

**The Effectiveness of Online Teaching Materials: A Case Study of a
Private University in Bangladesh**

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the effectiveness of materials designed and distributed among course instructors to teach an intermediate writing course in an online platform during the pandemic. The study is examined in the context of a private university in Bangladesh, where the students enrolled are bi-lingual learners. The paper reviews literature in fields of technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), activity theory and scaffolding to understand the extent to which the teaching materials are effective. In addition, by analysing semi-structured interview responses from course instructors, the paper highlights numerous strengths, weaknesses and suggestions regarding the materials disbursed among the faculty members. The research findings suggest that the given materials were useful and helped to promote understanding of course content, but improvements can be made to assist student learning. Increased emphasis on learner autonomy can facilitate the learning process for students and motivate them to become independent learners. Based on the findings, the writer includes suggestions that might be beneficial for institutions beyond borders.

Keywords: learner autonomy, TELL, activity theory, scaffolding, online learning

Starting from 2020, the COVID pandemic left a lasting impact on all sectors including education. It is during the pandemic that the use of technology came as a saving grace—educational institutions worldwide started to use online media to continue education. In the initial period, incorporating technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) in classrooms in Bangladesh was still a very new concept, which led to questions regarding effectiveness of online teaching and the type of materials with which students would interact the most. In this study, these questions, along with others, were researched against the context of private university-going students in Bangladesh, focusing on a certain institution. This study is a quantitative research which uses the Activity Theory and Scaffolding approach to comprehend whether the materials used online were effective enough and how learning can be further promoted across online classrooms. The findings demonstrated that the materials circulated among the students proved to be useful; students interacted better with objective units and understood materials better with elaborate in-class discussions. However, a certain level of learner autonomy is needed on the students' part for these classes to be successful. Hence, if online education is to become the norm, Bangladeshi institutions need to start emphasising on autonomous learning scenarios from early study levels. Although the conducted research is within the context of Bangladesh, its scope can be further extended to any L2 writing classroom in the tertiary sector

Literature Review

In the wake of the recent pandemic, the educational sector is one of the numerous affected sectors all around the world. An infectious disease like SARS-CoV-2 transmission means individuals could contract the virus easily through various methods (World Health Organization, 2020). Therefore, academic bodies had to seek viable solutions that would be applicable and sustainable amidst the pandemic. The most effectual strategy has been to adopt technological methods, meaning language teaching also began on a more wide-scale basis through medium of technology.

TELL is at the heart of our understanding of digital classes. As Clark (1918) informs, the use of “talking machines” to teach proper language articulation to pupils had already been a common phenomenon even back in 1918 (p. 116). The past century has seen rapid developments of TELL, and now a rise in technology-infused language lessons can be seen (e.g., Lenkaitis, 2020; Stefanick & VanOverbeke, 2020). During the pandemic, using technology to resume learning became the most rational option. Therefore, the government of Bangladesh announced continuation of education at all levels through remote learning (Sakib, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Jasim, 2020).

As discussed earlier, there are numerous instances of positive impacts of implementing TELL for language learning. There is a gradual progress of using technology more constructively (Patel, 2017). Walker & White (2013) focus on language skills while implementing theory of TELL into practice. Chau & Lee (2014) report positive research findings in regards to vocabulary, grammar as well as writing. Patel (2017) reminds that there are multiple advantages of incorporating TELL in the classroom, including flexibility, motivation as well as learner autonomy. Coverdale-Jones (2000) describes both the advantages and disadvantages in terms of video conferencing. In reference to the former, she mentions that the positives include better communication, easier affordability and personal engagement. At the same time, she considers some of its drawbacks such as detachment of tutor from the tutee, lack of effectiveness due to poor audio or video issues, student difficulty to comprehend class content and instability of the internet connection.

However, previous studies have reported that the Internet can be equally beneficial for all learners (e.g., Everett & Terence, 1994; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; Warschauer, 2000). Online discussions motivate learners to interact and comment, resulting in building rapport without the worry of wrong pronunciations in the target language (Beauvois, 1992; Kivela, 1996). Recent evidence suggests that use of technology has become widespread and normalised (e.g. Van et al., 2021), since the incorporation of technology encourages language practice, provides instructional materials, reshapes teaching methods and initiates social interactions (Zhang & Zou, 2020). It is important for learners to understand how to use these materials that they receive in the course of their learning. The concepts of learner autonomy and scaffolding can assist this process.

