

Teaching English in Higher Education during the Pandemic in India: Challenges, Innovations, and Future Directions

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented transformation in English language teaching across Indian higher education institutions, forcing a sudden and largely unprepared transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to online and blended learning modalities. This paper examines the challenges, innovations, and implications of English teaching during the pandemic, drawing on empirical studies conducted between 2020 and 2022. The analysis reveals that English teachers faced significant obstacles including the digital divide, inadequate institutional support, difficulties in online assessment, and challenges in maintaining student engagement. Simultaneously, the pandemic stimulated pedagogical innovations in formative assessment practices, digital literacy integration, and the development of blended learning frameworks. This paper argues that the pandemic experience has fundamentally reshaped English language pedagogy in India, with lasting implications for post-pandemic education. The findings highlight the importance of addressing digital infrastructure gaps, investing in teacher training, and developing contextually appropriate blended learning models that balance the benefits of online and face-to-face instruction.

Keywords: English language teaching, higher education, COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, blended learning, digital divide, formative assessment, India

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020, triggered an unprecedented disruption to education systems worldwide. In India, where 94% of the student population was affected by school and college closures, the transition to online learning was sudden, mandatory, and largely unprepared. English language teaching (ELT), a cornerstone of Indian higher education, faced particular challenges given its emphasis on interactive, practice-oriented pedagogy and the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners. The pandemic context was especially challenging for low and lower-middle income countries like India, where a United Nations report indicated that approximately 99% of students were impacted by educational disruptions. However, as the same report noted, this grave threat also “stimulated innovation” in education (United Nations, 2020, p. 2). The rapid shift to digital

platforms forced educators to reimagine pedagogical approaches, assessment strategies, and student engagement methods in ways that would have otherwise taken years to evolve.

This paper examines the teaching of English in Indian higher education during the pandemic, addressing three central questions: What challenges did English teachers and students face during the transition to online instruction? What innovative practices emerged in response to these challenges? What are the implications of this experience for post-pandemic English language pedagogy in India? Drawing on recent empirical research, case studies, and theoretical frameworks, this analysis contributes to the growing body of literature on pandemic pedagogy and its lasting effects on language education.

Understanding Online Language Teaching

The rapid transition to online English teaching during the pandemic can be understood through several theoretical lenses. Online Formative Assessment (OFA) theory, as elaborated by Gikandi et al. (2011), emphasizes the importance of authenticity, feedback, learner scaffolding, and proper utilization of evidence in digital assessment environments. McLaughlin and Yan (2017) identify practical methods for OFA including multiple-choice tests, one-minute papers, e-portfolios, and Web 2.0 tools—all of which became essential resources for pandemic-era English teachers.

Blended Learning (BL) theory, articulated by Garrison and Kanuka (2004), conceptualizes BL as a pedagogical approach combining online and traditional face-to-face learning opportunities. Key features include learner-centric instruction, enhanced interaction across multiple dimensions (teacher-learner, learner-learner, learner-content), and continuous collection of assessment data to improve courses (Watson, 2008). While blended learning had been established in developed nations, its implementation in developing countries like India faced significant challenges related to technology accessibility and digital literacy.

Authentic Learning theory, as defined by Shaffer and Resnick (2009), encompasses four aspects: personal meaning for learners, connection to real-world contexts, disciplinary thinking modes, and assessment that reflects the learning process. These principles guided the design of effective online English courses during the pandemic, particularly in first-year writing programs where authentic learning experiences could compensate for the lack of physical classroom interaction.

The Digital Divide: Infrastructure and Access Challenges

Perhaps the most significant challenge facing English teaching during the pandemic was the digital divide—the gap between those with access to digital technologies and those without. An Oxford University Press study involving 1,557 teachers from India and 91 other countries found that 68% identified poor digital access as the biggest barrier to digital learning. Furthermore, 56% reported that teachers and learners lacked the skills needed to make digital learning successful.

The situation was particularly acute in India's government schools and rural areas. According to data from Pratham Education Foundation, only 29% of government schools have functional computer facilities, and less than 12% have internet access. Smartphones, when available, are often shared household items with limited data connectivity. For English language teaching specifically, the digital divide had profound implications. Students without reliable internet access or suitable devices could not participate in synchronous online classes, access digital learning materials, or submit assignments through learning management systems. The problem was compounded by gender disparities, with girls often having less access to smartphones than boys. Teachers, too, faced challenges; many lacked training in digital pedagogy and had to develop new skills under pressure while managing their own pandemic-related stressors.

