



LEARNER ACUMENS OF ONLINE EFL CLASSES AT THE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract:

This study intended to evaluate the English as Foreign Language (EFL) learner responses to online classes during the covid-19 pandemic. It focused on the learner's insights rather than the teachers' views because the purpose is how the large population deals with technology during this pandemic. Though teachers are the real fighters, they are in a vacuum without the students' engagement. Therefore, this study showed EFL learners' readiness of using technology in attending online classes and what barriers they face during assessment and classes. It examined whether students can participate in group discussions, pair work, online assessment, respond to class, build their rapport, and get proper feedback or not. Data were collected randomly using a google form questionnaire having five elementary questions, fifteen Likert-type questions from 92 students of five private universities in Bangladesh. Besides, five questions were finally added to have an overview of multiple response analyses. Some imperative variables of flexibility, reliability, availability, and integrity regarding online classes were brought into light with descriptive analysis. Finally, the data were analysed in a qualitative approach. It shows that learners attending online courses and assessments are diverse regarding the availability of required facilities, and the students are having difficulties participating in online examinations. The result further implicates ensuring an intelligent learning environment in the 'new normal period' with more efficacy.

Keywords: online classes; online assessment; learners' perception; private universities; feedback; troubles

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1. Introduction

The entire world has already suffered from the swift eruption of the covid-19 pandemic. Due to that Pandemic, online education worldwide has received much popularity despite some adverse facets. However, World Economic Forum (2020) stated that there was already significant progress and adoption of technology in education before the covid-19 pandemic. However, university education in Bangladesh has also been highly affected by the unprecedented blow of the pandemic, where all educational institutions faced a sudden shut down in March 2020. The pandemic has already propelled the higher education sectors to the forefront of public attention ([Li & Lalani](#), 2020) in most countries. After being stuck for several weeks with continuous lockdown, to cope with the situation, private universities, with the permission of the University Grant Commission (UGC), started conducting online classes. The paradigm shift has caused ELT teachers and EFL learners to accept distance learning and pedagogy challenges as there was no other way than shifting to online teaching and traditional classes. The sudden adoption of online classes added an extra burden on EFL teachers and learners. Learning the second language is to master linguistic skills and non-linguistic skills like eagerness and motivation (Saqlain & Islam, 2014).

As Bangladesh is a developing country and the people need to work hard for livelihood, responding to online classes and managing technological devices using the internet is challenging for many EFL learners living in the capital and remote areas. Some private university teachers may be equipped with modern technology, but all the students cannot be expected to be fitted simultaneously. Nowadays online platform is the popular way of disseminating education considering the feasibility of that particular context (Karim et al., 2018). For example, Facebook is functioning as a platform for teacher-student interactions that facilitate, encourages, and support English language learning (AbuSa'aleek, 2015) in some cases. But it requires extraordinary measures in education around the world with the protocols of e-learning to mark the swift shift of face-to-face classes to online classes (Murphy, 2020).

Technologies are used by the teachers and students of first-world countries from earlier and have primarily emerged as a recognised professional tool in the last three decades. Incorporating the idea of using modern technologies in the pedagogy help students to know how technology is helpful as a part of an innovative teaching-learning environment (Islam & Bhuiyan, 2020). To ensure a collaborative and interactive learning environment, educators can use a combo of audio-visual text and plenty of tools to reach out to every student by maintaining a human touch in this crisis moment. Thus, incorporating face-to-face lectures with technology gives rise to the theme of the flipped classroom and blended learning, where students can increase the potentiality of learning from anywhere at any time (Dhawan, 2020).

