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DIGITALIZATION IN HUMANITIES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO POST-COVID 19 TEACHING: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized the educational practices globally, which brought forth a trend toward digitalization, especially in humanities disciplines. Although online learning provided a crucial lifeline during the pandemic, its aftermath continues to present significant challenges for both students and educators in the post-pandemic landscape. The present study investigates the impact of digitalization on humanities teaching, with a particular focus on English Language Teaching, examining the hurdles encountered during the transition back to in-person education. This study adopted a mixed-method approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative data. A structured questionnaire was administered to 60 undergraduate students from the 2nd, 4th, and 6th semesters and 20 experienced teachers. The study draws attention towards the issues such as reduced student engagement, diminished academic performance, and the erosion of essential skills. The research explores the measures implemented by educators to overcome these challenges and reestablish effective learning environments. It emphasizes that, while digital tools hold considerable value, they should complement rather than replace traditional teaching methods. A sustainable model for humanities education requires a balanced integration of digital innovations with conventional practices to meet the distinct demands of the discipline.

Keywords: Digitalization, Covid-19, Pandemic, Humanities

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented disruptions across all sectors of society globally, including higher education. In response, UNESCO (2020) recommended the use of distance learning and remote educational platforms to mitigate the

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impact of the pandemic on educational programs. Digital education platforms became the lifeline for both educators and students ensuring educational continuity. The lockdown impacted the whole education system globally, necessitating a rapid shift towards digital learning modalities. The structure of education system such as learning methodologies, teaching techniques and assessment practices transitioned to online mode, forced institutions to adapt to online learning models. Digitalization, which previously supported traditional education, became the primary mode of instruction. The integration of digital tools and platforms enabled the delivery of education beyond traditional classrooms, breaking geographical and temporal barriers. Virtual classrooms, multimedia-based learning modules, and interactive tools such as quizzes and real-time feedback systems became the cornerstone of modern education. It enhanced collaboration through tools like shared documents, forums, and virtual group discussions, fostering teamwork and communication skills. Moreover, digital education provided access to an extensive range of resources, such as e-books, online lectures, and global educational content, enriching the curriculum and broadening student horizons. However, while this approach to education is not ideal, Educators and students in developing countries encountered substantial challenges related to teaching resources, such as unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate access to electronic devices, lack of personal space at home, and frequent power outages. These constraints significantly hindered the effectiveness of online education, creating barriers to equitable learning experiences. Humanities disciplines, including English Language Teaching, faced unique challenges during this transition due to their reliance on critical thinking, discussion, and interpretive skills. Pandemic presented noteworthy challenges for adapting critical thinking tasks to digital formats, particularly in the English language teaching and soft skills courses where interactive and collaborative activities are essential. Digital tools and platforms often lack the nuanced capabilities of face-to-face interaction, making it difficult to replicate the richness of in-person discussions and debates. Maintaining student engagement in online environments was challenging, especially for activities that relied on spontaneous interaction and group dynamics. Assessing critical thinking skills in digital formats could be difficult, as traditional methods like in-class discussions and debates are not easily transferable. ELT heavily relies on non-verbal cues like facial expressions, body language, and gestures to convey meaning and understanding. These cues are often lost in online environments, making it difficult for students to fully grasp the nuances of language and cultural context.

Additionally, the domestic environment often exacerbated these issues. Noisy households and shared living spaces deterred many teachers and students from using their cameras or microphones during virtual classes, affecting engagement and communication. Students may need to leave their rooms to accommodate household activities,

faced difficulties due to poor lighting and background noise, and contend with privacy concerns involving other family members.

Psychosocial factors further complicated the scenario. Many students experienced self-consciousness about their appearance, making them reluctant to enable video during lectures. This reluctance could also stem from dysmorphic worry, a psychological concern where individuals fear their physical features, such as their faces, may appear unattractive or distorted on camera. Such anxieties impaired students' willingness to participate actively, reducing their learning outcomes and engagement.

As the routines were disrupted for nearly two years and educational institutions resumed in-person teaching, these challenges did not simply dissipate but evolved into new ones. This research aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student engagement and academic performance resulting from the transition between online and offline learning environments. It also seeks to explore effective strategies employed by educators to motivate and re-engage students in the post-pandemic learning environment.

2. Methodology

The present study adopted a mixed-method approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative data. A structured questionnaire was administered to 60 undergraduate students and 20 experienced educators. Students from the 2nd, 4th, and 6th semesters of different colleges of Srinagar were selected randomly to ensure diversity across academic levels. Educators from different degree colleges of Srinagar were chosen based on their experience pre- and post-pandemic, ensuring insights into the changes brought by the transition between online and offline learning.

3. Findings and Discussion

This research underscores the complex difficulties encountered by both educators and students in the shift back to traditional, in-person learning following the pandemic. By employing quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study pinpointed critical issues concerning student involvement, academic achievement, and the strategies implemented to mitigate these challenges.

