

Online Assessment Practices of English Language Teachers and Students in Higher Education in Bangladesh: Challenges and Choices

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Abstract

Online education appeared to be effective among stakeholders worldwide following the closure of educational institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the technology used for online education has hardly been explored to such a massive extent earlier, stakeholders soon self-educated themselves in new technological skills. However, challenges became more complex when the issues of assessment arose. Maintaining the validity, reliability, fairness, and academic integrity in online-based assessment became an insurmountable task; again, there was a pressing need for endorsing resilience and empathy for the assessors and assesses, especially for those who faced discrimination due to COVID-19. This study draws on the findings of a nationwide survey of online programmes offered by Bangladeshi private universities during the late 2020. They reveal the locally adopted methods and supports for assessing learners online, identify several challenges of online assessment, including the use of assessment methods, inadequate assessment-related support, fairness, and reliability, and ensuring accessibility to the assesses. It also reveals the stakeholders' choices to deal with the challenges in assessment, including flexibility, designing questions, and adopting process approach among others. Resilience and empathy for the stakeholders towards each other were required to successfully deal with the challenges of an online assessment.

Keywords: online assessment, higher education, challenges, choices, Bangladesh

Introduction

All spheres of life around the world were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO (2020), 60% of the world's student population was affected by the nationwide closure of schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions, due to COVID-19. In Bangladesh, one of the worst affected countries during the pandemic (Rahman et al., 2021), the first cases of Coronavirus-affected people were identified on March 08, 2020 (IEDCR, 2020). As a result, the educational institutes were shut down on March 18, 2020, and they remained closed for almost a year. The Ministry of Education announced the re-opening of all schools and colleges on 30 March (The Daily Star, 2021, Feb. 27) and all universities in late May 2021; however, a second wave of the COVID-19 starting in late March 2021 compelled the government to prolong the closure of those institutions.

The ministry also took measures for ensuring education at primary and secondary schools where remote teaching was offered nationwide through television, radio, and via printed assignments sent to those institutes through electronic and traditional mailing services. However, the government had to postpone the high-stake public examinations called the Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) Examinations and give 'auto promotion' to students based on their previous public examination results (Staff Correspondent, The New Age Bangladesh, 2020, Oct. 24.). Other important public examinations like Secondary School Certificate (SSC) Examinations are also being either deferred or redesigned with a curtailed syllabus (The Daily Star, 2021, Jan. 26). For tertiary education, private universities were offering the courses using online platforms, and learners had to take part in online assessments as part of the course requirements. In the initial days of the countrywide lockdown, the private universities took the lead in resuming education, which was then followed by other universities and much later recommended by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC, 2021).

As academic activities were resumed online, teachers and students of all levels had to quickly learn and adapt to the changing realities, irrespective of their prior knowledge of or training in technology and online education. Though some of the primary and secondary teachers of Bangladesh received training on integrating technology, especially mobile technology, in teaching English through a nine-year long and £50 million worth 'English in Action' (EIA) project (Karim et al., 2017), the tertiary level teachers never had any such opportunity to receive training on integrating technology and education, particularly in teaching the English language, which is considered as a means of development (Chowdhury, 2022; Coleman, 2010; Roshid, 2018) to fulfil economic, societal, educational, and personal needs (Sultana & Roshid, 2021). As a result, there have been numerous phases of trial-and-error in using technology, digital materials, teaching, and assessment methods since online education started in Bangladeshi universities. The study by Rouf and Mohamed (2018) shows that secondary teachers receiving training on technology skills used technology rather ineffectively in their English classes due to their inability 'to combine technology with their pedagogic knowledge' (p. 712). The tertiary teachers were neither trained nor ready for offering education online, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Under such circumstances, assessment, being the most crucial part of the education system, became a sensitive issue to deal with, especially in a situation perplexed by the growing uncertainty, drop-outs, physical, and mental and economic crises as the issues of fairness, access, equity, empathy, and resilience along with the existing issues of validity, reliability, and authenticity became highly important. In fact, many teachers did not know how to carry out an online assessment and how to ensure the fundamental requirements of assessment i.e., validity, reliability, practicality, fairness, academic integrity, standardization, etc. as they had to make a quick shift to the virtual environment.

However, it is always a challenging task to maintain the fundamental requirements of assessment, even when it takes place face-to-face. Since it is a very sensitive issue, it needs a lot of hands-on experience and informed knowledge to be able to incorporate all the essential preconditions of developing and conducting an assessment. It also involves much time, money, and administrative and infrastructural

support to make the assessment process flawless. In such unprecedented times of the pandemic, private university teachers were required to conduct online assessments, which is completely unconventional in the assessment culture of Bangladesh. Such kind of unusual situation calls for alternative approaches to assessment, but the concept of alternative assessment seems to be hardly familiar to the stakeholders, e.g., teachers, students, and parents and/or guardians. Following the concerns expressed by students, guardians, and other stakeholders, the Education Ministry of Bangladesh asked all private and public universities to suspend all forms of examinations until the re-opening of the universities. However, other forms of assessment continued even after the exams were suspended.

The current research investigates the online-based assessments conducted by selected private universities in Bangladesh between June to December 2020 and seeks to address the following research questions.

- 1) What methods and supports are offered for assessing learners online at Bangladeshi private universities during COVID-19?
- 2) What, according to teachers and students, are the major challenges of online assessment?
- 3) What choices are available for sustaining academic integrity and ensuring teachers' and students' wellbeing through online assessment?

