



## HYBRID CLASSROOM IN THE NEW NORMAL LIFE: LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims at exploring the perceptions and experiences of the undergraduate EFL learners regarding hybrid classroom. Applying qualitative approach, the research was conducted at a private university in Bangladesh. Using the concept of 'self-exclusion' in the hybrid classroom, the study analyzed the interview data of twenty EFL students. Findings show that though there are some opportunities of hybrid education, majority of the learners do not aspire to go back to the hybrid classes. They prefer pure on-line mode for the emergency period than the hybrid mode. Learners perceive that hybrid mode limits the exposure of the teachers to both on-line and face-to-face communication. However, the learners acknowledged that hybrid education enables digital technology and is beneficial to some extent. Nevertheless, despite having some positive aspects, the learners experienced the hybrid mode as 'exclusionary' which creates anxiety and marginalize them while attending on-line mode of hybrid classes. Hence, at the end, the study suggested minimizing the challenges of hybrid classes by ensuring the engagement of all the learners through classroom participation and focusing on the technological accessibility. The study also indicated the necessity of further in-depth analysis of hybrid learning in higher education for future direction.

### KEYWORDS

Hybrid classroom, on-line mode, face-to-face mode, self-exclusion, anxiety, marginalization, communication, technology.



## INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 pandemic became one of the major outbreaks of the world. It (the pandemic) has profoundly changed the teaching and learning environment across the globe. The shift from traditional face-to-face to on-line education has transformed the learning and teaching experiences in the educational landscape. Hence, the educational institutions gradually started moving to the blended mode of education from the pure on-line sessions. Thus, both the teachers and learners adopted hybrid models of education which combines both the on-line and face-to-face education. Like other countries, Bangladeshi universities embraced the change by shifting from the typical face-to face classroom to on-line classroom. However, in the new normal life i.e. when people started coming up with the pandemic, getting vaccinated and returning to the regular activities; students also started going back to their institutions. Nevertheless, they had to maintain the hygiene, the safety rules especially social distancing. In order to maintain social distancing, some of the private universities started hybrid classes in the new normal life in the post COVID era in Bangladesh. “The hybrid room has also been designed to allow online and physical attendees interact during operating sessions” (Triyason et al., 2020, p.1) Besides, Hybrid classrooms helped the educators embracing the benefits of blending online technologies with face-to-face class meetings (Harrington, 2010). Triyason et al (2020) stated that “The hybrid classroom concept aims to reducing the number of involved people in activity by offloading some group of people to online from their home” (p.1). Thus, hybrid classrooms have been viewed significant in the new normal life.

Hence, the current study explored the perceptions and experiences of the learners of the Department of English a private university of Bangladesh regarding hybrid classrooms. The university started hybrid classrooms after two years of pure on-line education. It changed the physical properties of its classrooms by providing all the logistic support including setting web

cameras in each classroom. Besides, the university ensured that 50% students of a class will attend the face-to-face mode and the other 50% will join online mode by using Google Meet. The students rotated i.e. the group who attended on-line in one week; they attended the face-to-face/physical classes next week. The objective of such hybrid classrooms was to maintain social distancing.

However, the adoption of digital technologies for pedagogical transformations engendered some significant challenges for both learners and academic communities (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2022; Penami & Kamalipour, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2022). Existing literature on the hybrid mode of learning (on-line and face-to-face) and perceptions and experiences of the learners has been reviewed in the following section.

### Hybrid Classroom and Learners’ Perceptions and Experiences

Though a large body of literature is available on the intersection of technology and language learning, research on the effects of hybrid delivery on ESL/EFL students is minimal. Thus, the need for research on the effects of hybrid classrooms upon learners has been suggested by the researchers (Harrington, 2010). Hence, the current study explored the perceptions and experiences of the EFL learners regarding hybrid classrooms.