To the language teachers, the uses of mobile phones, computers, projectors, and the internet are not new. Still, the complete practice of computer-based learning or e-learning or distance-learning or online learning is very new to many, regarded as a dynamic, complex, and interdisciplinary enterprise. The technology used in education

has made teaching-learning accessible elsewhere with the tools, techniques, processes, resources that also facilitate, support, and enhance performance, learning, and instruction (Huang, Spector, & Yang, 2019, p. 27). To encourage students' knowledge and monitor their overall progress, online classroom via Zoom, Google Meet, etc., are being used profoundly by teachers and students. Also, to complete the semester or trimester, online assessments are being taken. Meanwhile, students, the real stakeholders of online classes face few challenges for this impromptu imposition of online teaching on them though they require coping with the time. Here lies the rationale of examining student's responses towards online classes in this pandemic.

Evaluating EFL learners' acumens of online classes during the covid-19 crisis and what challenges they have faced are the key objectives of the present study focused on students' evaluation of online classes that match the scholarship of Boyer's teaching (1990). Furthermore, it can help a university take necessary measures to improve the ways for sharing knowledge by integrating online learning with traditional methods.

2. Literature review

To continue remote learning with the collaborative effort, unprecedented dependency on the online network has made researchers and practitioners examine its effectiveness and outcomes. For example, Favale et al. (2020) have experimented with how the internet has played a vital role to successfully cope with challenges while maintaining university operations in Italy, one of the first countries of Europe hit by covid-19. Thus, unparalleled stress on the network was found.

Basilaia & Kvavadze (2020) found online education successful in Georgia to adopt even if they hope to use the system during missing lessons even after the pandemic. However, many studies have identified teacher's perspectives. But the current research is to know about student acumens towards online education. Another reason is that very few studies were found specifically on the EFL learners amid the covid-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh.

However, Allo (2020) has studied the perceptions of Indonesian EFL learners whether during the pandemic online learning is good for them or not. It is found that most of the learners immensely enjoyed lectures online and found them very effective, but they said about internet disruption and the unaffordable state of getting it. In his study, students opined on the complexity of comprehending the materials and instruction of lectures. They suggested using the voice note in classes and lessons preceded by explanation through WhatsApp or Email. About group tasks, he found out that it helps learners who do not even have an internet connection at their home.

Sun & Chen (2016) showed that effective online instruction requires appropriate course contents, motivating interaction between the teacher and pupils, fully prepared and supportive teachers, etc. Muilenburg & Berge (2005) categorised factors that comprise student barriers to online learning: organisational and technical issues, social collaboration, academic and technical skills, learner impetus, support for studies, time-duration, cost, and internet access. The present study aims at dealing with such issues in

the context of Bangladesh. However, Mondol & Mohiuddin (2020) studied the readiness of online classes of private university students and teachers and urged some improvements and improvisations to the online teaching-learning in this current impasse.

It is found that adequate studies have not been carried out in the private university context where teachers and students involve directly. Therefore, all of these urges the researchers what the EFL learners of the private universities embrace in online learning, including attending online classes and assessment.

1.1 Research questions

This study evaluates online EFL classes from the student's perspectives regarding online education and its related issues, particularly from the English department students. The study is based on the following research questions:

- a) How were the EFL students prepared for online classes?
- b) What are the perceptions of the EFL learners regarding online classes and assessments?
- c) What are the challenges to attend online classes and assessments?
- d) What measures can be taken to diminish the problems they are facing?

2. Method

A qualitative approach was used to conduct the current study. The qualitative research emphasises the elucidation of the people's acumens from social viewpoints and supports creating eloquent relations between the researchers and the ordinary people (ISOTOPE, n.d.).

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted among the students of five private universities in the capital city of Bangladesh. Though 100 EFL students were selected as the key participants of the task initially, the researchers finally could receive 92 responses who simultaneously responded to the survey questions. The respondents were from the English departments of five private universities located in Dhaka city of Bangladesh. 76 EFL (English as Foreign Language) undergraduate students and 16 EFL graduate learners participated in the survey. The average age of the participants was 22 for the undergraduate students and 24 for the graduate-level participants. In addition, there were 54 female participants and 38 male participants who responded to the questionnaire. The researchers found 63 participants living in the city areas while conducting the study and 29 in the rural areas. This notable information is significant as the city area offers a more flexible internet connection and living facilities.