Literature Review

A wide range of issues emerged from the discussion on assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the existing research findings have been reviewed here to conceptualise the key problems this study aims to address.

Beneficial Effects of Online Assessment (Especially of Quizzes and Mock Tests)

Most online instructional programs are likely to be constructivist in nature where learners are assumed to be active participants (Bangert, 2006). In online education, synchronous and asynchronous communication methods give students more flexibility and opportunity (Kearns, 2012). Online assessment methods are effective if learning objectives are defined using realistic scenarios, students' learning styles are taken into consideration, and they are given enough assistance for their learning activities and software use (Boyle, et al., 2003). Exams, timed tests/quizzes, self-tests, weekly review questions, homework/written assignments/fieldwork, case study responses, peer evaluation with feedback, projects, short essays, group work, presentations, e-portfolios, rubrics for evaluating posts & participation in discussion forums, and reviewing comments in online chats are all indicated as effective assessment methods in the online environment (Huang et al., 2020). There have been a number of research studies reporting some potential benefits of online-based assessments. It has been reported that frequent online quizzes and mock tests are motivating for study and helpful for improving learners' grades as the electronic format and standardised checklist used for such assessment ensure fewer errors by students (Elzainy et al., 2020). In another study, George (2020) reported mock quizzes and feedback to have helped students positively. Jahan et al. (2022) mentioned how the necessity to control plagiarism and cheating in online exams led to the incorporation of more creative and alternative ways of assessing, trial-and-error based experimentation with assessment techniques, and assessment of 'higher-order thinking skills' (p. 159). Online assessments appear to be good for saving time, human labor, and test-related costs. However, in online education and assessment in the context of Bangladesh, recent studies (Bashir et al., 2021; Roshid et al., 2022; Sultana et al., 2022) have identified more challenges than benefits, some of which are discussed in the following sections.

Flexibility and Changes Brought into Online Assessment

Due to the constraints and challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been various forms of assessment-related changes offering more flexibility in terms of deadline, grading system, and modes. According to Khan and Jawaid (2020), assignments and assessment portfolios are used as asynchronous methods of assessment while multiple-choice questions (MCQs), open-book exams, objectively structured practical/clinical examinations, and viva (Online) are used for synchronously conducted assessments. Jankowski (2020, p. 3), in her recent study, found out that 97% of respondents brought about some sort of changes, including modification of assignments and assessments, flexibility in submission deadlines, shifting to pass/fail instead of grading, and modifying assessment-reporting deadlines during Spring 2020 in response to COVID-19. According to Gacs et al. (2020, p. 386), ‘project-based language learning components or integrated performance assessments’ are more suitable for online mode of education than the conventional achievement tests. Among other forms of changes and innovations brought into online assessment were take-home exams, time-constrained assessments, and pass/fail option instead of conventional exams (Gamage et al., 2020), open-book examinations, take-home assessments, professional presentations or demonstrations, annotated bibliography, fact sheet, E-portfolio etc. (Guangull et al., 2020). However, such flexibility was not free from criticism as well (Roshid et al., 2022).

Challenges of Online Assessment

As the pandemic forced educators to make changes in the assessment process, innovative practices were not often without challenges. In fact, there were negative impacts of such changes on assessment culture, especially on students’ and teachers’ mental health, and ability to stay focused and meet work-related requests and needs (Jankowski, 2020). Some of the challenges, as mentioned by Feldman (n.d.), include: the adverse effects of the pandemic-related anxiety on student academic performance, the diverse impact of racial, economic, and resource differences on the academic performance of students, and the lack of readiness of the larger parts of instructors to deliver high-quality instruction remotely.

Gamage et al. (2020) reported technological issues (as a result of remote delivery) as a major source of challenge. In a similar study, Guangull et al. (2020) found that remotely proctored exams are often more stressful for students, and in such exams, failure of software, hardware, or internet connection may take place; hence, a contingency plan should be there. Moreover, students, for cultural or personal reasons, may not accept camera supervision. More challenges related to equity, access, and justice were reported by Jankowski (2020) as she observed that students did not have equitable access to technology, and economic circumstances, leading to injustice in assessment. Citing Aucejo et al. (2020), she commented that students belonging to different races, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses experienced COVID-19 differently.

Online Assessment and the Question of Academic Integrity

One of the most intriguing challenges of online assessment is found to be the issue of maintaining academic integrity and fairness. The problem of cheating appears to be more acute when there was a growing demand for online-based assessment (Elzainy et al., 2020; Ibna Seraj et al., 2022). While specifying the various forms of academic misconduct, Jankowski (2020) mentioned issues such as compromised data, cheating, or falsifying work. Gamage et al. (2020) commented that plagiarism is important “in the discourse of academic integrity for two reasons: It is the most common act of academic misconduct that threatens academic integrity, and it is the most frequently detected act of dishonesty” (p. 4). Khan, Jahan, et al. (2021) say, “Since assessment in remote teaching is not proctored, there are more chances of cheating, affecting test scores’ reliability” (p. 36). Among other challenges were the gap between ‘earned grades’ and ‘bonafide grade inflation’ (Foster, 2016, p. 309) and limited proxy

supervision or invigilation while using an online platform (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Gamage et al., 2020).