Two distinct classroom communities – on-line and face-to-face groups attend the hybrid classes simultaneously. Educators who advocated for hybrid classrooms argued that combining face-to-face interaction with on-line discussion actually solidifies the classroom community which is not possible in pure on-line or face-to-face mode (Harrington, 2010). However, learners have different learning experiences and perceptions regarding the on-line and face-to-face classes and the use of digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). Simamora (2020) explored the perceptions of 15



Indonesian students regarding the impact of on-line classes. The students in Simamora's study felt that they can maximize the use of modern technology through on-line learning which they considered as a positive impact. They further added that they can take advantages of existing media and applications due to technological developments. Moreover, hybrid education enabled digital literacy; "the growth of education technology has facilitated to need to support digital learning and simultaneously introduce the concept of digital classroom" (Kumar et al., 2020, p.4176).

Additionally, there has been a wide adaptation of Google Classroom in on-line education. Google classroom has also provided affordances for hybrid classroom in the universities. Google Classroom which is easily accessible and user-friendly is a part of the Google Apps for Education (GAPE) Suite targeted to develop online learning platforms with a Google account (Kumar & Bervell, 2019). In addition, Google Classroom has good learnability, assignment submitting facilities and grading facilities with private comment option (Kumar et al., 2020). In their study, Kumar et al. (2020) explored the perceptions of seventeen students from a Malaysian higher education institution. The study revealed that Malaysian students perceive that Google Classroom was convenient for them for accessing notes and activities. Further, Google Classroom was also useful for them for getting feedback from their instructors. Moreover, the students achieved more confidence in using technology for learning. Hence, Google Classroom is a flexible communication platform for both teachers and learners in hybrid education.

In contrast, there are some challenges too. For instances, as on-line learning happens in one direction, it creates difficulties for students to consult with material that is felt to need a deeper explanation and understandings (Simamora, 2020). Harrington (2010) revealed that the use of two distinct modes may appear as 'exclusionary' for one group. The on-line group may isolate themselves by 'self-muting' and consequently they may be marginalized. Harrington's

concept of self-exclusion stated that "the hybrid's opportunity to choose between mediums is not so much a positive choice as a negative self-exclusion from half of the academic discourses necessary to be a full participant in the classroom community" (Harrington, 2010, p.3). Hence, it has been found that on-line learners may isolate them from the learning process by producing several excuses as hybrid mode limits the interaction of the teachers with the both groups. Thus, all the learners in hybrid classrooms are not equally engaged in the learning process whereas it is important for all students to engage and participate in the classes. Moreover, the students in hybrid classes create two separate identities; one is for the on-line community and another one is for the face-to-face community. Nevertheless, "constant switching between the two social communities might result in a fragmented and incomplete identity development" (Harrington, 2010, p. 4). Consequently, students may fail to understand the lectures. Hence, the failure may instill the feelings of anxiety and inferiority among the EFL learners and such anxiety might affect their course grades (Harrington, 2010). Further, there is difficulty of the devices and internet access. One of the students of Simamora's study stated that "the problems arise such as the difficulty of the signal or internet network so that it can hamper the learning process" (Simamora, 2020, p.93). For example, the student mentioned that when the teachers send videos, the students cannot download that for difficult internet networks, hamper the learning process.

Thus, existing literature revealed both the opportunities and challenges of hybrid classroom. However, the studies in different countries also suggested that challenges can be minimized by ensuring stable internet access and the engagement of learners (both on-line and face-to-face learners) in the classroom activities. Hence, the study explored the perceptions and experiences of the Bangladeshi learners regarding hybrid classrooms.



## METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the perceptions and experiences of the undergraduate EFL learners regarding hybrid classrooms, qualitative approach has been applied in the study. Qualitative approach allowed the researcher to get the in-depth perceptions of the learners. Dornyei (2007) advocated for qualitative research in order to explore the opinions, experiences and feelings of the individuals.