Kundu and Betal's (2022) study of 50 Indian EFL teachers revealed "teachers' concerns over technical problems, lack of resources, learner motivation, and participation in addition to online assessment". Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, developing "impromptu solutions—planning, access to digital equipment, collaboration, and school policy—for improving OTL". This adaptability became a defining characteristic of pandemic pedagogy.

Innovations in Online Formative Assessment and Feedback

One area where the pandemic stimulated significant innovation was in formative assessment and feedback practices. A multiple-case study by researchers examining ESL teachers in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal found that teachers actively engaged students in a variety of online formative assessment practices, though many areas remained for improvement. The study revealed that feedback practices, which involved integration of digital tools, were "regular and student-friendly".

Digital platforms enabled new forms of assessment and feedback that were not possible in traditional classrooms. Google Docs emerged as a particularly valuable tool, offering features such as version history, which displays chronological changes to documents asynchronously, and real-time cursor functionality showing user identities and actions.

Teachers used these features to provide individualized feedback, track student progress, and facilitate peer review activities. The “instant cursor” function allowed for synchronous editing and commenting, creating a collaborative writing environment that approximated the interactivity of face-to-face workshops.

WhatsApp and other messaging platforms became essential tools for maintaining communication and providing timely feedback. Soria et al. (2020) found these platforms to be effective tools for online formative feedback. Teachers and learners expressed satisfaction with timely and instantaneous feedback (Khan & Khan, 2019), which could motivate learners and help them self-regulate (Alharbi, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2019). The variety of digital tools available made feedback more versatile and accessible. Teachers employed multimodal feedback (Cunningham, 2019), combining written comments with audio recordings, video explanations, and annotated screenshots. This multimodal approach was particularly valuable for language teaching, where pronunciation, intonation, and other oral dimensions of English could be addressed through audio and video feedback.

However, challenges remained. As García-Peñalvo et al. (2021) emphasized, online formative assessment requires proper utilization of assessment information to be effective. The multiple-case study revealed that while teachers actively engaged students in formative assessment, “they did not use the obtained information from assessments properly and there remained many areas of improvement”. This finding highlights the need for ongoing professional development in assessment literacy.

Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Adaptations

The pandemic required fundamental rethinking of English curriculum design. At the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IITGN), the first-year writing program underwent significant adaptation while maintaining core pedagogical principles. Authentic learning in the online environment meant creating activities that mirrored real-world writing situations. Teachers shared sources through hyperlinks and QR codes that students could access on mobile phones, a practice that continued even after returning to offline instruction. The use of digital tools enabled students to engage with authentic materials—news articles, academic papers, digital media—in ways that developed digital literacy alongside English proficiency.

Socialization emerged as a critical concern in online English teaching. The IITGN curriculum incorporated components to promote academic and social integration, connectedness to the institution and peers, and social and cultural awareness. Activities included intra-section interactions, inter-section mixers, and practical instruction in academic conventions such as email writing, citation styles, and persuasive communication. These

elements were designed to compensate for the lack of physical interactions that normally facilitate socialization in first-year classrooms. Frequent feedback became both more challenging and more essential in the online environment. The IITGN program utilized Google Classroom and G-Suite for learning management, enabling continuous feedback loops between instructors and students. The digital platform allowed for more frequent, targeted feedback than would be possible in a traditional classroom setting, though it also created new demands on instructor time and energy.

The effective online English teaching requires intentional design that leverages digital tools while maintaining pedagogical principles. As Kim notes, “despite the drastic difference between offline and online environments, we found some underlying principles have continued with new faces”. This continuity suggests that effective pedagogy is not tied to a particular mode of delivery but can be adapted across modalities through thoughtful design.

Student Perceptions and Experiences

Understanding student experiences of online English learning is essential for evaluating pandemic pedagogy and planning for the future. Research from IIT Gandhinagar surveyed students across four learning conditions: online only, mostly online, mostly offline, and offline only. The results indicated that “the offline mode was overall more satisfactory for writing practice and learning, while some functions in the online mode provided meaningful support for an interactive writing experience”. This finding reflects a nuanced reality: while students generally preferred face-to-face instruction for writing practice—perhaps because of the immediate feedback and collaborative environment—they also valued certain online tools and capabilities. The interactive features of Google Docs, the accessibility of digital resources, and the flexibility of asynchronous learning all contributed positively to the learning experience.

However, these results must be interpreted carefully. The study was conducted in post-vaccine classrooms, when students had experienced both online and offline learning and could make comparative judgments. The finding that online and blended learning were more strongly associated with satisfaction may reflect students' appreciation for the flexibility, accessibility, and self-paced learning opportunities that digital formats provide. It may also reflect the fact that traditional face-to-face instruction, as experienced before the pandemic, was not optimized for student engagement.