Online Assessment in Bangladeshi Higher Education

There are some research studies conducted in Bangladesh that reported prevalence of mental health-related challenges among higher educational institute (HEI) students taking online lessons and tests (Rahman et al., 2021). The challenges include moderate to extremely severe depression, anxiety, and stress (Islam, Barna, et al., 2020; Islam, Sujana, et al., 2020). Sultana et al. (2022) report students' concerns over clarity and fairness in online assessment. Moreover, Dutta and Smita (2020) identified the following seven challenges of remotely conducted educational programmes: university closure, disruptions in learning, loss of social interaction, physical health problems, mental health problems, shifting to online education, and financial crisis and parental involvement. In a similar study, Khan et al. (2020) mentioned online assessment as one of the barriers to the successful implementation of online-based educational programmes in Bangladeshi public universities. Research has also reported teachers' and students' negative perceptions about online assessment as Khan, Basu, et al. (2021) found more than two-thirds of the HEI teachers dubious about the validity and reliability of online assessment while more than half (55.3%) of the students believed that online assessment would negatively impact their grades. Bashir et al. (2021) found students' perceptions largely to be negative about online assessment. It can be concluded from the research focusing on Bangladeshi contexts that there are multiple challenges in HEIs in Bangladesh relating to pedagogical, psychological, mental, financial, and wellbeing issues.

Issues of Resilience, Empathy, and Burnout

Students and teachers across the globe had a testing time as many of them faced anxiety, depression, worries, trauma, and even life threats caused by the pandemic, which eventually affected their physical and mental wellbeing. Especially there have been reports of the detrimental effects of assessment during the pandemic (Stifel et al., 2020). Referring to Bayrakdar and Guveli (2020), and Drane et al. (2020), Stifel et al. (2020), however, argued that the adverse impact might not be the same for all students as the marginalised groups were found to be more inequitably and severely affected by the pandemic.

It is argued by researchers that resilience and empathy are called for while dealing with people in education suffering from physical, mental, social, and psychological trauma. While giving into trauma leads to burnout, resilience is the power to adapt to a challenging situation. Jankowski (2020), in this regard, argued that there is a need to show empathy and include the 'Student Voice' (p. 23) in decision-making. The need for showing resilience and empathy is also stressed in the research by Albott et al. (2020), which reported an interdependent relationship between resilience and burnout from physiological, interpersonal, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. The issues of stress and challenges faced by learners during a pandemic have been revealed in some other studies (Dewantoro & Rachmawati, 2020; Goldmann & Galea, 2014; Goldstein, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Peng et al., 2012; Reivich & Shatté, 2002) that highlighted the importance of inculcating resilience and empathy among both assessors and assesses to make online assessments healthy, flexible, and equitable.

Ways to Deal with the Challenges

Research so far has mentioned a number of exploratory practices that required a lot of trial-and-error sessions to address the challenges of maintaining academic integrity as well as ensuing empathy and resilience. Some of the suggested assessment practices include preparing different questions for each of the individual students, online presentations and discussions, assignments (open-book and un-proctored), professional presentations, report evaluation, annotated bibliography, E-portfolio, and fact sheet

(Guangull et al., 2020). In another study, Rahim (2020) suggested nine guidelines for conducting online examinations, namely, evaluating prerequisites for implementing online assessment, ensuring alignment of assessment activities with stated learning objectives, addressing the diversity of students' situations, maintaining a good balance of formative and summative assessments, stimulating student learning with online assessment, considering format, scheduling, and timing of tests, establishing clear communication to students, ensuring high-quality feedback, and addressing assessment validity threats. Khan et al. (2020) suggested reforming the assessment system by formulating guidelines for online assessment, introducing open-book examinations, oral tests, e-portfolio, and projects, and using software for checking plagiarism.

The entire field of education in general, and assessment in particular, needs a more humanistic approach for healthy, flexible, and equitable operations (Keasberry et al., 2021). The literature reviewed above presents the benefits, changes, challenges, innovations, and dilemmas of online-based assessment during the pandemic, both from global and Bangladeshi contexts. An understanding of the issues provides a sound knowledge base for undertaking the current research study, which attempts to further explore whether there exist some more endogenously characterised assessment practices, challenges, and choices in the private universities of Bangladesh.

Methodology

Data Collection Procedure and Sampling

The study is a large-scale nationwide research project conducted among private universities in Bangladesh. It adopts a sequential exploratory mixed methods approach, aiming to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The first set of data (quantitative) was randomly collected from 208 teachers from 28 private universities and 674 students from 17 private universities through online surveys using Google Forms. The survey questionnaires were distributed using the official Facebook page of one of the largest English language teachers' associations in Bangladesh, other relevant Facebook groups and pages, and also via emails to the chairpersons and teachers of different universities.

Both the students and the teacher participants of the surveys were asked if they would be willing to participate in the follow-up focus group discussion (FGD) sessions. Consequently, the second set of data (qualitative) was collected by conducting 5 FGD sessions with 24 consenting private university teachers from 11 universities and another 5 FGD sessions with 25 consenting students from 10 private universities. The FGD sessions were conducted using 'Zoom' and 'Google Meet' platforms, which were recorded with the participants' permission. On average, each FGD session lasted for approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in both English and Bangla, the mother tongue.

Participants' Profile

The participating teachers either teach Foundation Courses in English Language, English literature courses, or Applied Linguistics and ELT courses. The demographic information revealed that 65% percent of the participating teachers and 58% of the students were female. Almost half of the students (48%) were living in metropolitan areas with technological advantages. Students were reached through the chairpersons of concerned departments and their teachers. The participating students were enrolled either in English Language programmes as a major or a foundation course at undergraduate and/or graduate levels at the time of data collection.