### Data Collection Tool

Interview has been used as a research tool for collecting data. Twenty EFL students of a private university in Bangladesh were interviewed in order to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding hybrid classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were used. There are three types of interviews – structured, semi-structured and unstructured. While, a structured interview is very formal and rigid, an unstructured interview is informal which is guided by the interviewee than the agenda of the researcher (Nunan, 1992). Thus, semi-structured interview has been suggested by the researchers in order to get the in-depth views of the interviewees. A semi-structured interview is flexible and gives privileged access to other people's lives (Nunan, 1992). By using the semi-structured interview format, the researcher used a set of guided questions and asked some other questions based on the responses of the participants in the current study. One-to-one and face-to-face interviews were carried out and both the close ended and open ended questions were asked to the interviewees to explore their perceptions and experiences.

### Ethical Issues

Maintaining ethical issue is one of the major concerns for conducting interviews. The study has dealt with the ethical issues carefully. Thus, the name of the university has not been mentioned; instead, pseudonym has been used. Besides, the interviewees were ensured that they will remain anonymous. Thus, 20 interviewees were referred to in the findings and

analysis section using pseudonyms from the letter A to T.

### Findings and analysis

The learners shared their experiences regarding learning and teaching activities, classroom participation and feedback, availability of technology, digital platform and challenges and opportunities of hybrid classrooms. Findings from the interview of the 20 undergraduate students have been explored and analyzed below:

#### Learning and Teaching Activities

Students were asked how satisfied they were with the learning and teaching activities in the hybrid classes. They were also asked about the relevance of conducting hybrid classes in the post-COVID era. In response, 40% (8 out of 20) students expressed their satisfaction with the hybrid classes. They perceive that it was quite appropriate to conduct hybrid classes in order to maintain social distances. Moreover, they perceive that it was a great opportunity for them to meet their teachers and friends after a long time. They received the flavor of normal life after the era of new-normal life. Student B, D, F and L mentioned that students might be depressed if they had to stay home further.

However, 60% (12 out of 20) of the students shared their dissatisfaction with the hybrid classes during the interview sessions. They perceive that pure on-line or face-to-face classes were better than the hybrid mode. They mentioned several reasons for their dissatisfaction. For example, the students who were attending face-to-face classes were able to interact with the teachers easily. Besides, the teachers could not focus on both groups at a time. Therefore, students who were attending on-line classes were not able to get clear understandings on various topics. Consequently, they felt marginalized very often. Some students in the study of Simamora (2020) in the context of Indonesia also did not find the on-line mode effective. They felt that on-line mode was not





comfortable for them. Besides, 2 of the students of the current study perceive that social distancing was not maintained properly as half the class was attending face-to-face classes. Thus, they were at a risk of being infected.

### Class Participation and Feedback

Students were asked about their participation in the classroom discussion in hybrid classes. In response, 80% (16 out of 20) students mentioned that they did not have a good experience when they were joining on-line. Nevertheless, they participated well when their turns came in face-to-face classrooms. Thus, face-to-face mode of hybrid class was convenient for them. The learners also perceive that their learning processes were hindered due to the lack of non-verbal communication, such as the facial expressions and eye contacts with the teachers. In their study, Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) also revealed that non-verbal communication enables learning and acts as a key part of the learning process in higher education.

However, only 20% (4 out of 20) students shared that they participated well in the classroom discussions both in the on-line and face-to-face modes. Nevertheless, all the 20 students stated that teachers gave tasks to them in the hybrid classes, but on-line students did not get the feedback always. However, feedback is found essential for effective learning in different research studies. In their study Archambault et al. (2010) focused on students' feedback and revealed that students can receive direct feedback about activities and assessments in on-line classes. They also argued that the contents should be flexible for engaging students in on-line classes by using technology (Archambault et al., 2010). The current study revealed learners' anxiety as they were not getting feedback properly. Hence, they (learners) were worried about their grades.