2.2 Instruments

A survey questionnaire having 23 different questions was administered to the students of five private universities. Five close-ended questions provided us with vital information

about the students. Fifteen questions were set on a 5-point Likert type statement from 'Always (A)', 'Very Often (VO)', 'Sometimes (S)', 'Rarely (R)', and 'Never (N)'. The Likert scale (1932) is used to measure the qualitative variables here. In this regard, the qualitative approach was proved effective. In addition, five open-ended questions were also set to know the detailed information in the related field with multiple response analyses.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

All the questions were transmitted to the students online via Google Docs to collect data. The data were analysed in a descriptive approach. A questionnaire survey was the most reliable tool as the learner could express their feelings and opinions anonymously in an honest approach. The study was conducted from July-2020 to February-2021. However, data have been analysed using percentages (%) and were shown using tables, figures, and charts. The term SL and 'n' in all the tables are abbreviated for the word 'serial' and number, respectively. However, the variables like learner attendance, affordability, flexibility, feedback, responses, teacher-student interaction, internet connection, home environment, reliability of online assessments were the primary concern for the study.

3. Results

3.1 Preparation for online classes

The questions of table-1 were asked to know whether students were made prepared before the trimester begins or in the interim of the trimester to make the learners fully accept the online mood of learning. Again, the study found a regretful figure.

Table 1: Students' insights about online classes

SL	Questions	Yes	No	Unrequited
		Percentage (%)		
01	Has your institution arranged any training sessions on using technology for online classes?	64.13	29.35	6.52
02	Do you feel the online training was adequately practical for you?	36.96	63.04	1.1
03	Has your institution provided you with any electronic devices?	0	88.04	11.97
04	Has your department provided you with the necessary resources if you don't have any?	70.65	25	4.35
05	Have you got multiple ways to attend the online tests?	56.52	32.61	13.04

Regarding whether affiliated institutions arranged any online training session on using technology for online classes, 64.13% replied 'yes' and 29.35% responded 'no', and 6.53% were unanswered. Thus, though many students informed that their institutions arranged online training programs for online classes, most students considered those ineffective. Furthermore, several learners were found struggling to afford devices and internet packages. When they were asked whether their institution or department provided necessary resources if they do not have any, it was found that no university supported

the students with any electronic devices. However, a good number of students opined that they had the necessary resources from their respective departments. This data shows that for students who cannot afford data or devices, the university should take immediate initiatives to help them.

3.2 Learner perceptions of EFL online classes

In Table-2, the variables were depicted in the percentages of the students' responses about the online classes based on Likert-type statements itemised from numbers 1 to 15 are given.

Table 2: Students' insights about online classes

SL	Items	A (5)	VO (4)	S (3)	R (2)	N (1)
		Percentage (%)				
1	Attending online classes regularly.	45.65	28.26	7.61	14.13	4.35
2	Considering online class affordable.	19.56	19.56	25	30.43	5.43
3	Having fast internet connection at living place.	9.78	17.39	2.17	32.61	38
4	Having device supports (Laptop/ Smart phone).	55.43	19.56	5.43	6.52	3.26
5	Getting effective online materials from teachers.	65.22	6.52	15.22	8.7	4.35
6	Collecting shared study materials flexibly.	7.61	54.35	14.13	18.48	5.43
7	Attending group discussions in online classes.	10.87	21.74	6.52	58.69	2.17
8	Having instant feedback responding to the class.	4.35	66.3	13.04	10.87	5.43
9	Online assessment seems reliable.	8.7	34.8	25	18.48	16.3
10	Online classes and assessments are challenging.	19.56	58.69	13.04	8.7	0
11	Requiring more training for active participation.	8.7	39.13	43.48	6.52	2.17
12	Having a suitable home environment for the online classes.	4.35	41.30	13.04	25	16.3
13	Enjoying online learning and feeling the needs for continuation.	8.7	34.78	19.56	26.09	10.87
14	Developing basic EFL skills online.	4.35	19.56	26.09	39.13	10.87
15	Having enough scopes for the teacher-student interaction during online classes.	2.17	5.43	17.39	52.17	22.83