One of the early definitions of autonomy exhibits that it is not a singular behaviour that can be described with ease, nor does it remain in a state of continuity (Little, 1990). Benson (2013) establishes his concept of “autonomous language learning.” The term refers to learners having control over their own learning practices, even outside the boundaries of the classroom (p. 840). This concept cannot function on its own unless the student receives adequate and appropriate guidance. Therefore, new learning techniques and independent learning can drive students to learn English as L2 through technological media, especially for those students who may not be motivated enough and require external assistance (Yang & Chen, 2007). This transitions to the Vygotskian concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which can be defined as the activity zone that allows learners to produce better outcomes with assistance which could not have been achieved alone (Pea, 2004). To advance in development, teachers present information that is higher than the learners’ existing level, and appropriate cognitive strategies are induced as per that level of comprehension (Vygotsky, 1978). Afterwards, Cazden (1972) makes a solid connection between the terms of ZPD and scaffolding. Thus, it can be understood that the learning is achieved as an amalgamation of cognitive development and social practices (Walqui, 2006).

Activity theory and Scaffolding

The metaphor of scaffolding is used in connection with several research (e.g., Li & Zhang, 2022; Donato, 1994; Sam, 2012; van de Pol et al., 2010; Walqui, 2006). There is an ongoing research about how scaffolding can work in online spectrums (Din et al., 2021; Hung & Nguyen, 2022). All of them state characteristics of scaffolding at varying lengths. For the paper, the researcher will investigate the three pedagogical stages of scaffolding, mainly because they are closely related to the field of education. These include the following:

- “*Scaffolding 1* *Planned curriculum progression over time (e.g. a series of tasks over time, a project, a classroom ritual)*
- Scaffolding 2* *The procedures used in a particular activity (an instantiation of Scaffolding 1)*

*Scaffolding 3 The collaborative process of interaction
(the process of achieving Scaffolding 3)''
(Walqui, 2006).*

The three steps mentioned above mainly focus on three aspects, which firstly includes focusing on structural support to allow skill enhancement and activity performance. This structural support can be placed under the broad term of contingency, roughly described as customized support for the learners (van de Pol et al., 2010). This support includes helping students to garner interest in the task, and to simplify the work for the convenience of learning. A model version of the work to be performed can be presented to students to further give them a clearer idea of what they are supposed to achieve (Donato, 1994).

Next, the activities discussed beforehand are executed within the classroom. This process can be classified under the umbrella term of fading; at this stage, depending on the progress and competence level of the learner, the instructor gradually removes scaffolding (van de Pol et al., 2010).

The third step prioritises communication and maintains that instantaneous classroom interactions are crucial to learning. Classroom interactions occur at two levels: the primary interactions occur between teacher and student, but at the same time, student-student interactions are prevalent as well. While the teacher provides guidance through lectures and class engagement, students also actively help each other through class discussions or pair/group work. Transfer of responsibility occurs, since at this stage, students participate in discussions to complete the second stage of scaffolding (van de Pol et al., 2010). This, in turn, also assists students on their way of becoming autonomous learners.

It should be remembered that these steps can change in a classroom setting; in the pedagogical arena, the planning and improvisation/innovation of ideas go hand in hand, along with unpredictable and the routine (Walqui, 2006). The classroom is a versatile zone, where variable factors can lead to sudden changes in the schedule. The steps of scaffolding given above shall be used by the researcher to gauge the usefulness of materials used for a writing course.

Apart from Scaffolding, another theory that plays an integral role in the context of technology is Activity Theory (Issroff & Scanlon, 2002). Based on Engeström's three generations of activity theory suggestion, activity theory can be traced from Vygotsky's concept of mediation that is

remembered in history for its technical and psychological tools (Engeström, 1987). His theory limitation was overcome by Leont'ev, and Engeström further elaborates how any individual proceeds towards an activity with a motive in mind (Engeström, 1987). Also, Guo, Bussey & Adachi (2020) posit how useful the Activity theory is in the creation of a pedagogical system.

Engeström's activity theory combines subjects, objects, tools, community, rules and division of labor, leading towards the outcome (Engeström, 1987). The outcome acts as a foundation for a new activity (Blayone, 2019). In this paper, the researcher will reframe the activity theory to place the designed activities: the goal is to understand how the materials fit in within the activity theory mediated through digital technologies.

Figure 1: Activity system representation from Isssroff & Scanlon, 2002.

