and learning process because the principal facilitates and monitors teaching through the online mode. To conduct the online classes smoothly, the head teacher or the principal coordinates with the teachers, students, and parents. They enable teachers to subscribe to online apps and software. They send the teachers to professional development programmes to update their skills and knowledge. Schools should facilitate teachers to teach innovatively by providing students with opportunities to interact with native and non-native speakers of English to improve their communication skills (Alshammari, 2022). Most schools in the Kashmir valley were not prepared for online learning.

### **Teacher Preparation**

*If you're teaching today what you were teaching five years ago, either the field is dead, or you are* (Noam Chomsky).

Preparing the teachers for the transition from offline to online teaching is essential because teachers should be able to operate the software and

teach students with computers. Unfortunately, teacher preparation was relegated to the background. Teachers need time to learn the tools. They got neither the time nor any training. However, they were forced to take online classes struggling to use Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco WebEx, etc. In a survey by Mushtaq et al. (2022), about 55 per cent of teachers reported wanting training to give online lectures. Most teachers were unaware of English language learning software and games for the students to develop their language proficiency. These software and apps range from free to subscription basis like Zoom classes, Google Classrooms, WhatsApp, YouTube, Gmail, the G-Suite, Seesaw, Padlet, Webex, Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, etc. The Kashmir Valley's training institutes must prepare the teachers for online teaching by organizing workshops and training programmes on handling different hardware and software. The preparation should include introducing teachers to new educational and technological tools (Gömleksiz, 2004). In Mushtaq et al.'s study, about 60% of Kashmir teachers reported having the necessary IT skills to conduct online classes. The difference between teachers who can teach online classes and those who are not will have repercussions on students' learning. "This will lead to further inequalities in children's quality of learning between those whose teachers had higher capacity versus those who did not" (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021, p. 14).

Moving forward, all teachers should be equipped with the capability to create the online content, make interesting presentations, engage students, evaluate them, and provide feedback. Teachers who are equipped with all these training will successfully handle online English language classes. Language labs are available in only a few universities and colleges; these are not full-fledged labs. At least one full-fledged language lab should be available in each zone so that students may benefit from them and sharpen their English communicative skills. English teachers should be active so that learners may not feel bored during the class; instead, the students should enjoy the class (Octaberlina et al., 2020).

### **English Language Learner Preparation**

Many students lack computer literacy which is another major challenge for online learning. They cannot operate basic programs like Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. However, technological proficiency is a requirement for online learning. Planning for workshops for students is an essential requirement.

Learners or students are the main stakeholders in the learning process because, without their active participation, English language learning cannot take place. Many students resist this change to online learning and find it difficult to adapt. It is necessary to provide opportunities for students to discuss with their peers the benefits of eLearning and the reality of learning loss. These discussions will help them change their mindset and be prepared for virtual learning.

When students are equipped with handling online tools and gadgets, like Zoom, Google classroom, Webex and other platforms, they can actively participate in the online English language classroom without any hindrance. The teachers' time and energies are channelled for teaching rather than helping students become familiar with the software.

The uncertain situation in Kashmir Valley is a source of anxiety for many students. Nousheen, an undergraduate student (cited in Rodrigues, 2020, para 22), sums up this anxiety thus: "what if there is an Internet shutdown during the exams and even the 2G is taken away? What if my locality becomes a red zone"?

### **Technology Problems**

Because of the government's ban, only 2G internet speed was used for communication. The valley started online classes during Covid-19. In the words of Bashir, "The experiment to start online classes on 2G network was absurd because teachers faced massive problems while attempting to upload content on the internet. Many were not well versed with technology either". (*The Wire*, 2020). Rodriguez talks of educator Mubeen's experience with technology (2020). Because there was no broadband or Wi-Fi, Mubeen flew to Delhi, copied lectures on the pen drive and distributed them to students. Even then, students found copying the lectures using the 2G network difficult.

Connectivity is a central issue that the teachers and students face during online teaching and learning in the Kashmir Valley. Some students do not own computers and seek the help of Learning Resource Centres for technical assistance. Students from poor financial backgrounds do not have smartphones to join online classes, which is an obstacle to online learning. In a few instances, even when students have smartphones, they waste their time on social networking sites. Here, parents have the role of council and should monitor the activity of their wards. The solution

to this problem is to know students' technology needs and support them in meeting these.

## Conclusion

Kashmir Valley, even before Covid-19, was in a situation of 2G internet speed and plagued with school closure. The Covid-19 epidemic added to the already existing misery of Kashmiris. In this situation, the valley has several challenges in transiting to an online mode of English language teaching. Some of the challenges discussed in this article are lack of systematic planning, preparation of schools, English language teachers and learners, and connectivity issues to transit to an online mode of learning. The educational administration plays a pivotal role in mitigating many of these challenges. Ensuring effective online learning is critical for equal access to education. Online learning should not become a source of promoting inequities in society.

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