In response to the first statement whether they can attend online classes regularly or not, the combined results of 'always' and 'very often' showed that 73.91% of participants could participate in online courses regularly, and 7.61% of the participants attend sometimes. In the statement, whether it is affordable to them to participate in online courses during this pandemic, 39.12% opined that it is reasonable to them. On the opposite, 35.86% opined 'rarely' and 'never' because they could not afford to attend online classes, where 25% ticked on 'sometimes' that may depend on their family income. In the third item, whether their internet connection is adequately fast at their home/location, only 9.78% always find fast connection, and 17.39% find it very often, where 5.43% chose 'sometimes'. In a statement, whether they have proper device supports like laptop/Smartphone, majority participants (80.83%) opined that they have such facilities. In another account, about 62% were found to collect shared materials effortlessly using the internet, whereas the aggregated result of 'rarely' and 'never' 23.91% participants replied in the negative. However, the study indorsed that the students who are facing

trouble collecting class lectures and materials in online classes should be given more attention. It ensured whether they are getting class materials duly. Around 72% of participants found the teacher-shared materials compelling always or very often.

Regarding group discussion during the online classes, very few opined agreeably, but most participants found less or no scopes for group discussion in the online classroom. The investigation reached a point that the students are not getting the opportunity for group discussion due to technical issues. On the other hand, around 71% of participants opined that they always get instant feedback or often respond to their teachers in the online class. In another item, it is to be noted that less than half of the participants assumed that online assessment is reliable, whereas others could not find this view appropriate. More than 78% of participants considered the online assessment challenging to participate in in a similar item. However, Hartshorn & McMurry (2020) also showed that the paradigm shift to online was more challenging for students than teachers.

47.83% considered that online training and learning are required for more active participation in the class, but some opposed it differently. It matches the introductory statement in item-2, table-1, where most participants found the received training was not adequately practical. In response to the statement of whether their home environment is suitable for online learning or not, only 4.35% of participants marked 'always' and 41.30% on 'very often' whereas 13.04% of participants indicated 'sometimes'. In this response, the aggregated result of rarely and never was 41.3% notably. It was understandable from the amassed result of 'always' and 'very often' that more than 43% of the participants find distance learning quite enjoyable. However, 19.56% found it enjoyable sometimes and are thinking about its continuance, whereas 26.09% rarely see it, and 10.87% did not consider online class enjoyable.

Moreover, only a handful of the participants opined that they could build language skills through online classes and 24 participants considered that sometimes online classes could improve their EFL skills. However, 50% chose 'rarely' or 'never' that indicated that language skills could not be developed through online classes. In the last statement of whether the participants get enough scopes for teacher-student interactions during online classes, more than half of the participants feel limited scopes for teacher-student interactions. Similarly, Yao et al. (2020) also suggested making online teaching more conducive by more teacher-student interaction.

3.3 Multiple response analyses

The researchers tried to find out more information about learners' discernments with multiple response analyses from a different set of questionnaires. Therefore, the responses are analysed in this segment. In figure 1, the experience of internet connection during online classes is shown. Only 22.83 % found it fast. On the contrary, 36.96% of participants experienced it slowly, and 34.78% (32) found it interrupted, whereas 2.17% opine that they found no connection during online classes. Notably, only 3.26% of participants could use a high-speed internet connection.