Data Collection Tools

As for tools for data collection, a survey questionnaire for teachers was initially developed. A similar survey questionnaire was developed for students with the necessary modifications. For FGDs, a pool of relevant questions was created for further inquiry based on the data that emerged from the survey. The questions of the tools focused on, among many, issues related to assessment. They were piloted among peers and validated by a group of experts. Based on the comments, observations and suggestions, necessary modifications were made.

Data Analysis Methods

The quantitative data were processed using SPSS (Version 26). Qualitative data from FGDs were transcribed verbatim and translated (where needed) into English by professional transcribers and translators. Information in alignment with quantitative survey data was arrayed using thematic categorization based on close readings of FGD sessions. Later, data from diverse sources were triangulated to arrive at findings.

This can be mentioned that standard ethical measures were followed throughout the data collection process.

Findings and Discussion

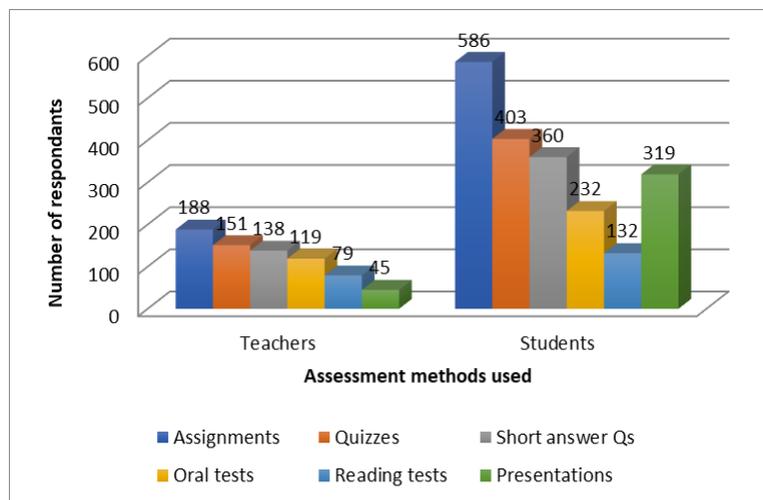
Findings from the surveys and FGDs are presented simultaneously under each of the three sections relating to the three research questions, followed by discussions and implications.

Methods of and Supports Offered for Assessing Learners Online

Both teachers and students were asked questions about the methods and techniques used for online assessment, the support provided to students for preparing them for assessment and the ways the learning outcomes of the course were achieved through online teaching. The detailed findings from the surveys and the FGDs are as follows.

Assessment Methods and Techniques Used Online.

Figure 1: Assessment methods used



It was found from the survey that both the teachers and students used written assignments followed by quizzes and short questions as the most frequently used forms of assessment. Among other highly used techniques used by both teachers and students were oral tests, presentations, and reading tests though there is a slight difference between the teachers and the students regarding their frequency of usage.

As can be seen in Figure 1, written assignments were preferred by the majority of teachers (N=188, 92.8%) followed by quizzes, short questions, oral tests, presentations, and reading tests. As for students, written assignments were preferred by the majority of students (N=586, 89.7%), which was followed by quizzes, short questions, oral tests, presentations, and reading tests. The teachers reported that they used a combination of methods for conducting learner assessments while learners were also found to be comfortable with such combinations.

In the FGD sessions, most of the teachers mentioned that they used Moodle to conduct mostly quizzes, and then assignments, including multiple-choice questions, short question-answers, Yes/No questions, etc. The teachers also revealed that they often used presentations uploaded by students on Google Drive or YouTube as a useful technique. One teacher mentioned a ‘case study approach’, a technique of formative assessment, while another teacher emphasized the ‘viva type of thing’. While talking about the techniques, one senior faculty member gave details of how assessment underwent modifications on online platforms to combine various methods and techniques:

Normally, we give three quizzes, presentations, assignments, midterms, finals etc. But now, as everything is online, they can submit on a folder in Moodle or upload a video giving presentations [sic]. In quizzes, we mainly prefer true/ false, multiple-choice questions, short answers. In midterms or finals, we choose creative, analytical, or problem-solving, opinion, and viewpoint-based questions. We can later check their answers with Turnitin.

