

Indian EFL Teachers' Reflections on Sudden E-Adoption vis-a-vis COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a mammoth impact on all spheres of human life—social, cultural, mental, and academic—to different degrees. The current study reports the authors' reflection on the Indian EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers' pedagogical challenges and opportunities on a sudden shift towards OTL (online teaching-learning). The qualitative method used here is a content analysis of narrative representations from 50 EFL teachers working in different schools and colleges/universities referring to their experiences on this unforeseen teaching situation and suggestions for improvement. In-depth analysis revealed teachers' concerns over technical problems, lack of resources, learner motivation, and participation in addition to online assessment. Amidst these limitations, the participants tried to cope with this sudden shift with resilience and often with impromptu solutions—planning, access to digital equipment, collaboration, and school policy—for improving OTL.

KEYWORDS

Challenges, COVID-19, EFL, ELT, India, Opportunities, OTL

INTRODUCTION

India is a huge country and is globally known for its ethnic and linguistic diversities. Despite having hundreds of regional languages, English has been evolving as the lingua franca for inter-state or intra-state communications that bring EFL (English as Foreign Language) teaching-learning to the core curriculum in all grades starting from primary to the tertiary levels. But the pandemic outbreak of COVID-19 has made educational principles shift from proximity to distance, from presence to remoteness, from traditional methods to increased digitization through language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, or online learning software (Kundu & Bej, 2021a). This move to online teaching and learning (OTL) has been unprecedented yet unavoidable to most EFL teachers.

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Against this backdrop it would be worth assessing the performances of the Indian EFL teachers during COVID-19, the biggest existential crisis the human race has ever faced. How did they respond to this exigency? How was their preparation? How did they continue their teaching during the prolonged school closure? What challenges did they face? What lessons they have learned therefrom? What should be possible preparations for enhanced resilience to face such calamities in the future? Based on these basic questions, the current study aimed at presenting a new teaching perspective comparing challenges and opportunities regarding OTL during the pandemic, thereby helping the smooth transition to digital pedagogy by analyzing teachers' first-hand narratives and responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New technologies are assimilated into the academic world profusely to aid the process of learning in many fields including English language teaching (ELT). Technology has the proven potential to improve student motivation, engagement, and achievement thereby helping them to grow up to their potential. EFL teaching-learning can be enhanced with technology incorporation capable of giving new dimensions to create language learning, especially during critical situations (Patil, 2020). Microsoft PowerPoint presentations are demonstrated to have a significant role in the improvement of EFL learners' vocabulary (Mahmoudzadeh, 2014). Bruff et al. (2013) said the integration of both face-to-face interaction (offline) and online materials has shown great implications for learners as they found it to be useful.

Bonner & Reinders (2018) found another benefit of new technologies in ELT that is encouraging learners to actively take part in (co)-constructing their learning environment. These studies made their observations during normal situation but how technology has been used by the EFL teachers during the pandemic?

Like other courses of study, EFL teaching-learning had also been technology leaned during pandemic across the globe. Several past studies investigated teachers' and students' experiences on this sudden transition to remote/online teaching-learning in the pandemic. Khatoony & Nezhammehr (2020) found the implementation of technology has provided significant opportunities for EFL teachers to adopt online applications and instruments to enhance learners' proficiency in complicated COVID-19 conditions. Howard et al. (2021) found there were differences in teachers' perceptions about online teaching depending on the resources they had and the institutional support they received. Cutri et al. (2020) investigated readiness for online teaching during the pandemic and found that although some areas needed attention such as assessment, they were willing to transform their teaching to online and enrich their knowledge by sharing with their learners. One of the main factors determining teachers' readiness and competencies was their prior experience and training (Moser et al, 2021).