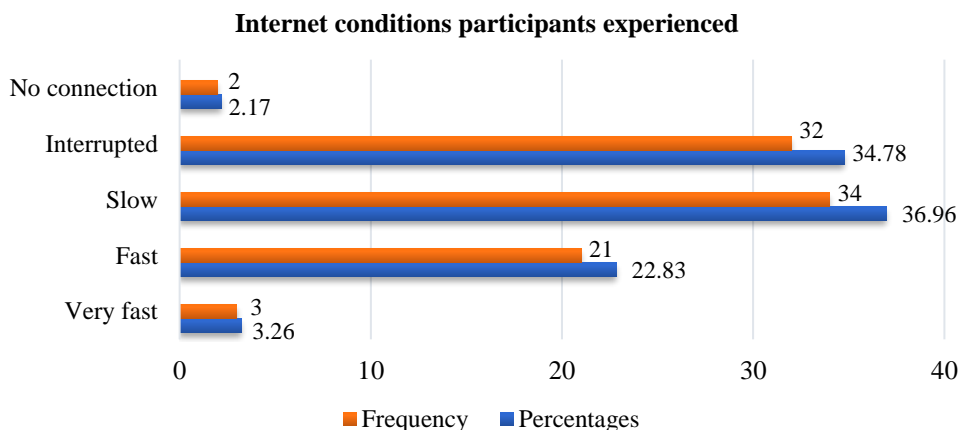


Figure 1: Experienced internet connection of the participants

The below Table 3 showed the devices that participants frequently use. In query to the availability of devices, 42.4% opined that they use laptop/desktop, 52.17% use smartphones/tablets, 3.26% use other devices or lent devices, and 2.17% have no devices. Notably, many students having laptops/desktops and smartphones/tablets may be common realizably because of their socio-economic status. However, still, some students do not have any device to attend online classes.

Table 3: Devices used by the participants to attend online classes

SL	Devices used by the participants	Percentage	Frequency
1	Laptop/Desktop	42.4	39
2	Smartphone/Tablets	52.17	48
3	Other/Lent devices	3.26	3
4	No devices	2.17	2

Below, Table 4 shows the responses of two interrelated questions in percentages and frequencies (n) of the participants' responses about using online applications to attend online classes and their insights into considering them effective in the Bangladesh context.

Table 4: Apps used and considered adequate by the participants to attend online classes

SL	Modes used by the participants	Percentages	(n)	Apps considered effective by the participants	Percentages	(n)
1	Zoom	92.4	85	Zoom	75	69
3	Google Meet	77.17	70	Google Meet	63.04	58
3	Microsoft Team	10.87	10	Microsoft Team	2.17	2
4	Facebook Live	31.52	29	Facebook Live	13.04	12
5	YouTube	33.7	31	YouTube	26.1	24
6	WhatsApp	20.65	19	WhatsApp	4.35	4

In further inquiry related to the preferred assessment modes, 80.43% of participants voted for the written assignments on google classroom, 5.43% supported presentations, 3.26% agreed for the online viva, 2.17% found multiple-choice question suitable. In

contrast, only 28.26% supported quizzes on Google Docs. However, nobody decided to test over the phone.

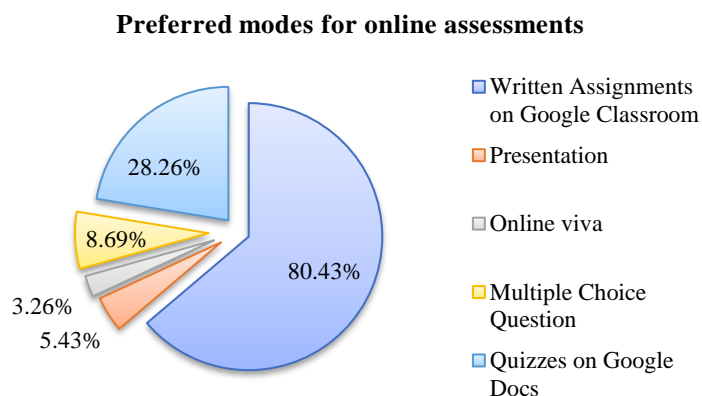


Figure 2: Preferred modes of the participants for online assessments

4. Discussion and recommendations

After collecting and analysing data, this paper provides varied insights into the EFL learners' online classes during the pandemic. First, it is found that students from private universities attended online classes and assessments through teaching-learning tools like Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Facebook, etc., where the majority find Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom as practical tools. In a similar study, Radha et al. (2020) found that around 38.29% of students join classes through Zoom, nearly 25% of students access learning materials through Google Classroom, and 23.43% learn through YouTube.