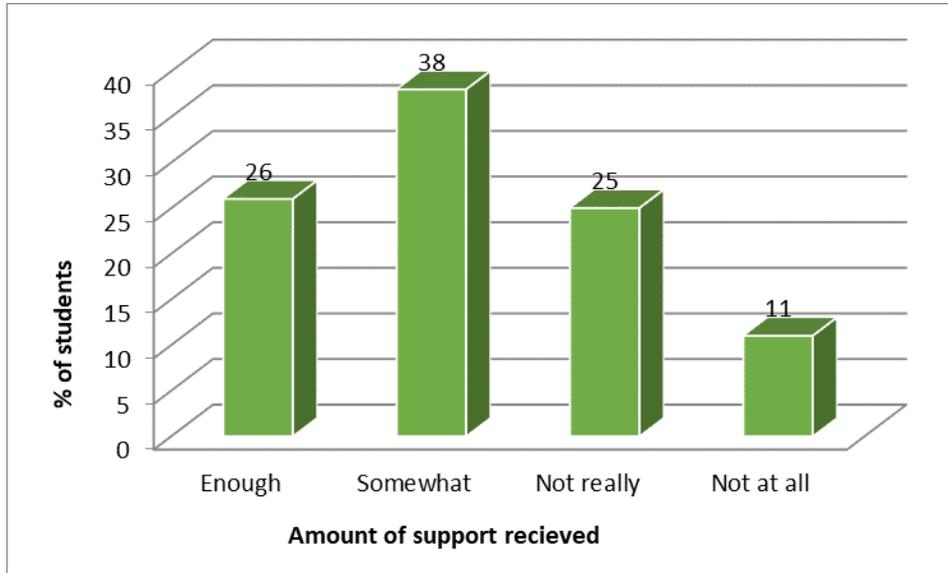
The findings also revealed teachers’ flexible choices of using a combination of apps, digital devices, and platforms to conduct online assessments. When it came to assessment methods/techniques, teachers’ preference to use written assignments, quizzes, and short answer questions indicate their reliance on more conventional forms of assessments even though they shifted to online modality. However, in the FGDs, some teachers mentioned using more innovative methods such as Moodle-based quizzes/MCQs, oral tests, and presentations uploaded on Google drives or YouTube etc. It is reported in previous research that these types of online based quizzes and tests are motivating (Elzainy et al., 2020) and helpful for students (George, 2020).

It was also noteworthy to see teachers’ flexible attitude towards using a combination of methods to suit the learners’ needs and abilities, especially in a crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, neither teachers nor students mentioned using some modified and alternative assessment methods such as take-home exams, time-constrained assessments, open-book examinations, annotated bibliographies, fact sheets, E-portfolio etc. The methods and techniques found to be preferred by teachers and students in this study are identical to the ones used in Bangladeshi public universities, as previously reported by Khan, Basu, et al. (2021). It was also noticed that no teachers mentioned about assessment of listening skills. The assessment methods mentioned above indicate that speaking, reading, and writing skills were assessed.

[Exam related support provided through online English classes.](#) The bar chart in Figure 2 based on the survey data illustrates that only 64% (n=420) of students believed they got ‘enough’ or ‘somewhat’ support to prepare for examinations in the form of necessary lectures, materials, and preparation time,

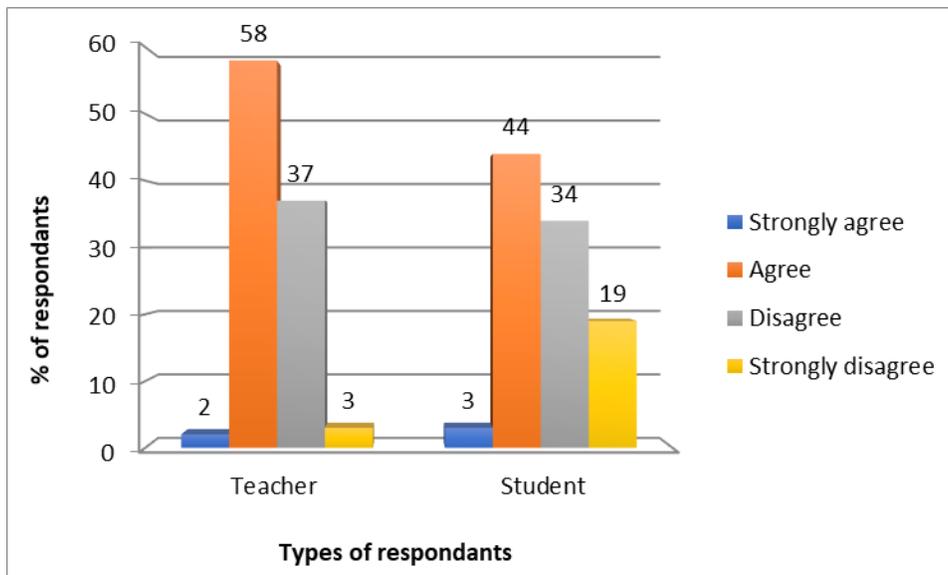
whereas 36% (n=235) of them thought they did ‘not really’ get any support or they did not receive any support at all.

Figure 2: Exam related supports received from online courses



Achievement of stated learning outcomes. Figure 3 presents data regarding the achievement of stated learning outcomes. When teachers and students were asked if the stated learning outcomes of the online courses were met, almost two-thirds of the teachers (60%, n=124) either ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that the outcomes were met whereas around 53% (n=345) students either ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with the statement.

Figure 3: Achievement of stated learning outcomes



The teachers and the students were divided in their opinions regarding the achievement of the stated learning outcomes. More than half of the students (53%) responded negatively about the achievement of their course learning outcomes. When students were asked to comment on the amount of support they