Challenges Faced by Teachers/

3.1.1. Changes in Student Engagement

It was observed that 75% of teachers noted that students felt shy and lacked confidence during classroom interactions. Teachers reported that students were unresponsive, and hesitant to participate in discussions. Confidence and interactive skills, which are crucial components of both soft skills and English Language Teaching (ELT), had noticeably declined during the transition to online learning. Important communication skills including critical listening, effective verbal conversation, and non-verbal cues were disturbed by the

pandemic. These abilities are essential for both academic success and personal development. Students were unable to work together on group projects, engage in impromptu conversations, and express themselves confidently in online settings due to the absence of in-person engagement. These skills, which are vital for language acquisition and soft skill development, suffered due to reduced opportunities for real-time, interactive engagement. The absence of immediate peer feedback and teacher interaction also impacted students' ability to develop fluency, expressiveness, and the ability to articulate ideas effectively. Consequently, students were less adept at navigating interpersonal relationships and understanding diverse perspectives, which are critical aspects of soft skills in both academic and social contexts

3.1.2. Reduced Attention

Teachers noted that students appeared increasingly disengaged during in-person classes, with many demonstrating a noticeable reluctance to participate actively. This reduced engagement became evident through various behaviours such as lack of eye contact, inattentiveness, and an overall decline in enthusiasm for classroom activities. Despite the physical presence of teachers and peers, many students were less willing to speak up, hesitant to join group discussions, and often appeared mentally disconnected during lessons. The disruption caused by the pandemic led to a loss of routine and engagement with in-person learning, as students struggled to adjust back to traditional classroom dynamics after nearly two years of online learning. The shift from a flexible, self-paced online environment to the structured, interactive demands of in-person teaching was challenging for many. The absence of immediate, convenient distractions from home reduced, but didn't entirely mitigate, their attention and engagement. These behaviours suggest that the break from traditional schooling disrupted students' attention spans and their ability to sustain engagement, impacting their overall learning experience and performance.

3.1.3. Decline in Academic Performance

Teachers consistently observed a significant decline in students' academic performance following the transition back to in-person teaching post-pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times. This decline was linked to several factors. The prolonged period of remote learning disrupted students' study routines and weakened their basic skills, making it difficult for them to adapt to traditional classroom expectations.

The reliance on simplified online assessments, such as multiple-choice or objective-type examinations, during the pandemic significantly contributed to the observed decline in academic performance. These assessment formats, while expedient in the online learning environment, did not sufficiently cultivate students' critical thinking or problem-solving skills. As a result, the reintroduction of

more rigorous evaluation methods in offline settings, including essay writing, comprehensive examinations, and analytical tasks, presented considerable challenges for students. Many struggled to meet these heightened academic demands, highlighting the inadequacy of prior assessment practices in preparing them for traditional evaluative standards.

The flexibility of online learning encouraged students to work at their own pace, which often led to procrastination and a shallow understanding of the subjects. The sudden shift to structure in-person classes made it hard for students to adjust to tighter deadlines, longer study hours, and more demanding academic standards.

Social and psychological factors also played a role in the decline of academic performance. The pandemic caused a lot of stress and anxiety, which negatively impacted students' ability to concentrate and perform academically.

Students relied on shortcuts such as copied assignments rather than engaging in meaningful learning. This behaviour resulted from habits developed during prolonged online learning, where minimal supervision and flexibility led students to seek quick solutions rather than genuine effort. Many viewed assignments as obstacles to clear, not opportunities for growth, compromising their academic integrity and essential skill development. Consequently, they were unprepared for the demands of in-person learning, further widening gaps in knowledge and performance.

3.1.4. Behavioural Issues

The resumption of in-person learning highlighted several behavioural issues among students that negatively affected classroom environments and learning outcomes. A significant concern was the general lack of discipline and adherence to academic routines, as many students found it challenging to readjust to structured schedules after the flexibility of online learning. Irregular attendance became common, with students frequently skipping classes or arriving late, often citing fatigue or lack of motivation as reasons.

Some students exhibited aggressive behaviour towards peers or teacher's post-pandemic, reflecting the emotional strain and social challenges of returning to in-person learning. This aggression ranged from verbal outbursts and defiance to passive-aggressive actions like ignoring instructions or disrupting class. Factors such as frustration with heightened academic expectations, difficulty navigating social interactions, and stress from re-establishing routines contributed to these behaviours.

3.2. Challenges Faced by Students

3.2.1. Loss of Routine and Motivation

One of the significant challenges faced by student's post-pandemic was the loss of routine and motivation. Many students

admitted feeling disengaged and unprepared for the demands of in-person classes, often describing them as tiring and overwhelming. The structured schedules of traditional education clashed with the flexible and leisurely pace they had grown accustomed to during online learning, making the transition particularly challenging.