This study also manifests that the learners using smartphones and laptops are foremost for online classes and adapt to the crisis by actively engaging themselves in e-learning. Al-Shamsi et al. (2020) showed how mobile learning improves learner's skills by using it everywhere. Again, it shows positive steps taken by the institutions to train the learners on using technology for online classes and suggests training others immediately. Furthermore, it shows that two-thirds of the total participants find online classes affordable, making them affordable to the rest. It further reveals positive results that the majority has required logistic supports though some opposed it who should be brought under special consideration. This study exposes that concerned departments provide necessary logistic support to 70.65%, but the rest are still deprived. The university should provide them with the required resources. Besides, 43.48 % from the study opined that the students sometimes need more training sessions (8.7%) and (39.13%) often to participate effectively in the online classes.

About the internet, the majority shows negative feedback regarding connection and shows dissatisfaction because of its slowness and frequent disruption. Radha et al. (2020) also showed that nearly 19.34% of them considered it very challenging to join the classes due to bad internet connection, particularly the video lectures. Allo (2020)

advocated that the internet disrupts online classes and suggested group work to make up for the lost studies due to internet interruption.

To diminish the problems faced mainly by the students is internet disruption and high cost of internet which can be facilitated by the mobile operator companies and the government steps. Mondol & Mohiuddin (2020) also suggested the importance of offering cost-effective data packages to the students staying in rural areas. Moreover, as students cannot connect to online classes on time due to internet interruption, keeping video recordings of the online class lectures might help them to watch those later multiple times.

The study implies that students finding online materials ineffective should be brought to the usefulness of online learning by ensuring more student-oriented classes. This study also reveals positive responses of the EFL learners regarding participation in the online class and getting feedback from teachers in the virtual classes. Still, a few find no feedback that matches with Mishra et al. (2020), where it was shown that immediate feedback is not always possible during online classes. So, the researchers suggest making online classes interactive, practical, and culturally relevant to mini-lessons pedagogy so that every student gets interested in interacting with each other. Moreover, positive and instant feedback can be provided to the students to spontaneously encourage them to participate in teaching-learning sessions. Besser, Lotem & Zeigler (2020) showed a higher level of psychological stress on university teachers during the transiting to online synchronous teaching, which hurts their voice. Their ultimate goal was to illustrate the impact that falls on students and university professors. For this reason, it may not be possible to get feedback immediately always. However, in social networks and online environments, students can interact with each other, enhancing their learning and participation (Smith & Hardaker, 2000).

The study showed that 43.5% of EFL learners find online assessment reliable and valid though 25% ticked on sometimes, 34.78% ticked rarely and never together. Adanır et al. (2020) showed some Turkish and Kyrgyz learners perceived online exams as less reliable. Overall discussion implicates that many developing countries are facing similar snags. Though some developed countries have successfully implemented online assessment, learners from developing countries embrace difficulties because of limited access to ICT, insufficient knowledge of computer operating, lack of experience in online examinations (Adanır et al., 2020). Online tests should be taken on the student's convenient way to participate. Time extension for answering with appropriate assessment techniques may be a good option. The extra session can be arranged to allow EFL learners to emphasise their English language skills equally. According to Islam et al. (2020), adopting a "universal pass" for the current semester can thwart failure and get relief. It also investigates that the majority find it challenging to participate in online assessment. Though some developed countries have successfully implemented online assessment, learners from developing countries embrace difficulties because of limited access to ICT, insufficient knowledge of computer operating, lack of experience in online examinations (Adanır et al., 2020).

