Deploying Blended Learning in the New Normal Pedagogy: Challenges and Prospects in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

While the world is experiencing a severe global crisis for the Covid-19 pandemic, the academic education sectors of several developing countries face formidable challenges, including Bangladesh. The current study aimed at finding out the barriers and possibilities for blended learning in the new normal situation in the education sector of Bangladesh. The researcher followed a descriptive approach with reviews of related literature and conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with twenty-one university teachers to collect data and develop the study. The study found some challenges for blended education, e.g., poverty, lack of familial and institutional support, inadequate internet facilities, untrained teachers for using technological gadgets, electricity issues in rural and coastal areas. Still, the study found prospects to deploy blended learning and flipped classrooms in the post-pandemic period because of the countenance of 71.43% of participants. Finally, the study recommended some possible strategies in the new normal life for a more balanced educational system, particularly at the tertiary level.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has encountered severe education challenges in the current Covid-19 pandemic time. Therefore, the preparation should be taken as early as possible to continue the adequate flow of education in the post-pandemic situation. Otherwise, the authority or the concerned educators may face severe challenges in the teaching pedagogies of New Normal Life. The new normal life will not be easy as pie to encounter the challenges as the students are not in a continuous mode of general study. The teaching and learning environments accept numerous innovations, and a portion of these contain the utilization of modernization across blended education. This innovative pedagogical approach is attached quickly; however, it goes through a phase. The demonstration of blended education combining the face-to-face and web-based instructing and understanding endeavors is essential for these improvements; nonetheless, its acceptance, mainly in the generating field, meets complexities for it to be a persuasive advancement in teaching and learning. Blended learning competence has plenty of hidden elements that can pose challenges. One primary challenge is how stakeholders can efficiently utilize modernization and ensure participants' responsibility confer personal learner traits and skills with technology. However, a consistent blended learning design makes sense instructional and economically (Hofmann, 2014).

"Blended learning is an approach to learning that combines face-to-face and online learning" (Teach Thought, 2020). Preferably, each one (virtually and offline) will complete the other by using its strong points. Blended learning offers both conventional frontal learning and technological learning. We

can connect a wide range of students by considering every possibility—the individuals who realize well in an organized atmosphere that incorporates vis-à-vis cooperation with a teacher, and accessible sorts who study better with semi-independent, computer-centered training. While the classroom offers an opening for playing roles with the instantaneous confrontational response, online education offers customized, self-regulated learning with eLearning/m-Learning gadgets that advance themselves to communicating media such as capacity building, video tutorials, games, and quizzes, along with public media mechanisms, fully available from the pupil's profile page in the 'Learning Management System (LMS)'—and reachable from the student's smartphone or tablet (Learning, 2020). Besides, learners can steadily utilize their views, sentiments, and behaviors to obtain their objectives (Rajabi, 2012).

In general, blended learning refers to the strategic learning strength that remains to enhance the understudy knowledge. Research has displayed that fused education reduces the rates of failures, expands understanding, and boosts commitment. Blended learning consolidates the most delicate parts of face-to-face instruction and online guidance in manners that empower learners to understand at their speed (Panopto, 2019). Every student has a scope of various qualities and necessities, and a blended learning approach permits coaches to recognize this. When they can utilize instruments from both orthodox and computerized circles, tutors can introduce fundamental data in a scope of various ways intended to suit the shifting learning styles of their students (Rosell, n. d.).

Regardless of technological limits, e-learning and blended learning may be effectively carried out in developing nations like Bangladesh and can conquer numerous issues related to the conventional homeroom-based learning system. In Bangladesh, the current scenario shows that there are diverse difficulties for E-learning. Students often do not want to be involved in online education because they think it is tiresome or expensive (Shifat, Khan & Chowdhury, 2021). The lack of facilities such as technological gadgets, internet connection, and electricity is the main factor contributing to the slow growth of blended learning. Some students attributed the lack of development of blended learning to a lack of technical knowledge among students and teachers (Mustary, 2019).

E-readiness study models are compelling devices for catching existing conditions of the objective gatherings and foundation to deliver hindrances to the powerful utilize the framework. However, the primary objective was to discuss the challenges and prospects of new normal pedagogies for the better functioning of higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-learning has a lot to contribute to the future 'Digital Bangladesh,' a vision outlined by the Bangladesh Government that suggests using information and communication technologies in education, healthcare, and socioeconomic growth (Laden, 2021). E-learning can essentially lessen the fixed expenses of scholarly organizations and diminish student time for learning. In Bangladesh, how students use this facility is consequently a researchable issue (Khalid, Jahan & Sobhan, 2009). However, Students show an elevated possibility of accepting blended education, notably as student self-guideline displayed. Blended instruction is intended to expand students' degrees of information development to make insightful abilities in them. It can go far in delivering gifted students who can be innovative graduates enough to fulfill work requests through inventiveness and creativity (Kintu, Zhu & Kagambe, 2017).