The Oxford University Press study found that 60% of teachers reported engaging students in online lessons as their biggest challenge during the pandemic. This challenge was particularly acute in English language teaching, where active participation is essential for skill development. Teachers employed various strategies to address this, including breakout rooms

for small-group discussion, interactive polls, and gamified activities. Yet engagement remained a persistent concern throughout the pandemic period.

The Emergence of Blended Learning Frameworks

As the pandemic progressed and vaccination became widespread, educational institutions began exploring blended learning as a sustainable model for the post-pandemic era. The framework is built on several key principles. First, 'learner-centric instruction' ensures that learning contents are designed according to students' individual preferences and needs. Second, 'enhanced interaction' is fostered across multiple dimensions: teacher-learner, learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-other stakeholders. Third, 'continuous assessment' provides data for ongoing course improvement.

Blended learning offers particular advantages for English language teaching. Online components can provide self-paced grammar and vocabulary exercises, access to authentic language materials, and opportunities for asynchronous writing practice. Face-to-face components can focus on interactive activities such as discussions, presentations, and collaborative writing workshops. The combination allows for a more flexible, personalized learning experience than either modality alone.

However, implementing blended learning in India requires addressing persistent challenges. The Oxford Group (2013) reported that 16% of learners have negative attitudes towards blended learning, and 26% believe courses will not be completed. These attitudes may reflect prior negative experiences with poorly designed digital learning.

The National Education Policy 2020, which emphasized multilingualism and inclusivity in higher education, provides a supportive framework for blended learning. Institutions like IIT Jodhpur have developed structured approaches to technical education in Indian languages. While focused on technical education, these initiatives demonstrate the potential for leveraging digital tools to make English-medium education more accessible to students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Challenges and Future Directions

The pandemic experience has revealed both the possibilities and limitations of online English teaching in India. Several key challenges require attention as institutions plan for the future. Infrastructure and access remain fundamental concerns. The digital divide—in terms of device availability, internet connectivity, and digital literacy—continues to marginalize students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Addressing this divide requires investment in infrastructure, provision of devices and data connectivity, and development of low-tech alternatives for areas with limited connectivity.

Teacher training is equally critical. Many English teachers were thrust into online teaching without adequate preparation. Moser et al. (2021) found that teachers' readiness and competencies were determined largely by their prior experience and training. Sustainable improvement requires ongoing professional development in digital pedagogy, assessment literacy, and blended learning design. Assessment practice need continued refinement. While online formative assessment tools offer new capabilities, teachers need support in using assessment information effectively to guide instruction. The development of assessment literacy should be a priority for both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Student engagement remains a persistent challenge in online learning environments. Teachers need strategies for maintaining engagement, building community, and supporting students' social and emotional needs in digital spaces. The IITGN experience suggests that intentional design for socialization—including opportunities for peer interaction, community building, and authentic communication—can help address this challenge.

Looking forward, the pandemic experience suggests that the future of English teaching in Indian higher education will be hybrid rather than purely online or face-to-face. Blended learning offers the potential to combine the best of both modalities: the flexibility and accessibility of digital learning with the interaction and immediacy of face-to-face instruction. However, realizing this potential requires intentional design, adequate resources, and ongoing support for teachers and students.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed English language teaching in Indian higher education. The sudden transition to online instruction revealed deep-seated challenges, including the digital divide, inadequate teacher preparation, and difficulties in assessment and engagement. Yet it also stimulated innovation, prompting teachers to develop new approaches to formative assessment, feedback, and curriculum design that continue to shape pedagogy in the post-pandemic era.

The research reviewed in this paper demonstrates that effective online English teaching is possible when grounded in sound pedagogical principles. The IITGN first-year writing program, guided by principles of authentic learning, socialization, and frequent feedback, successfully adapted to online and blended formats while maintaining educational quality. Studies of formative assessment practices reveal that digital tools can enhance feedback quality and timeliness, though teachers need support in using assessment information effectively.

The emergence of blended learning frameworks offers a promising direction for the future. By combining the strengths of face-to-face and online instruction, blended learning can provide flexible, personalized, and effective English language education. However, realizing this potential requires addressing persistent challenges of infrastructure, teacher training, assessment literacy, and student engagement.

The pandemic experience has shown that English teaching in India can adapt to crisis conditions, but lasting improvement requires sustained investment and thoughtful planning. As schools and universities continue to integrate digital tools into their pedagogy, the lessons learned during the pandemic—about what works, what doesn't, and what students and teachers need—should guide the development of more equitable, effective, and resilient approaches to English language education.

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