### Availability of Technology

In response to the question regarding the availability of technology, all the interviewed students (20)

mentioned that their mobile phones/computers were good enough for on-line learning and teaching. However, they had different experiences regarding fast and stable internet connection. While 10 (50%) students mentioned that they had access to fast and stable internet connection, other 10 (50%) students mentioned that they had very weak internet connection.

### Perception on Digital Platform

Students' perceptions were explored regarding the use of digital platform such as – Google Meet, ZOOM etc. in education. All of the interviewed students felt that digital platforms supported and enhanced their learning experiences during the COVID and post-COVID era. They agreed that without the emergence of digital platforms, their education might have been stopped. Student A, C, O and P considered the digital platforms as blessings for education. They added that virtual classes were recorded which was also helpful for them. In addition, all the interviewed students mentioned that due to the digital platforms they were able to attend their classes and exams and consequently completed their semesters on time. Moreover, attending classes with the use of digital technology was a new learning experience for them. Simamora (2020) also revealed that on-line learning enhances the teaching of technology skills by instilling technological literacy in academic learning content.

Further, the students were asked how far Google Classroom has been helpful for their learning. In response to the question, 90% (18 of 20) students mentioned that it was a great help for them while teachers were uploading all the teaching materials in the Google Classroom. They added that they could upload the assignments and exam scripts in the Google Classroom. Moreover, both the teachers and students shared important notices and information Google Classroom stream which was found very convenient by the interviewed students. However, 2 students were not comfortable with the platform Google Classroom as they were used to reading the hard copies of the books and materials.



## Challenges and Opportunities

They students shared the challenges they faced while attending the hybrid classes. For example –

- They could not hear the lectures properly very often due to the problems in microphone and sound systems in the classrooms.
- When the teachers moved around the physical classes, students did not get the messages or instructions clearly
- Students could not hold their attention while attending on-line mode and therefore, became anxious and frustrated.

Thus, the learners experienced the feeling of 'exclusion' very often due to the technological glitches and lack of attention of the teachers in on-line mode. Therefore, the learners opined that hybrid classes are only appropriate for the emergency/crises moments, not for the regular life. Some students in the study of Simamora (2020) also complained that on-line mode of teaching – learning caused anxiety and they could not focus while studying. One of the participants in Simamora's study stated that "online lectures make some students become bored and frustrated. Online videos uploaded on YouTube or via video calls, in my opinion, cannot be understood in their entirety because they are done online and do not create focus like face-to-face lectures" (Simamora, 2020, p.95).

Despite having some challenges, the learners also traced some opportunities of hybrid classrooms during the interview sessions. For example -

- Educational institutions can adapt hybrid mode as teaching method that will benefit the students who cannot join the physical classes for sickness or some family crises.
- The on-line mode of hybrid classes save time and students can join the classes from any places

- Distance education is found more flexible in time and in space than campus-based education in the research studies. One of the Indonesian students in the study of Simamora (2020) also stated that "I can save time and energy so that I can do other activities outside of class hours because learning that is actually done in the classroom can now be done from home" (p.93). Therefore, some opportunities of hybrid mode of education have been traced both in the existing literature and in the findings of the current study.

## CONCLUSION

The study traced both the positive and negative aspects of hybrid classrooms. The use of digital technology, stable internet access, lack of sustainable communication, anxiety and marginalization of the learners have been identified as the key challenges of conducting hybrid classes. However, hybrid education has some opportunities too as it enables digital literacy. The findings of the study revealed some positive contributions of the blended mode of education. Existing research studies also traced the significance of hybrid classes. Thus, hybrid course offerings should not be restricted, despite having some potential problems (Harrington, 2010). Therefore, the study recommends utilizing the opportunities of hybrid classrooms by ensuring communication and team skills of the stakeholders (both learners and teachers) along with the proper use of digital platforms. Finally the study suggests more in-depth studies regarding hybrid classrooms for pedagogical development.

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