Mahyoob (2020) explored that the participants were not satisfied with online learning due to technical problems leading to poor performance in language learning. Bataineh et al. (2021) found learners faced technical problems and issues with the design of online activities, leading to dissatisfaction with distance learning. These technical issues are mainly related to poor internet connections (Mayrink et al. 2021), lack of hardware and software (Kaur & Aziz, 2020), and lack of technological equipment (Sayuti et al. 2020), problems of online assessment (Freddi, 2021), lack of social activities (Schmied, 2021), and technical inadequacy leading to problems with internet connection (Mayrink et al., 2021), and these led to problems in practice, which is crucial in interacting with other speakers (Mercan Uzun et al., 2021). All these limitations led to problems in having synchronous classes (Kundu, Bej, & Dey, 2021).

Rajat et al. (2020) found that although there were concerns about communication, assessment, and technological tools, most participants indicated the positive impact of this transition from face-to-face to online mode. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) pointed out the main opportunity provided by OTL was the flexibility provided to both teachers and learners in terms of place and time to follow the online activities provided that stakeholders have the necessary devices and recourses. Ramadani and

Xhaferi (2020) stated that learners' engagement can be achieved in online learning in various ways using different materials and tools, such as slide or online game-like activities. Research also shows that teachers have found new ways to provide extra practice in language skills using social media and other applications such as Messenger or WhatsApp (Fauzi & Angkasawati, 2019).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The previous section revealed the challenges across the globe with few silver linings for improvement as well. COVID-19 destroyed the traditional teaching formats for a time being. Teachers have been forced to introduce, very often provisional solutions to, the existing situation within a very short time, often on the individual level and without systemic support (Kundu & Bej, 2021). The adjustments to the new conditions concern not only the way of teaching but also its content. Almost every country and its academic system got affected by this hard time and the effect had been more acute in developing countries like India since these countries were already at the frills in respect of e-education and needed e-infrastructure – device, skill, and attitude. Now, a probe into e-intrusion in Indian EFL teaching during COVID-19 pandemic will help to answer a lot of questions regarding the improvement of OTL infrastructure at the same time structuring a resilient system to defend against any such future calamities.

A person-in-context approach has been followed for understanding EFL teaching challenges in the pandemic. More specifically, the qualitative study presented here seeks to investigate not only the effects of COVID-19 on EFL teaching from a multicultural perspective but also analyses the individual person-situation factors such as teaching context and available resources affecting the teaching environment. To achieve this objective, the study sought to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What problems did the EFL teachers encounter during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What resources were available for teaching while facing the pandemic?

RQ3: What solutions were implemented to sustain in the new teaching environment?

METHODOLOGY

Sites and Participants

The participants of the study included 50 EFL teachers serving different government run educational institution in India. They represented 10 federal states (5 participant from each state- West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala) with different teaching traditions, prestige, quality, and status of EFL teaching-learning, as well as varying availability of teaching tools. The chosen states represent the whole India since before taking this purposive sampling the whole country was divided into five division- Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Central. Two states from each division were selected as per researchers' will. Out of 50 teachers, 25 were from schools (both secondary or primary) and rest 25 were from higher education arena (working in different colleges and universities). They were 20 female and 30 male participants. To honor ethical standard all participants are kept anonymous and each of them has been identified with a unique code (P1 to P50) where P1 to P25 represent school teachers and P26 to P50 represent college/university teachers.

Instruments and Data Collection

The participating teachers took part in the project initiated by the authors aimed to create a collection of experience-based reflections on the opportunities and challenges of EFL teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The teachers were selected from several social media associations

like Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, etc to finally make a social media group among all the 50 participants nationwide having a common interest. Time-to-time intimations were provided to each participant. Participation in the project was purely voluntary.

Each participant was given a chance to write his views on the challenges and prospects they found in his/her respective institution in EFL teaching within maximum of 2,000 words. The narratives were all written in English and sent to any one of the two authors electronically preferably through Email or WhatsApp who made an in-depth analysis of the views/ narrations to design the findings of the survey on EFL teaching during the pandemic conducted in March-July 2021.

The methodological approach was qualitative and collected opinions intended to offer readers updates on how teachers in different contexts taught English online, indicating the challenges and opportunities faced via a series of reflections on the teachers' own experiences.