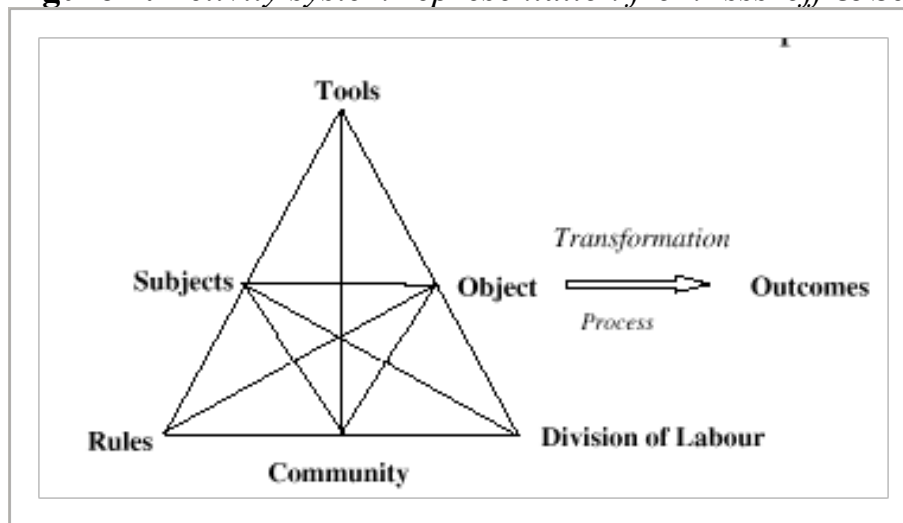


Figure 1 is a representation of the Activity theory. The subject, the object and the community are related to one another in three ways, and their relationship is mutual. The subject and object are connected with one another by tools since the subject uses tools to reach its object. In the meantime, rules govern the relationship between the subject and community. Division of labor mediates the communication between object and community (Engeström, 1987).

Using the literature, the researcher aims to provide an understanding of the effectiveness of online materials used in digital

classes in this paper. The research is based on the following questions:

1. Are online classes effective?
2. Which type of materials enable student engagement during online classes?

Context

It is crucial to ask these questions, now more than ever, since teaching has taken a virtual turn- previously, teaching would take place in the physical setting of a classroom, whereas now, teaching and learning is not confined within the four walls of a classroom. Rather, now the practice takes place in a classroom, albeit in a virtual setting. The researcher, being a faculty member at one of the top private universities in Bangladesh, was directly impacted by the classroom switch. Her responsibilities as one of the course coordinators for a writing course (Intermediate Composition level) meant that duties are two-fold; apart from being one of the primary planners of the Course Outline, she is also helping faculty members to teach the course by providing materials. The coordinators always prepare materials to assist course instructions, abiding by the Course Outline provided at the beginning of the semester, particularly following the Course Objectives with as much precision as possible. This time, the difference is that the coordinators had to prepare online teaching materials for the course in alignment with course objectives. This meant inclusion of accessible online materials, which would also be accepted by faculty members and students alike. The word ‘accessible’ is used not only in terms of copyright, but also to refer to search of materials that students will be able to work with in an online spectrum.

Therefore, it is important to know the background of the students. In Bangladesh, university students usually hail from one of three curriculums of English medium, Bengali medium and Madrasah medium. Amidst all requirements for admission in this university, one requirement dictates the schooling. The university in question admits pupils from the national curriculum and Cambridge/Edexcel curricula. It also accepts students with a US diploma. All mediums receive lessons on Bengali as well as English. Therefore, it is acknowledged that students who receive admission in the university have a standardised level of expertise in both languages. To improve their levels of English, the university provides EAP courses.

EAP, or English for Academic Purposes, is a segment of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Dudley-Evans & Jo St John, 1998). Its focus

on the context of academia sets it apart from ESP (Hamp-Lyons, 2011). Although EAP is taught in various settings, the university being researched follows the US curriculum. As a result, all subjects are taught in the L2. Here, the EAP courses are set out into three level courses: ENG102 (Introduction to Composition), ENG103 (Intermediate Composition) and ENG105 (Advanced Composition).

ENG103, or Intermediate Composition, is the second level academic course which aims to improve essay writing, teach summary writing and prompt critical analysing, targeted in the realm of academia. Within the course, students also learn to spot common grammatical errors they encounter in writing and overcome these hindrances in writing. Since this is a writing-based course, qualitative data collection method has been used for research purposes.