Talukdar, Hasan, and Nahar (2021) proposed a hybrid model for higher education institutions to conduct classes. Model 1 suggests that the teachers go to actual classrooms, and the students join the live sessions from their homes. Model 2 recommends that the traditional and online classes continue while students get registered or enrolled by choice. It may be challenging to deploy in the Bangladesh context. Virtual and conventional classes should continue simultaneously, but the 'by choice enrollment' cannot be applied considering the lack of ceaseless internet facilities to a broader extent. Even as the second model is welcomed, practical classes in the laboratory must get predilections over other on-campus courses.

Furthermore, Model 3 proposed that only practical laboratory classes start on-campus, whereas other courses could be simulated. However, virtual learning cannot be enough for Bangladeshi students' overall development in a broad-spectrum manner. Online learning should not be isolated to merely e-mail communication and web-based classroom interactions only (Higley, 2014). Learners may have anxiety about learning online and need to feel connected, reassured, and safe to contribute to their new learning environments (Terry & Leppa, 2009; Hastie et al., 2010). Therefore, virtual and conventional

classes should continue simultaneously. Considering the fast extension of the use of versatile specialized gadgets in the country, improvement of technology, and decrease in cost, all around planned e-learning structure is required to contribute essentially to instructive turn of events and in this way having a drawn-out impact on poverty alleviation (Khalid, Jahan & Sobhan, 2009).

In another study, Ghazizadeh & Fatemipour (2017) considered that blended learning develops the students' language skills. Such skills are also essential for Bangladeshi learners as many of them are yet to improve their language skills considerably even after passing 14 years of school and college education (Shurovi, 2014). Shishigu, Michael, and Atnafu (2021) have depicted that pedagogic tactics cannot assure an agreeably enhanced education; instead, a supplementary tool is required that may boost learners' appeal. Rabbani, Raihan, and Khan (2020) found that mobile learning, group-based e-learning, and cloud computing are popular. There have been few studies conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic time. However, the challenges and prospects for the new normal situation in education have not been directly addressed noticeably. So, the current study deals with the new normal conditions for educational institutions.

METHODS

The current study followed a qualitative approach conducting a focus group discussion (FGD) with twenty-one university teachers as the key participants. The FGD was conducted through the Zoom platform due to the pandemic crises. The participants were selected randomly from different public and private universities. The authors could receive opinions from twenty-one university teachers during focus group discussion though more teachers were invited. However, the participants spontaneously opined their views about the respective questions asked by the researchers. The discussion was based on ten powerful queries of 'Yes/No/To Some Extent' parameters. Then, the meeting continued with some follow-up questions. The data were analyzed to bring out the opinions and suggestions of the university teachers for implementing contemporary blended pedagogies in new normal life. The FGD continued with the discussion of possible obstacles to deploying blended education. However, few related journal articles and newspapers articles were also studied for the progress of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching and learning are challenging tasks in the internet world, but digital transformation in education creates a more engaging and effective education process (Rahman, 2019). In connection with this idea, the researcher sought some prospects and possible barriers, especially from teachers' perspectives in the current study.

The practicability of blended education

The participants answered in the following percentages shown in table 1.

Table 1. Participants' opinions about blended education

SL	Questions	Yes	No	To Some Extent
1	Do you think blended learning can be implemented in Bangladesh in the new normal life?	71.43%	19.05%	9.52%
2	Is it possible to arrange flipped classrooms in Bangladesh thoroughly?	33.33%	52.38%	14.28%
3	Do you feel that online education was quite successful in Bangladesh during the Covid-19 pandemic?	19.05%	57.14%	23.8%
4	Do you think it is challenging to rearrange the current pedagogies in the new normal life with regular online classes?	76.19%	9.52%	14.28%
5	Have you been satisfied with the online educational activities in the Covid-19 pandemic period?	42.85%	47.62%	9.52%
6	Do you feel the students are convinced with the online classes?	33.33%	52.38%	14.28%
7	Is fair assessment possible in online academic courses?	42.86%	38.09%	19.05%

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SL	Questions	Yes	No	To Some Extent
8	Do you think the educational institutions in the country have the necessary technological support for blended learning?	9.52%	76.19%	14.28%
9	Are the existing teachers extensively trained and ready to use technological gadgets in real classrooms?	0	80.95%	19.05%
10	Are the students prepared for such virtual and on-campus study simultaneously?	38.09%	52.38%	9.52%

Table 1 depicts that more than 70% of teachers believe blended learning is worth applying in Bangladesh in the new normal era. However, the majority (52.38%) do not think flipped classrooms are arrangeable, but 33.33% think flipped classrooms can be arranged. Nevertheless, a private university has already launched flipped classrooms in Bangladesh, a form of blended pedagogy where learners are introduced to a topic by utilizing recorded video content and textbook at home. Later, they are given a brief lecture on that particular topic in the classroom ("EDU: Pioneer of," 2021).