Cleland (2017) said qualitative research is very important in education as it addresses the “how” and “why” research questions and enables deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context. It is especially helpful for a researcher as well because here he/she get ample scope of self-reflection (Kundu et al. 2022). It allows a researcher to ask questions that cannot be easily put into numbers to understand human experience. Getting at the everyday realities of some social phenomenon and studying important questions as they have really practiced helps collecting extended knowledge and understanding.

The qualitative data collected in this study provided insights into the teaching situation as affected by the pandemic, both in terms of officially available resources as well as individually developed solutions to the existing problems. The participants were told to put their observations on the following six points:

1. A brief self-introduction mentioning name, state, gender, and institution.
2. Description of the context.
3. Teaching resources available.
4. Challenges and issues faced while teaching English online.
5. Teachers' own solutions to these issues.
6. Opportunities and benefits of teaching online.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis technique was used for data analysis having a dual layer of interpretation particularly developed by Johnson (2008) to understand how research participants construct stories and narratives from their personal experience.

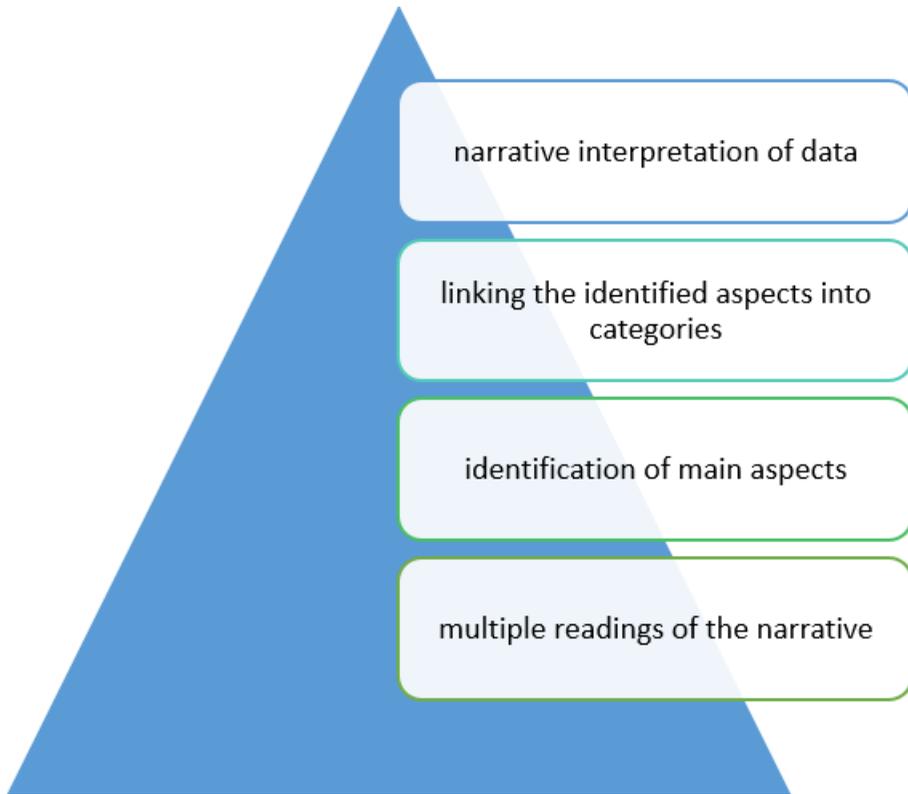
Delve and Limpaecher (2020) define narrative analysis as a genre of analytic frames whereby researchers interpret stories that are told within the context of research and/or are shared in everyday life. Researchers or Scholars who conduct this type of analysis make diverse—yet equally substantial and meaningful—interpretations and conclusions by focusing on different elements (Parcell & Baker, 2017).

Authors coded each response and arranged in three basic categories (resources, challenges, and solutions) responding to the formulated research questions. The stages involved in the data analysis are reported in Figure 1.

RESULTS

In this section, results are presented following each research question.