Regarding the findings from learner's perception of online classes, though it manifests that the learners find it positive from the different sides amid covid-19, a major proportionate do not enjoy online classes. However, a well-constructed careful observation and planning can minimise the difficulties to a certain extent. Besides, teachers should be lenient towards students' unavoidable consequences like underprivileged home environment, poor connection, and having no or limited devices. Moreover, the class materials can be uploaded on a shared platform like Google classroom to get those. Also, class lectures can be exciting and effective by making them more participatory and innovative by adopting new strategies.

The finding revealed that as the complete dependency on online education is new in Bangladesh, students' home environment does not suit this. To get an uninterrupted home environment, students require a noise-free place where family members cannot intervene in the interim of online classes and assessments. Furthermore, Radha et al. (2020) found that the students prefer classroom learning to e-learning, implicating the home environment's unsuitability for online education.

However, this study shows that the majority cannot improve their English language skills at a harmonious pace. In contrast, others view themselves as benefitted in skill improvement from online classes. The result corroborated the findings of Hartshorn & McMurry (2020), where it was found that though students can make progress in writing, they remarkably made less progress in speaking. In their research, students have also commented on their lack of grammar, speaking and listening skills during the online classes. The study's finding is also matched with Mishra et al. (2020), whose participants found themselves lagging, which urged them to develop soft skills of the language. In this uncertainty, there are ample opportunities for learners to expand their knowledge through virtual meeting platforms, independent home study Chatziralli et al. (2021). Furthermore, the government should take some initiatives like providing subsidies with low-cost internet packages without disruption and offer stipends to needy students for online classes.

However, participants' perceptions remarked that the development of EFL skills is not getting proper attention during the online classes. The teachers should render appropriate directions, audio-visual materials and monitor the students' language skills during the class. In addition, he should act as a teacher only and as a mentor-teacher for effective/alternative teaching methods to affect student success (Islam, 2020). Shahzad et al. (2020) suggested ensuring accessibility to the 24/7 portal of e-learning with qualitative and errorless information, the robustness of the server, updated and enriched knowledge with ordered data, user-friendly portal, and time to time feedback from the users. Thus, the resilience and adequacy of the e-learning portal can be increased.

5. Conclusion

Based on the very beginning responses to covid-19 in Bangladesh, private universities have adopted few measures to run their academic activities online. This study depicted the panorama of students' mixed reactions to online classes and how they adapt to this

paradigm shift. Though complete dependency on online is very new to the students of Bangladesh, the EFL learners of the private university are attending online classes and assessments to adapt to the ongoing crisis. In response, they have expressed worry for the minimal scope of practising communication skills of language and slow internet connection; above all, they are trying to cope with the pandemic. On the other hand, students have shown a positive attitude towards the availability of course materials. However, the majority still do not enjoy online classes compared to traditional face-to-face classes, which has revealed their mixed attitudes or indicates a blended learning environment. However, there was no alternative to shifting online teaching from the traditional model that was also positively adopted by the university. Student's views were examined towards online learning keeping social distances when students already started to battle with technological devices to join the online classes. Hopefully, this will help policymakers, educators, and researchers take more student-oriented research on online education. It suggests taking practical online classes so that students can learn in a more flexible environment. Even if this pandemic continues or a more unprecedented situation arises, students and teachers can adapt to online learning more successfully. As this study has been conducted on a crisis moment when maintaining social distance is highly required to restrain the eruption of covid-19, the researchers collected data online using a questionnaire in Google Docs for the student-participants. Still, the researchers hope that future researchers would research more from students' and teachers' perspectives to create blended learning and the flipped classroom in Bangladesh. Besides, practical, and innovative teaching strategies should also be sought for better output of online education.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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