Methodology

This study has adopted a qualitative research approach for many reasons. Firstly, qualitative research work usually targets in-depth understanding (Allen, 2011). In addition, one of the major aims for collecting qualitative data is to generate content for the empirical part of a research (Flick, 2018). Thus, for better comprehension on this topic, it was necessary to collect perspectives from faculty members responsible for teaching the course (Dörnyei, 2011; Ary et al., 2010). Since this is an interpretive research, it helps to understand the participant's perceptions (Ary et al., 2010). Other features of qualitative research include collection of rich material as well as possibilities of further exploration (Dörnyei, 2011). Similarly, the research questions ask for perceptions and suggestions, which will later be interpreted and explored further. Stickler and Hampel add that qualitative studies in CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) can assist to get detailed pictures on numerous language learning scenarios (Stickler & Hampel, 2015). Moreover, being a social-constructivist theory, Activity theory relates to qualitative research by nature, and scholars use a wide range of qualitative data sets to understand why an activity occurs (Roth & Lee, 2007).

Keeping these in mind, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was circulated among 30 faculty members of the institution. This mode of data collection is versatile yet exploratory, thus allowing to collect insightful responses which help to understand the reality of their situations (Kvale, 1996; Punch, 2013; Patton 2015). The questionnaire included a few questions on online classes and materials that they were provided with

by the coordinators at the beginning of the semester to assist during online sessions with students. Online materials that were provided include textbook, practice materials (both subjective and objective), samples for essays and assessments, lecture handouts and online links for practice on a chapter on Transitions. These have been provided to cultivate students' reading and writing skills. The faculty members were requested to provide anonymous comments on these given materials; they had complete liberty to engage in the research as per their will.

Analysis of findings using scaffolding and activity theory

After a hiatus of one month, the interview responses were collected. This break was deliberate: firstly, since this self-selection sampling (Sterba & Foster, 2008; Sharma, 2017) was incorporated, participants could take time to decide whether they wanted to be a part of the survey, Secondly, this break allowed the faculty members to consciously observe how useful the materials have been in their classrooms. Of the study population, 15 subjects completed and returned the questionnaire. The majority of those who responded felt that online classes are effective (10 respondents). Apart from these 10 respondents, three others commented that the effectiveness of online classes vary from one course to next, while the remaining two respondents deemed online classes to be completely ineffective.

Interestingly, there were varied opinions about the type of materials that worked best with students. These varieties have been roughly classified into three categories: Objective, Discussion-based and Unspecified. About 40% of the responses highlight that objective questions work best with students. 'Objective questions' refer to practice exercises and assessment units in the form of multiple-choice questions (MCQs), short questions, short online quizzes and sentence level exercises. One interviewee alluded to the notion of gamification, stating that videos and fun quizzes generate interest on the students' part. The second data set consisted of four respondents, who agreed that discussion-based materials worked with their students. They used Microsoft PowerPoint slides to conduct classes and initiate class discussions, as per the norm in the university. The third set of the data did not specify particulars; while some claimed that students associated better with practice-based material, they did not specify which type. Within this category, others mentioned that students were driven by a variety of content, depending on the chapter being taught in class. One individual

response did not fit under any of the given rubric- as per the interviewee, “students will interact with anything that is tied to their overall grade” (Anonymous faculty member #11, interview questionnaire, 2020).

Although there are differences in opinions about the type of materials, there is a consensus that materials used online are mostly resultant to learning. While five respondents did not find any weakness, certain constraints were noted by a few others. From here onwards, the discussion will refer to the literature to evaluate and decipher the responses via descriptive qualitative analysis, breaking those down to strengths and weaknesses. Although descriptive qualitative research is more common in the medical arena (Kim et. al., 2017; Magilvy & Thomas, 2009), it can also be implemented in the current context as well, since the target is to develop a proper understanding of the instructors’ experiences (Magilvy, 2003). To this end, the researcher has provided a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of online classes, along with suggestions on how to execute successful learning in an online setting.

The responses have been presented in the tables below:

Table 1: *Respondents’ answers about the strengths of online classes*

Strengths	Respondents
Resources can be adapted	3
Can engage inattentive students	2
Encourages independent study and individual work	2
Uses a variety of media	2
Ready-made materials provided by the co-ordinators made the job easier	2
Material shared online can be shared on screen and on platforms like Google Drive	2
Sample quizzes and most exercises were useful	1
All materials were useful	1
More materials mean more practice; thus, students were well-prepared for class the next day	1
Easy to use	1
Eco-friendly	1
Easily accessible	1
Easier to grade quizzes	1
Availability of blank worksheets	1
Less time consuming	1

The table above reports the common advantages of TELL: more versatility in respect of time, materials and even teaching mediums. Additionally, increased communication as well as student motivation is dominant. A recurrent theme here is learner autonomy, especially since the strengths mention that materials can engage inattentive students, thus acting as Scaffolding level One and Two, thereby leading to independent study and individual work, which can be classified under Scaffolding Three. Once the students reach Scaffolding Three, as the literature suggests, they are on their way to becoming autonomous learners.