Figure 1. Stages of data analysis (Source: Authors)



Problems Encountered by EFL Teachers

The first research question focuses on what teaching problems the teacher-narrators encountered during COVID-19 situation and the findings are reported in Table 1.

Student-related issues. The issues were common across India comprising all academic levels. The aspect of the lack of student engagement was mentioned in 42 contributions from the 10 states. Lack of students' motivation has evolved from 37 representations of both school and college/university levels. The online classroom disturbed the interaction between teachers and learners significantly, partially through the inability to conduct individual work, skepticism among students at all levels about participating in online classes, the need to ensure student participation, and switching off cameras. Due to poor infrastructure, internet access-related problems and a lack of digital devices among learners were identified as prominent. The problems were more acute among school students in comparison to college/university students (in respect of several observations). School teachers have mentioned resistance to learning online as evident in 17 representations. Thus, the students' related issues in EFL teaching could be understandable and these were felt by the teachers more or less the same at the pan-Indian level.

Teacher-related pedagogical issues. Analysis of teachers' responses revealed 10 pedagogical issues that hampered EFL teaching including monitoring learners during teaching, dealing with a multi-level class or teaching students of multiple grade levels at a time, progress evaluation, unpreparedness of the teachers for new online pedagogy, timer management, online communication, individual teaching approach, students' interaction, and problems owing to the absence of non-verbal communications.

Table 1. Teaching challenges in pandemic

Teaching problem	States	Context (university/ school)
EFL students related issues	Received responses from	Represented in favor (No. of representations)
Lack of engagement	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (22) and College/ universities (20)
Lack of motivation	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (20) and College/ universities (17)
Initial skepticism and overt resistance to the introduction of remote teaching	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (15)
Resistance to learning online	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (14)
EFL teacher related issues		
Monitoring learners during teaching	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (21) and College/ universities (18)
Dealing with a multi-level class	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (17)
Progress evaluation	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (16)
Unpreparedness to teach in new conditions, lacking knowledge about online teaching	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (21)
Time management	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (20)
Online communication	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (18)
Lack of ability to choose a teaching methodology responding to different students' different learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and mixed)	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (21) and College/ universities (19)
Creating an online learning context where students can interact with each other effectively.	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (24) and College/ universities (20)
Assessment	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (22)
Lack of physical contact, gestures, facial expressions	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (23) and College/ universities (18)
Technical issues		
Lack of access to digital equipment especially in rural areas	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (17) and College/ universities (11)
Poor internet connection	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (19) and College/ universities (16)
Problems with logging in	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (17) and College/ universities (14)
Switching cameras off	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (22) and College/ universities (18)

Participating EFL teachers considered pedagogical issues most challenging because these were directly affecting teaching-learning at all levels.

Not only did the use of digital tools for educational purposes (“I found it difficult to fully integrate computers in teaching some subjects, for example, Grammar”- P3) posed a difficult obstacle, but also the appropriate choice or mixture of pedagogical strategies to facilitate and increase the efficiency of

online EFL teaching, especially in terms of developing speaking skills and respecting different types of learning styles. In teacher statements from Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, and Maharashtra, the aspect of assessment was highlighted. Moreover, a lack of physical contact strongly affected the quality and efficiency of language classes. Among other teaching-related problems there was time management during online classes (slower pace of discussing teaching material).

Technical issues. These issues include first and foremost the lack of digital devices, especially in rural areas, poor internet connectivity, log-in issues, and camera-off issues. All of these were mainly due to a lack of exposure in online operations on the part of students and teachers. (“This was altogether a new phenomenon to us and we didn’t even hear the name of WhatsApp or Google Meet”- P12). The teachers participating in the survey also pointed out technical problems which significantly hindered remote teaching, the most frequent of which were problems with a lack of knowledge of the platform, on the part of both students and teachers, problems with the speed of the internet, the lack of cameras on the part of students or their unwillingness to switch them on during classes. The availability of resources is a topic discussed in more detail in the next section of this article.