Assignments, which required sustained effort and focus, were a source of frustration for many, as students struggled to rebuild study habits and manage time effectively. The sudden shift from independent, self-paced online tasks to the more rigorous and interactive requirements of offline education disrupted their sense of comfort and familiarity. This disengagement and lack of motivation hindered their ability to actively participate in lessons, complete assignments on time, and maintain consistent academic performance.

3.2.2. Digital Dependency

Another major challenge faced by student's post-pandemic was their increased dependency on digital tools and platforms for learning. During the period of online education, students became accustomed to features such as readily available resources, instant feedback, and simplified assessment formats like multiple-choice tests. This over-reliance on digital conveniences created difficulties when transitioning back to in-person learning, where tasks required deeper engagement, critical thinking, and sustained effort.

Students often expressed a preference for objective assessments over written assignments or in-depth evaluations, citing the ease of completing tasks online. Additionally, many struggled with manual processes such as note-taking and in-class problem-solving, skills that had diminished during the extended period of digital learning. This dependency also affected their ability to participate in collaborative, face-to-face group activities, as they were used to the mediated, asynchronous nature of online interactions

3.2.3. Communication and Interaction Gaps

The prolonged isolation during online learning significantly impacted students' communication and interaction skills. Weaknesses in verbal expression, active listening, and collaborative engagement became evident as students returned to in-person education. Many struggled to articulate their thoughts clearly, hesitated to participate in class discussions, and found it challenging to build connections with peers.

The lack of regular face-to-face interactions during online learning reduced opportunities for practicing social cues such as eye contact, tone modulation, and non-verbal communication. This gap also hindered their ability to engage effectively in group activities or debates, which are essential for developing teamwork and critical thinking skills.

4. Strategies Adopted by Educators

4.1. Attendance-Based Incentives

To address declining student engagement and motivation, educators implemented attendance-based incentives as a key strategy. By allocating marks for regular attendance and active class participation, teachers encouraged students to develop consistent routines and prioritize in-person learning. This approach not only improved attendance rates but also provided students with a tangible reward for their efforts, fostering a sense of accountability.

The practice of linking attendance to grades created an environment where students were motivated to attend classes regularly and participate in discussions to enhance their overall performance. Teachers observed that this strategy gradually helped students re-establish their connection with the classroom environment, making it a simple yet effective tool for addressing post-pandemic challenges in student engagement.

4.2. Interactive Techniques

To rebuild student's confidence and engagement after the pandemic, educators introduced a variety of interactive techniques. These included frequent oral tests, class discussions, and group activities, which were aimed at re-establishing a dynamic classroom environment. Oral tests allowed students to express their ideas verbally, providing immediate feedback and boosting their confidence in articulating their thoughts. Regular discussions encouraged critical thinking and the exchange of ideas, fostering a more interactive and participatory learning atmosphere. Group activities, such as collaborative projects and peer discussions, were particularly effective in rebuilding communication skills and teamwork. These activities not only encouraged students to engage more actively with the course content but also helped them overcome the hesitancies and social anxieties developed during the prolonged period of online learning. By involving students in group problem-solving tasks, educators aimed to recreate the interpersonal interactions and spontaneous learning opportunities that were lost during the shift to remote education. These strategies collectively played a crucial role in helping students reconnect with the learning process and regain their enthusiasm for in-person classes.

4.3. Positive Reinforcement

To enhance motivation and re-engagement, educators employed positive reinforcement techniques, such as acknowledging and appreciating students' efforts. This approach involved recognizing and rewarding students for their participation, progress, and contributions during lessons. Teachers would offer verbal praise, small rewards, or positive feedback, which served to build a supportive learning environment where students felt valued and encouraged.

Acknowledging students' efforts not only boosted their confidence but also motivated them to continue participating actively in class. This form of positive reinforcement helped counteract the negative impact of the prolonged online learning experience, where students might have felt overlooked or unappreciated. By highlighting their achievements and showing genuine appreciation for their contributions, teachers were able to rebuild the intrinsic motivation of students, making them more willing to engage with challenging academic tasks and fostering a renewed sense of purpose in their learning. This strategy effectively bridged the gap between online and in-person education, facilitating a smoother transition and encouraging students to embrace the social aspects of classroom learning once again.

5. Conclusion

The transition to online learning during COVID-19 marked a significant milestone in the digitalization of education, especially in the humanities. While it allowed continuity during an unprecedented global crisis, the post-pandemic return to in-person learning has revealed significant decline in student engagement, academic performance, and attendance post-pandemic, attributed to prolonged online learning habits and the challenges of transitioning back to offline education. While educators implemented various strategies to re-engage students, the residual effects of the pandemic, such as reduced confidence, lack of focus, and disrupted routines, remain substantial barriers. The unique challenges faced in ELT and soft skills development further underscore the need for targeted interventions, including hybrid learning models, smaller group activities, and enhanced feedback mechanisms.

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