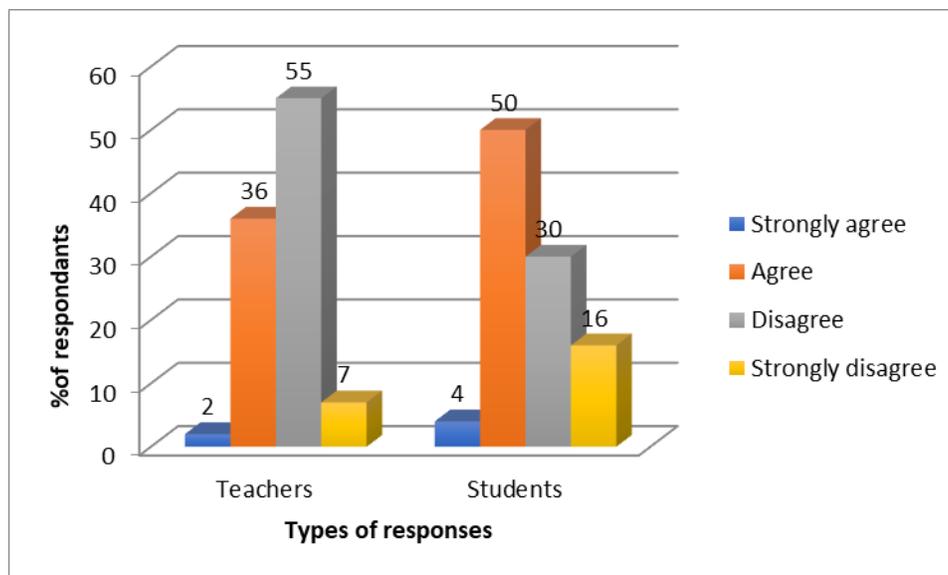
received as part of their exam preparations, only 26% of them reported having enough support, whereas the rest of them were not happy with the support they received (see Figure 2). This finding did not present a good picture of the assessment-related support provided to the students. Now, these findings, taken together, indicated that there could be a relationship between achieving the stated learning outcomes and preparing students for assessments, although teachers seemed to have a different perception.

Challenges of Online Assessment

The challenges of online assessment as perceived by the teachers and students were reported based on issues like fairness and accessibility, reliability, academic integrity, and some external factors such as stress, burnout, uncertainty, and trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fairness and accessibility in assessment. Figure 4 reveals that the majority of teachers (62%, n=129) either disagreed (7%, n=15) or strongly disagreed (55%, n=114) with the statement that the online assessment process is fair and accessible.

Figure 4: Fairness and accessibility in online assessment



On the flipside, less than half of the students either strongly disagreed (16%, n=101) or disagreed (30%, n=197) with that statement. It can be noted that the percentages of students who believed that online assessments were fair and accessible outnumbered the teachers with similar views.

In the FGDs, teachers shared the reasons behind their skepticism about the fairness of assessment. Firstly, they mentioned increased workloads for online assessments. According to them, online assessment had been physically taxing and time-consuming. One teacher mentioned discomfort in her eyes caused by checking students' copies on her laptop. She also mentioned that downloading all assignments submitted in different formats and organising them in a folder added to the workload that she had to tackle. Another senior professor commented:

Desperate time needs desperate measures. The workload has increased without a doubt. Creating lesson plans, uploading them in Moodle, giving exams, checking exam copies, and discussing these issues with other teachers on the laptop all of these had made us automated or robot-like.

Secondly, the teachers mentioned the rural and urban divide as a factor in determining students' accessibility to online assessment. The current online assessment systems became a source of widening disparity amongst students based on their accessibility and affordances. Students located in the suburban and rural areas did not have access to uninterrupted Internet connection too. Sometimes students needed to go to open spaces like fields or grounds in order to get Internet connectivity. Nevertheless, they failed to attend the English class without difficulties. One teacher commented:

I don't think online teaching is beneficial for the ones living outside the city or in the countryside because most of them fail to make it to the Zoom classes, although they are submitting the written assignments on time. It is creating a lot of trouble for them to browse the Internet.

Some teachers also suggested supporting students with limited or no access to gadgets. One teacher commented:

What I think is that universities can provide some facilities regarding the expense of buying mobile data or can give discounts or can offer internet packages, which I've heard about XX University [the name of one particular private university was mentioned here, but that has been anonymised on ethical grounds] and some other universities. This may help a bit. Honestly speaking, I do not know about the limitations and troubles of attending online classes outside Dhaka.

Therefore, teachers provided students the 'flexibility' of time for submitting the extensive assignment as they were quite aware of the students' problems regarding the Internet and the devices. They also allowed them to take pictures of the copybook and submit it. It takes time for teachers to organize the tasks, but they went the extra mile and organized the photos of the term papers with the motto of helping out students in desperate situations.

Thirdly, the teachers mentioned their worries about maintaining fairness in an assessment method they were not trained in, and as a result, they had to be flexible. One teacher said, "With the word 'flexibility,' I meant like I accepted pictures of hand-written assignments or like expanding the given time span and more options like this." She shows her reservation when the university shows flexibility in terms of the submission of assignments. Another teacher said:

Like, this semester, our university has taken measures to make it effective so that nobody fails in any course just because he or she could not submit work or could not attend the classes. Assign them extra tasks and contact them, take it out of that person but try not to leave anyone behind. If someone fails to say only for two marks, please consider him as passed in exchange for any extra work from him. This is what we call 'flexibility'.

Many faculty members mentioned that their grading was lenient during the COVID-19 affected semesters. One teacher said in this regard, "So, I guess it's not that fair. . . The main challenge is the fairness of the marking."