Later, it was found that most of the participants felt that online education was not as successful as expected during Covid-19. After that, 76.19% of participants think it is challenging to balance current education and online classes. However, 42.85% of teachers opined only about their satisfaction in the online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such opinions indicate that implementing blended learning or the flipped classroom is challenging in the Bangladesh context. It has also been depicted that most teachers are not satisfied with the online educational activities during the pandemic time. Moreover, more than half of the participants opined that the students are not convinced with online classes, though few have opposite opinions. However, such an idea matches Shifat, Khan, and Chowdhury (2021), who found that more than 50% of their student-participants were not satisfied with the online interactions with their teachers.

Again, many of the teachers do not believe that fair assessment is possible in online academic courses. Most of the participants (76.19%) do not think that the educational institutions in the country have required technological assistance for blended education. 80.95% of the participants pondered that the existing teachers are not trained and ready to use technological devices. Khan, Rahman, and Islam (2021) also mentioned that the lack of experience using online education apps required to download should be a serious concern. More than fifty percent of teachers do not think that the students are prepared to accept virtual and on-campus study at the same time effectively.

Barriers to implementation
The discussion continued about online education in the new normal life after the pandemic. According to the participants, virtual learning may not be effective for many students, especially for rural learners who are not facilitated by the proper internet connection or monetary support. In the center of the country's administration, teachers started using a blend of real-time interactive courses and classes, with a blend of pre-recorded materials and homework wise digital sessions on a small measurement, but this is not the scenario for the whole country (Khan, Rahman & Islam, 2021). This fact can negatively influence the deprived learner's mind to be out of the offline study where they are neuro-linguistically demotivated. Moreover, many poor and lower-middle-class learners can not use online applications due to proper familial or institutional support. Laden (2021) postulates that this disparity in student access to online learning facilities has ignited a new debate on social media, called the digital divide— a fact that is not new. So, the psychological and psychosocial quandaries have already influenced them even worse.

Many students face poor internet connection or electricity problems in remote or coastal areas. Khan, Rahman, and Islam (2021) found that 55% of the students are not privileged by proper internet speed to continue their online education. Al-Amin et al. (2021) also found a similar result and remarked the stable internet as a crying need. So, only a handful of learners may benefit from online learning platforms, especially those living in urban areas. It is understood that technology is not being utilized adequately, whereas it is a great enabler in education rather than a roadblock (Rahman, 2019).

Most teachers consider that the scientific and practical courses in the different departments of 'Life-Science' and 'Engineering' fields are greatly hampered at the tertiary level. Though all the public universities have not yet officially started the online classes, some concerned teachers are taking classes

using different cybernetic applications for the students' betterment. However, problems remain because many teachers and students cannot use technological gadgets. Laden (2021) mentioned a scarcity of training on how to use such devices at home to obtain digital education effectively. Regarding private universities, only the theoretical courses are being taught in most of the institutions.

Consequently, the required balance cannot be maintained between theoretical and practical classes usually designed with a bottom-up process. Moreover, only the general education courses are no longer suitable for the current semesters as the private universities pass a few trimesters or semesters. However, most of the teacher participants repeatedly showed concern about the interrupted internet services and buffering that causes inconvenience for the online classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study indicates that the challenges precede the prospects for blended learning in the new normal pedagogy of Bangladesh. Still, an innovative approach for 'New Normal Pedagogy' is required and recommended. The themes of 'Blended Learning' and 'Flipped Classroom' are the demand of time. In that case, the government and the educators and teacher-educators should rethink the canon to continue the mainstream study. The students have already been habituated with the online classroom or learning platforms. So, this habit should be fostered in the future. Such items may be included in the curriculum also. As the government of Bangladesh is determined to make a 'Digital Bangladesh,' this online class should be authorized and given priority to encounter the future challenges of the competitive world during the offline study. There remain questions with the online evaluation process. That issue may also be solved by a body of intellectuals of education sectors. So, a balanced pedagogy is required for the New Normal situations. The offline class may be divided into offline and online assessment systems to resolve the problem. The assignments, class tests, and quizzes may be taken through online platforms. In that case, the class lectures, discussion, and teacher-student interaction may be facilitated and get additional scopes with more credibility and efficacy. The university grants commission (UGC) also has plans to launch a blended learning policy to coordinate onsite and online education in the post-pandemic era (TBS Report, 2021). Such policy prospects the universities to continue academic programs and courses flexibly and smoothly in the future.