Table 2: Respondents' answers about the weaknesses of online classes

Weaknesses	Respondents
Easy for students to plagiarize for which no objective questions can be used, thus making grading difficult.	2
Weak students have difficulty understanding all aspects of materials	1
Easy to share materials, therefore individuals from other institutions can have access to them.	1
Materials need to be structured.	1
Eye strain	1
Lengthy	1
Time-consuming	1
No assurance whether students are working properly.	1

The next section of the survey was concerned with the weaknesses of online materials. Plagiarism is a prominent issue, since instructors are concerned that objective questions will lead to an increase in cheating and easy accessibility of materials can result in sharing of materials with parties outside of the institution. Two conflicting results appear regarding time and assessment. Here, three respondents have claimed that online materials are difficult to manage in terms of grading and time maintenance. Since no further details were provided, the researcher makes an informed assumption that subjective grading for quizzes is difficult for the instructors. In addition, since the majority of students face internet connectivity issues and lack adequate knowledge about navigating the internet tools, this affects their performance and engagement in the class. Once again, another occurring theme here is learner autonomy. Two faculty members mention that weak students have difficulty understanding

all aspects of materials and there is no assurance whether students are working properly. These issues stem because students are not independent learners, and as many respondents have already recommended, this skill needs to be developed. This has been elaborated in the next section, where respondents suggested methods through which online learning can be encouraged. Several suggestions were provided regarding promotion of learning on an online platform.

1. Four respondents emphasised on the importance of class discussions, driven by learner autonomy. One comment informed how teachers can

“use the online format to provide them (students) with tools and guidelines to learn but they must also want to learn and be in a mindset and circumstance where learning is possible” (Anonymous faculty member #11, interview questionnaire, 2020)

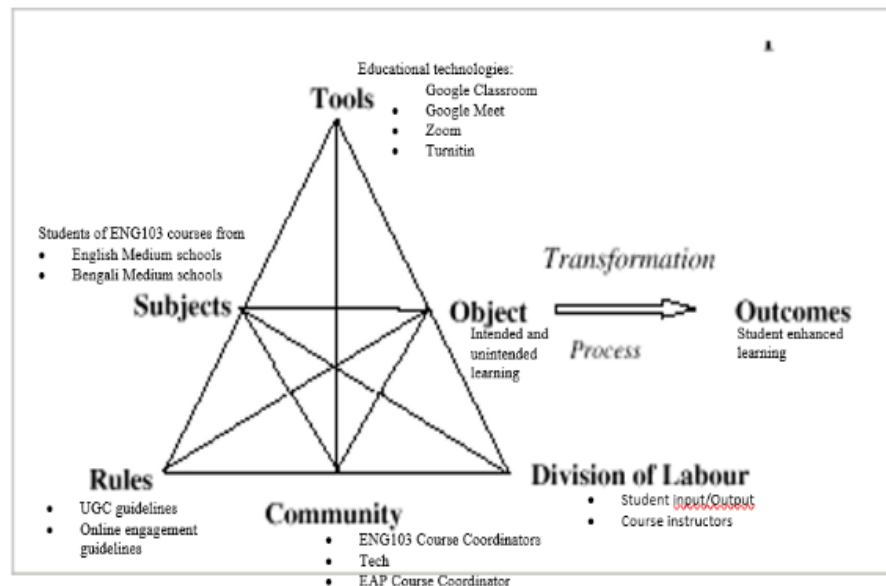
Therefore, the respondent believes that once instructors provide materials and guidance, meaning once teachers assist learning with Scaffolding levels One and Two, it is partially the students' responsibility to execute Scaffolding Three, where they can use student-student interactions to utilise the course content to the maximum. At this level, self-awareness is developed and collaboration with peers is also encouraged, and this, in turn, aids students to become autonomous learners.

2. There were some brief remarks about teacher education and material creation. From the context, it can be understood that many respondents believe that teachers need more specialised training in the field of TELL, especially in terms of teaching strategies. One respondent recommended that adopting student-centred approaches and task-based activities during online classes can foster learning. Secondly, a common view among participants was that materials tailored accordingly can assist learning, although no explicit suggestions were made on this point. Therefore, based on previous responses, it can be assumed that these remarks refer to material development in terms of objective assessment (including short online quizzes) and discussion-based lecture content (including Microsoft PowerPoint slides and short video clips).