Available Resources for Teaching

The second research question was concentrated on the resources available for EFL teachers during the pandemic. For digital teaching-learning, the basic resources are device, skill, and attitude (Kundu & Bej, 2022). The investigation was done following this postulate and the collected data were analyzed in these three categories.

Referring to digital devices (the results presented in Table 2) a variety of resources have been mentioned by the participants. Again, in this case, the dichotomous variables (state, context and working field) have been introduced by analyzing the previous research question.

The majority of participants (from all ten states) used Google Meet, Zoom, Facebook, and WhatsApp for communication and conducting synchronous teaching during the pandemic and this scenario is equally pervasive in both schools and colleges/universities. Among other modes, Messenger and Emails were also used by teachers as means of asynchronous communication in a few states both schools and college/universities.

Besides, in the asynchronous context, the Google Classroom and Moodle platform was also used in few states but its use is not pervasive and limited to the higher education level only. Initially teachers were not proficient in these asynchronous communications but university training helped them get efficient. For communication with students, social media like Facebook and WhatsApp played a big role. Concerning the hardware, almost all narrators struggled with equipment problems that directly affected the learning and teaching process (both for students and teachers):

“While working from home in the lockdown, students and teachers used their Smart phones, PCs, tablets and laptops. Some students’ phones/PCs don’t have cameras and at first, they entered on-line classes without enabling video features.” (P22)

The resource shortage evolved in this study was acutely and omnipresent across the country. All narrators admitted it with a positive note and this shortage was more acute in schools rather than in colleges as evident from the opinions of few school teachers who said:

“My school arranged regular classes during this prolong school closures and we took daily classes following school routine but the most acute problem was students’ attendance in online classes which was always below 15% mark in average.” (P20)

“We want to take classes, our students also want to attend but the problem is of device, that the students often don’t have and missed the classes” (P24)

Table 2. Resources available for digital pedagogy during the pandemic

Resources	State	Context	Special remark
Digital devices	Received responses from	Represented in favor (No. of representations)	
Smartphone	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (15) and College/ universities (24)	"We have bought smartphones but one 1 out of every 10 students have a smartphone to attend classes online (P1)"
Internet	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (11) and College/ universities (24)	"We availed internet connectivity in our smartphones but most of our students didn't get a good connectivity to attend synchronous classes (P7)"
Google Meet	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (16) and College/ universities (23)	"In maximum schools classes have been going on in Google Meet (P5)"
WhatsApp	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (10) and College/ universities (24)	"I feel confident in teaching WhatsApp (P29)"
Zoom	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (09) and College/ universities (18)	"Ya! it was helpful in my teaching (P32)"
Facebook	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (20) and College/ universities (25)	"it's easy to engage students in continuous learning using Facebook(P41)"
Messenger	Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (13) and College/ universities (21)	"We used to utilize it for asynchronous communication with our students" (P13)
E-mail	Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (15) and College/ universities (22)	"This has been very popular during lockdown to contact students" (P22)
Digital book	Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (05) and College/ universities (22)	"An important alternative of books and we used to share e-books or Scanned copies of books with our students" (P33)
Google Classroom	Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (02) and College/ universities (11)	"Our university arranged and trained teachers for Google Classroom operation during teaching (P30)"
Moodle	Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (01) and College/ universities (14)	"It was a challenge for us at the begin but university authority trained us (P41)"
Skill for online teaching			
Communication skill	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (23) and College/ universities (20)	"I can't make clear and concise communication with my students online (P7)"
Technology literacy	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (23) and College/ universities (21)	"I have just learnt using smartphone but I feel problems in using applications and icons available for online teaching purposes (P11)"
Time management	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (22) and College/ universities (13)	"I tried but can't present my teaching within time (P9)"
E-assessment	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (23) and College/ universities (11)	"It is an altogether new system of assessment and we need to habituated with it (P43)"
Attitude for online teaching			
Interest	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (08) and College/ universities (15)	"I didn't find online teaching interesting rather I am waiting for good old of in-class teaching (P22)"
Commitment	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (08) and College/ universities (14)	"I tried to take my classes from a high roof of my neighbor since in my home connectivity was not good (P25)"
Constant Learning	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (05) and College/ universities (12)	"We didn't know the basics of online classes until pandemic so this question does not arise (P29)"
Adaptability	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (02) and College/ universities (08)	"I feel our old face-t-face mode was good and online mode didn't attracted me (P11)"
Creativity	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (02) and College/ universities (10)	"We hardly get time to think about school outside our school hours (P17)"
Patience	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School (03) and College/ universities (14)	"Online classes are good for young aged teachers not like us who are over 50 (P19)"