As found in Table 1, the teachers require comprehensive training on the post method pedagogic education approach with contemporary teaching and learning materials. In addition, they should be updated with technological gadgets in the actual classrooms. Besides that, the students must be motivated and encouraged by their teachers to be habituated with blended learning environments in the new normal period. The blending will continue as the recent technological advancements dominate the world to a great extent. For this, the country's administration must include blended courses in the educational institutions, particularly in the higher education sector. However, the current study recommends the following process (in figure 1) for blended education in higher education in Bangladesh.
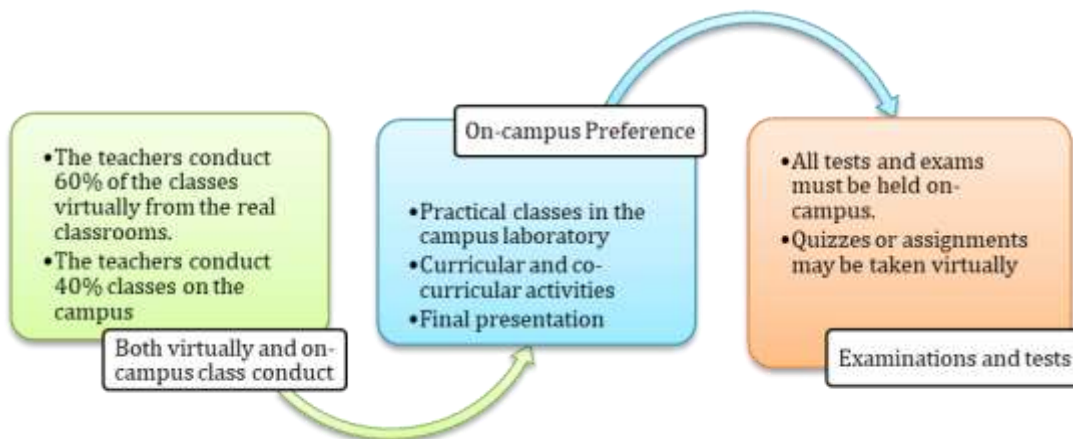

Figure 1. Blended education framework for new normal pedagogy

To enhance students' in-depth technological knowledge through the wide use of internet-supported education, it is essential to increase the rate of administering tests and giving homework or assignments through the internet as formative assessment, making them more collaborative, cooperative, and communicative (Rabbani, Raihan & Khan, 2020). However, some private universities in Bangladesh might have acceptable technological assets, and students are relied upon to have higher admittance to computers and the web. So, the prominent private universities started online education from the very beginning of the pandemic. With the supposition that private universities are e-prepared, e-learning facilities may successfully supplement address-driven exercises at the university. That indeed creates prospects for blended education for new normal situations.

Again, after the pandemic, the students may be at a loss. Few public exams have already been canceled, which has created trouble, frustration, and confusion among the mass people, particularly the students. The upcoming general exams also fall into the subject of consideration. Mainstream education has been padlocked for sine die. So, a considerable number of students have not been prepared for the next upper level. In that case, some imperative and inevitable topics may be included in their 'would be promoted' class for necessary insights on subjective themes from the previous courses. Notably, the practical issues need to be reconsidered. So, it is high time the authority and officials deemed this issue for the student's ongoing progress.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes with several obstacles to blended learning: lack of teacher training, lack of institutional support, lack of internet facilities, lack of familial support, and lack of interest in using technology. Still, some points indicate the prospects for implementing blended pedagogy in the post-pandemic period, e.g., teacher interest, the vision of the government, the policy of UGC. However, the study was mainly focused on tertiary education sectors. So, all the ideas cannot be generalized. Future researchers have many loopholes to investigate to continue online education through blended learning in the new normal period. More studies are required for secondary and intermediate levels of education. To implement the vision of 'Digital Bangladesh,' the teaching and learning processes must be facilitated by technological supports. A digital monitoring cell may be formed to evaluate the learning process and regularly report to the higher body in every institution. Besides, adequate study materials, institutional capability, incentives from the government, teacher research, and teacher training should be ensured to face the challenges—all the govt. Furthermore, non-government educational and development organizations should collaboratively work to deploy the blended education system and implement flipped classrooms in the new normal life of Bangladesh.

Funding and Conflicts of Interest

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