In the FGD sessions, several students also mentioned the urban-rural divide. One student commented specifically:

Students who are in villages or who don't have sufficient devices because it's difficult for a student always attend online classes and making assignments and submit them to teachers [sic]. Charging the

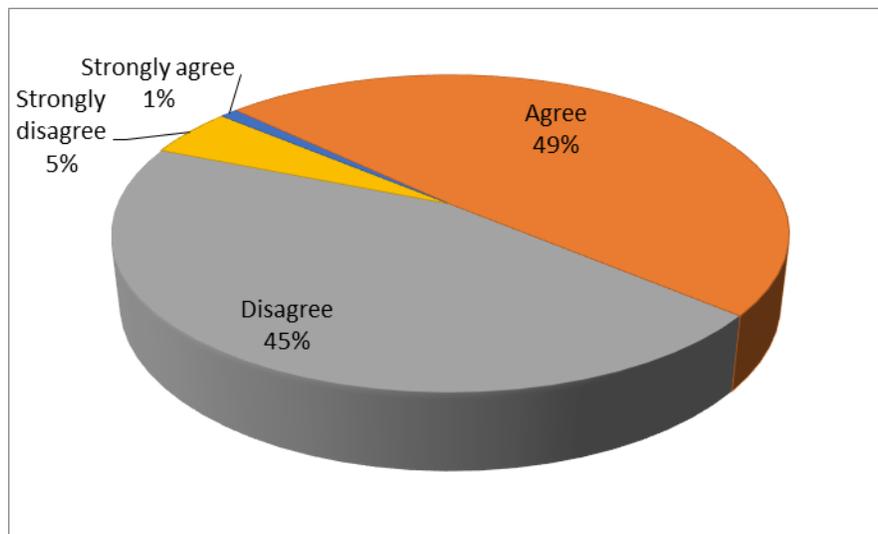
mobile phone is also an issue. Even after using a mobile phone for 4-5 hours, it is necessary to charge the phone. Same happens for the laptop.

Students also shared their observations regarding fairness in assessment. One student said, “We just sit for the exam and get the answer from the Internet or through other websites”. Another student mentioned, “They gave it to another friend to complete it for them. . . So, they did not get the knowledge from the study or anything. Actually, I had to do double assignments for my friends.” Again, another student mentioned, “Even on the group chats, when the exam papers were given to us..., people were solving the questions and were sharing screenshots of it. Then people were copying it and writing it in their assignments.” Even one student admitted having two gadgets, one for attending examinations and the other one for browsing for answers simultaneously. Another student had a different opinion. According to him, “. . . term papers or assignments are somehow fair, but quizzes are not fair because personally, I also cheated.” Many students preferred video interviews or viva instead.

However, teachers appreciated the university authorities for being highly supportive, continually sending emails to them, suggesting new methods to make online assessments effective, and providing facilities and training to make the assessment process easier and fairer. The issues of anxiety (Stifel et al., 2020), increased workload (Jankowski, 2020), marginalization (Khan et al., 2020; Stifel et al., 2020), fairness and flexibility (Goldstein, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Reivich & Shatté, 2002), lenient grading (Foster, 2016), lack of training (Khan et al., 2020) have already been mentioned in the literature review. Though the natures of these issues seem similar, often, they are characterized by local contextual factors, as presented here.

Reliability (integrity) in assessment. Figure 5 shows that the teachers were divided in their opinions regarding the reliability issue in online assessment.

Figure 5: Teachers' views on the reliability (integrity) of online assessments



Exactly half of the teachers disagreed (45%, n=92) or strongly disagreed (5%, n=11) with the statement that online assessment is reliable, whereas the rest half either agreed (49%, n=101) or strongly agreed (1%, n=3).

In the FGD sessions, teachers opined that little or no training was responsible for the absence of reliability in online assessment. One teacher commented:

. . . I did courses in Coursera, and there I found rubrics and different kinds of ways of assessing people, but I do not think that this kind of assessment will be alright with my students at the very outset. So, . . . I also need resources and I need to know techniques and training.

Teachers identified the chances of plagiarism as the major reason for the unreliability of the online assessment process. Because of their sudden shift to online modality, they had to give long assignments to cover mid-term and final examinations. Consequently, students seemed to be dependent on copying and pasting from different sources in order to cope with the demand of these assignments from numerous courses in a single semester. Lack of personal gadgets also led students to plagiarize quickly from internet cafes. One teacher said, “It’s very easy for them to cheat in online classes, which is not so much easy in the real classroom.”

In the FGD sessions, students also shared their concerns regarding reliability in terms of marking. One student commented, “What I think is that the assessment has become more lenient, and a kind of average assessment has happened. As a result, those who were good and industrious were assessed, and those who were not so industrious and indolent their grades increased [*sic*]. So, there was the possibility of grade inflation, and it happened.” In fact, by now, it is perhaps known to all that students got better grades during the pandemic-affected semesters in comparison with other semesters, a point also mentioned in the literature review (see Foster, 2016; Khan, Basu, et al., 2021); however, the reasons for such improvement or inflation are yet unknown and requires further research-based investigation.

Some more challenges. Most of the faculty members found it ‘quite laborious’ “because it’s a very difficult task to read the long essays and the project papers and answers. Well, small quizzes and answers are okay, but take-home exams and project papers - that was pretty challenging [*sic*].” Another faculty member said, “We have to take the exams [*in fact ‘ . . . give the exams’ was meant*], all through the day, and then calling students one after another becomes quite challenging because not all the students will participate. It is like a one-to-one interview sort of thing or spoken test.” Some faculty members found it time-consuming as one teacher said,

. . . even preparing the questions, preparing the process, and answers script checking is a, is a huge amount of work. It becomes a mammoth task, but it can be made effective, but it requires a lot of, a lot of work. Even, even when you are getting a less amount of salary, particularly in that situation, I’d like to say.

Many faculty members blamed the slow typing speed of the students and the slow internet connection while taking synchronous examinations. One teacher mentioned that they did not know about the rubrics based on which they could assess and give feedback. Another teacher said that he prepared separate question papers for each of the students, e.g., 80 papers for 80 students.