Only two narrators (one from an urban institution and one from a university) reported not having problems with the lack of devices. The problem of device scarcity among school students is more prevalent in comparison to higher education institutions as evident from this remark of a college teacher:

“I think that my colleagues and our students were rather well-equipped with devices and Instructions needed in digital education.” (P12)

The second major resource, skills for online teaching, revealed a poor picture that jointly points out the lack of digital skills among Indian EFL teachers. In all the four sub-domains considered for this analysis – communication, technology literacy, time management, and e-assessment- teachers were found stumbling with their skills when 43 representations in online communication, 44 technology literacy, 43 time-management, and 44 e-assessment admitted that they have difficulties in the concerned areas. The problem concentration is deeper among school teachers especially those located in rural areas.

Teachers’ attitude has been considered the third major resource for online teaching which further aggravates the situation and implied a cause behind this overall state of denigration. In all six sub-domains, teachers lacked positiveness. They have a lack of interest in online teaching, lack of commitment, learning zeal, adaptability, creativity, and patience, except few stray cases reported in few studies like Kundu & Bej (2021b) where a school teacher is depicted in taking his class from a tall tree in expectancy in of good Internet connectivity since he did not get it from his low roofed residence.

Potential Solutions to Sustain Teaching Environment

Findings on the third research question addresses the impromptu solutions developed by EFL teachers in different states facing unique challenges during the pandemic as reported in Table 3.

Only one suggestion (intense teacher training on implementation of modern technologies in teaching) has a systemic character, apart from that the ideas described are individual suggestions made by teachers who developed them by monitoring the needs of their students and the dramatically altered teaching situation. Most of the solutions presented concentrate on activating the teacher-student relationship, for example, by facilitating contact, increasing motivation, and helping students without access to modern technology. In this respect, using social media (like WeChat, WhatsApp, Messenger, or Facebook) was useful.

Increased student activity and engagement can be achieved by introducing accessible Paddlets (an extremely easy-to-use tool that allows learners to collaborate online by posting text, images, links, documents, videos and voice recordings) or Blending Blackboard.

In terms of evaluation, it is essential to use alternative assessment methods instead of comprehension questions, short answer questions or multiple-choice questions, or the available functions of SoundCloud, Youtube or Netskoli. The essential aspect of teaching online is to increase the approachability of the teacher, and through that also establishing contact with shy and unmotivated students.

Few veteran narrators talked of the holistic necessity of the *“shift from teacher-centred lectures to a flipped classroom methodology”* (P42), which is a type of blended learning approach that reverses the traditional educational arrangement in which *“the teacher is the primary source of information”* (Flipped Learning Network, 2014).

The solutions introduced in different states differed, but for teachers from a few economically stronger states introducing collaborative tasks was one of the remedies for the lack of interaction with students. The solutions refer mainly to the university level, where very often on-the-spot activities were tested in practice, however, *“Needless to say, it becomes urgent to transfer the online static education that is based on handout downloading into the interactive transmission of knowledge.”* (P44).