Figure 2: Activity theory in the context of the research (adapted from Isssroff & Scanlon, 2002 and Guo, Bussey & Adachi, 2020)

3. Some recommendations were made on the management level, such as division of classes, eradication of online assessment altogether and introduction of competitions within sections. While these solutions can significantly change the learning atmosphere, the decisions for these are taken by higher authorities. Although it is beyond coordinators' authority to materialise these suggestions in any way in terms of material development, it is an important reminder that management structure can have a profound impact in classroom learning as well.

As shown in Figure 2, the nodes of activity theory work together, go through the transformation process and lead to specific outcomes. Subjects, in this case students of the institution, use educational technologies to reach the learning outcomes of the course. This means students of the ENG103 courses are using technological mediums to progress their learnings. This leads to their object (i) intended learnings, such as those mapped out in the course outline, and (ii) unintended learnings, those learnings which are received to execute the intended learning (technical knowledge, online etiquettes and so forth). Meanwhile, rules set out by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh as well as institutional online engagement guidelines dictate how course coordinators, technology support team and the overall EAP Course Coordinator approach and address issues and assessments surrounding the subjects. Lastly, the individual responsibilities of students and course instructors determine the learning outcomes, i.e., the object. This is the part where



scaffolding plays a crucial role since educators provide adequate knowledge and create ZPD for the learners. Therefore, this assistance allows students to learn and develop their skills. This, here, is a continuous process of all levels of scaffolding, and as mentioned earlier, can occur in any order. For example, if a teacher is teaching essay structure, she or he usually informs the students of the generic structure and provides examples. This falls under Scaffolding One. At this level, the teacher delivers knowledge slightly higher than the students' current level, so in this case, the student receives knowledge. Afterwards, teachers provide students with guided practice exercises which can be both objective and subjective. The purpose of this practice is to establish and instantiate Scaffolding One. Afterwards, students can be paired or divided into groups and assigned with topics to expand cognitive understanding and social interaction with peers, thus leading to output. This independent work can be classified under Scaffolding Three, which, once again, helps the student to become independent learners, therefore assisting the outcome to accomplish student enhanced learning.

Therefore, the results in this chapter represent the answers to research questions. Findings indicate that for most part, online learning has been proven to be effective. However, there are comments that its effectiveness varies. Usually, learners interact better with small and objective units. Likewise, engaging discussions prompted through a variety of resources also help to promote in-class learning. While faculty instructors can scaffold learning through plethora of resources and various media, problems still arise since most learners are not digitally sound, thus lack the required level of learner autonomy to comprehend content provided in the online spheres. Nonetheless, the research has certain limitations, based on which recommendations for further study in this topic have been made in the next section.

Recommendations

The findings of this paper are subject to some constraints. These limitations arose because the researcher had time limitations to adhere to while conducting this research. Therefore, considering these issues, some recommendations are made for the future research in this field. Once the limitations are highlighted and suggestions have been made, the next part

will discuss research implications and draw a conclusion about the findings.

Firstly, the number of faculty members who participated in the research is relatively small, for which future research can work on a greater sample size to provide further validation of findings. A high sample size means more experiences and opinions, thus ensuring a deeper insight into the issue of how online materials can be incorporated in TELL to aid students become autonomous learners.

Additionally, since the questionnaire results were collected one month after the implementation of the classroom materials, it is possible that the researcher may not have a clear and concrete picture of the classroom utilisation of materials. To tackle this, a longitudinal study can be implemented to construct an enhanced image on how online materials can help students to become independent learners over an extended period.

Furthermore, the scope of this study is limited to the teachers' perspectives only—it does not research into students' perspectives on effectiveness of online classes. Therefore, further research could concentrate on students' perceptions of classes conducted online and materials used for these classes.

Conclusion

This study analyse the efficacy of the materials designed for digital classes for a Bangladeshi private university consisting of bi-lingual students. The findings in this research suggest that in general, online classes have been effective, but there is room for improvement. This can be done by greater emphasis on development of learner autonomy, which can be achieved by designing lessons and using materials to scaffold student learning and assist them to become independent consumers of knowledge. This research extends the understanding of how online classes can be beneficial for learners. Nonetheless, there are certain limitations, which, if tackled, can contribute further into the field of online learning.

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