Table 3. Solutions to EFL teaching challenges

Challenge	Solution	State	Context
EFL student related problems	As follows:	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School and College/ universities
Lack of interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of Google Form and Interviewing via Zoom, which encouraged wider involvement. • Reaction functions of teaching platforms “Also in this case, the functions for indicating various reactions were used. Particularly, those available in Zoom appeared useful, for example, “go faster/go slower.” (P 33) 		
Increasing motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional revision Additional exercises published on the Moodle platform. • Personalized materials. • Expose to language “every week they were required to watch a recommended movie by themselves at home, and then discuss its summary and their ideas about its plot in class”. (P11) • Student’s feedback “When students answered some tasks prepared at home, they were asked to write all new vocabulary items in the chat and provide definitions.” (P 26) 		
Cheating in exams	Webcam and desktop sharing “I made it compulsory for the exam attendees to go into a desktop sharing mode and to make themselves visible via a webcam throughout the exam.” P 14		
Access to materials	Exercise packages prepared by teacher “I prepared self-study English packages and personally distributed them among my students living in areas with poor communications services and those completely cut off from service.” P 1		
EFL teacher related problems	As follows:	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School and College/ universities
Unpreparedness to use new technological tools	Intense teacher training on implementation of modern technologies, online solutions into teaching		
Feedback	Providing constant constructive feedback and reward them verbally during online meetings and even through written comments		
Monitoring	Constant monitoring of students needs		
Teaching methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixture of the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) method and Task-based Language Learning to teach the four skills. • Visualization Mind-mapping Graphic presentations. • Project based learning. • sharing sound files through the teachers’ computers, or sending these files to the students or reading the scripts for the listening activities 		
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing students’ listening and speaking skills using applications such as ‘SoundCloud’, ‘Youtube’, ‘Netskoli. • Using alternative assessment methods rather than comprehension questions, short-answer or multiple-choice questions. 		
Resource problems	As follows:	West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nādu, Kerala	School and College/ universities
Device	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and non-government agencies can work together to enhance the access of device among students (P11). • “if a low range smart phone can be devised for students with one or two Apps for presenting in online classes could help immensely” (P24) • “Parents’ awareness is a major factor here, who have smart devices and don’t allow students for classes” (P20) 		
Poor internet connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early morning hours for teaching. • “We tried to avoid the rush hours and eventually work in the early morning hours when the internet is less used” (P27) • Switching off cameras. • We have also learned that turning off cameras during a video task may help stabilize the internet connection and turning off data on other devices such as phones and tablets.” (P5) classifying students into two groups: those who accessed digital devices (e.g., smartphone, laptop), and those who couldn’t afford.” • Local app for the first group, including technical infrastructures conducting classes both synchronously and asynchronously. 		

In terms of the specificity of teaching EFL in a pandemic teacher, independently of state of origin, mentioned the recreation of traditional teaching materials and making use of digital resources, as well as tailoring the materials to the needs and expectations of students.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to explore the major challenges and opportunities of EFL teaching caused by the COVID-19 outbreak in India. The changes caused by the pandemic in this field were evident and the major concerns evolved on how to link the new situation with the available resources and a certain amount of skepticism or even fear.

In comparison to papers published in recent times, embracing similar topics (e.g., Kundu et al. 2022; Mahyoob, 2020; Bataineh et al., 2020; Howard et al. 2020), this study has a strong national character and aims at depicting exclusively the struggles and solutions developed by Indian EFL teachers. Additionally, the form of collecting data (in form of written narratives) is to encourage teachers to share their opinions on the topic in a more open way than traditional surveys. It offered an alternate avenue for them to showcase their innovations, although anonymously, yet expectations of having a perpetuating effect in national pedagogic practices, evident in their enthusiasm throughout this study.

It's important to mention, most research to date has focused on the learners' perspective, whereas this study looks at the situation from the teacher's perspective. The current study found that facing generally very similar problems, EFL teachers developed very diverse solutions which were mainly their ideas, extempore, tested in practice with their students, and based on the available teaching tools.

The first research question concentrated on the identification of the challenges in EFL teaching. Student-related and technical problems were identified, moreover, teacher-related issues were also mentioned by the participating teachers. The choice of the appropriate EFL teaching methodology (adapted to the current situation) and ensuring student involvement seemed to be the problems mainly occupying EFL teaching in the states where the study was conducted.

Among teaching skills, developing online speaking was the most challenging matter for many teachers which was in line with the findings of the studies conducted by Bishop and Mabry (2016). The monitoring and assessment of student progress corroborates the findings of several other studies (e.g., Kundu & Bej, 2021c; Ramadani & Xhaferi, 2020; Cutri et al., 2021; Freddi, 2021).

Indian EFL teachers pointed out their unpreparedness for teaching in an online environment, therefore, the choice of efficient teaching methods was also difficult. This might be attributed to the resources that teachers had and the support provided to them by their institutions. Moreover, regarding the methodology, skepticism towards learning English using a new medium influenced the learners' involvement has been a similar finding following Bataineh et al. (2020).

The scope for interaction with students during class was limited partially by technical problems, and partially by their resistance and unwillingness to cooperate (switching of cameras). In some narratives, poor internet connections and a lack of hardware were also mentioned (Kundu, 2018; Bishop & Mabry 2016, Kundu & Bej, 2020; Kaur & Aziz, 2020; Mayrink et al. 2021). This indicates the interplay of several factors in EFL teaching online, among which the choice of the appropriate methodology and increasing student participation seem to play an important role, which was also indicated by Sayuti et al (2020).

The second research question addressed the resources and tools available in EFL teaching during the pandemic. The findings admit a wide variety of platforms and tools used, sometimes imposed by an institution (college/universities) and often sometimes chosen by the teachers themselves (generally in schools). However, many participating EFL teachers appreciated the advantages of using ZOOM for teaching online as easy to cope with and offer many useful functions (Ramadani & Xhaferi, 2020). WhatsApp was found more popular among school teachers. Teachers also used social media to improve contact with students (WeChat, Messenger, Facebook) and some of them were also used

to provide students with extra exercise materials which are in line with other research findings (i. e., Kundu & Bej, 2021a; Fauzi & Angkasawati, 2019).

The lack of technical equipment was a nuisance for both teachers and learners, which is consistent with the findings of the studies by Kundu, Bej, & Rice (2020), Kundu (2020), Mercan Uzun et al. (2021), Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), Kundu, Mondal, Mandal, & Bej (2022), and Mayrink et al. (2021). Nevertheless, respondents pointed out potential solutions based on mutual help, borrowing equipment, or support from large companies. As far as the availability and choice of working tools is concerned, the decisions made in this respect were rather of an individual character, based on early experiences.

The last research question concerns the potential solutions to the challenges identified. The answer to the identified problems lies primarily in increasing the approachability of teachers, e.g., by using the available social networks like Facebook, WeChat, and Messenger to facilitate communication with students on the one hand and to intensify the exercises provided to students on the other. Apart from systemic solutions (educational programs, radio broadcasts, and support through the implementation of teaching platforms), teachers can look for tools to support teaching online like digital books or TED talks.

In terms of EFL teaching, the participants mention mixing of available methods by constantly monitoring student needs and interactions, as well as providing constant constructive feedback to the students. From the statements of the participating teachers, it results that creating an appropriate teaching setting and taking care of the students' involvement was far more crucial for the EFL teaching process in the pandemic than sticking to the previously unforeseen teaching plan.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the main challenges and opportunities of EFL teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Certain challenges have been noticed such as technical issues, online assessment, and lack of interaction, in addition to opportunities such as flexibility and using extra multimedia materials in different contexts and at varying levels in this huge country. Instructional technology has played a crucial role during the pandemic, as technological equipment and resources served as the only platform or place for the delivery of educational activities. As such, technological infrastructure has become important for all stakeholders. However, as indicated by the reflections and experiences of teachers, the main question or concern appears to be how to connect the new situation with the (un)available resources considering both teachers' and learners' needs.

LIMITATIONS

There are certain limitations regarding the participants and the data collection instruments. The participants included only 50 teachers from a limited number of states (10 out of total 28 Indian states), and the data were based on the participants' self-reported reflections and experiences. Their responses might have been biased due to several reasons, such as personal experiences and institutional support. Further research, therefore, can include underrepresented states, and learners' voices can also be heard in the data collection process to have a more holistic view of the problem.

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