Students also mentioned some challenges in their FGD sessions. One student said:

When it's about the presentation in our face-to-face class, I feel much more confident rather than being in front of the camera . . . , I smile automatically, a smile comes automatically in front of the camera, it's a bit awkward like keeping a record of your presentation and submitting it.

Several students across different FGD sessions also had similar kind of opinions. Another student mentioned that they could not discuss teachers’ feedback in a group in an online modality. She said, “But, in online assessments, it cannot happen because we have to do it alone anyway.” Several students mentioned internet breakdown or power failure during online assessment. One female student said, “I

think that I face the challenges because I am a little dumb about technical issues. So, I cannot even make a document properly.” So, lack of technical skill is also a challenge in online assessment.

Regarding fairness and accessibility, the percentage of students who indicated that online assessments were fair and accessible were more than that of teachers. This might be caused by the fact that the students are not aware of the technical issues like fairness and accessibility and the ways to ensure them. When the issue of reliability was raised the teachers were almost equally divided in their opinions. However, as the teachers and students spoke out more openly in the FGDs, various causes, factors and natures of fairness, accessibility and reliability were revealed. Among the reasons mentioned by teachers and students were increased workloads for teachers, widening disparity amongst students based on their accessibility and affordances, teachers' limited skills of conducting online assessments, lenient grading policy, and the unfair means adopted by students in various forms and manners, especially in the form of plagiarism. Some of the challenges reported in this study are identical to the findings of previous research that reported widening disparity among students with inequitable access to technology and economic circumstances (Jankowski, 2020; Khan et al., 2020), teachers' mental health, ability to stay focused and meet work-related requests and needs (Jankowski, 2020), lack of strict invigilation (Gamage et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020), and challenges of controlling students (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015). However, some unheard or less heard issues emerging from the local context, like camera shyness, unawareness about rubric for online assessment, and lack of technological know-how, were also unearthed in the study.

Ways to Address the Challenges

While commenting on ways to address the challenges of students' unfair means, such as plagiarism, teachers opined that they need to be more analytical, creative, and critical in setting question papers for maximising scopes for original individual engagement of the students with the tasks. One teacher said, “If we can create questions that require more Higher Order Thinking Skills or HOTS, the students will be bound to express their own viewpoint. This can solve this problem of cheating”. Another teacher exemplified this, saying, “I was teaching Shakespeare and the assessment was on this very topic, I had to make questions like, ‘Do you think Hamlet is a terrible boyfriend?’” One faculty member suggested using more subjective kind of assessment to ensure ‘less chance of cheating or plagiarism’. He adds, “They have to express their own, own things which is we can judge, at least we can judge even in the forms of assignment, but it requires a lot of work from the teacher, from our end.” Another teacher suggested using Moodle to stop students’ tendency towards plagiarism. Another teacher mentioned that she re-assigned the same task if plagiarism was found. One teacher commented that fairness often depends on the types of tasks given, e.g., whether process approach instead of the product approach of writing assignments is emphasised in the assessment design. She further added:

So, from making the outline to the first draft, second draft, and final draft, there will be several peer feedback and teacher feedback going on, and so, I don’t think anyone can just make up or copy like that because the teacher will be involved in every stage. And we are basically going to look at how students learned how to incorporate the process. So, I think it will be fair.

Other teachers suggested using oral performances, immediate feedback, and forum activities to reduce the chances of plagiarism. Almost all the teachers expressed similar opinions that the issue of plagiarism or cheating could be effectively and efficiently dealt with; however, it required a lot of time. Despite spending a lot of time and energy in formulating innovative online assessment processes, they were not yet sure if they could ensure the reliability of the assessment. Maintaining transparency and fairness in

assessment has become one of the hardest hurdles for teachers. Nevertheless, they were optimistic about becoming efficient and confident assessors eventually through trial and error.

In the FGD session, one student also suggested ways and means of dealing with unfair means. He proposed introducing the analytical questions as it involves brainstorming from students. The same student also suggested uploading hand-written assignments, writing it first by hand and then taking photos, and finally converting it to a single PDF file.

Almost all the suggestions given to address the challenges of online assessment are related to students' unfairness, including plagiarism. Teachers have particularly stressed the need for being innovative while designing and setting assessment tasks. These strategies are similar to the one suggested by Khan et al. (2020), who recommended the reformation of the assessment system, and Guangull et al. (2020), who argued that academic dishonesty could be minimised by preparing different questions for each of the individual students.

However, it is noteworthy that teachers hardly gave any suggestions to deal with the work stress, anxiety, and burnout caused by online education, as reported in earlier research in the context of Bangladesh (Islam, Barna, et al., 2020; Islam, Sujana, et al., 2020). What is more alarming is that the teacher and student respondents appear to be hardly aware of the need for high level of empathy for both teachers and students and resilience, which refers to a person's ability to cope with stressful changes and adapt to them in a healthy and flexible manner (Goldstein, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Conclusion

The study evolves around the three research questions (RQ) mentioned earlier. In answering RQ1, it has been revealed that the traditional methods of assessment, e.g., written assignments, quizzes, and short questions, and often their combination are used even in online assessment, and both the assessors and the assesseees are found to be satisfied with them. Very few of them use Moodle, YouTube for conducting an online assessment. However, teachers are not found to adopt innovative and technology-oriented alternative forms of assessment. In addition, students are found to be unhappy about the support they receive for preparing for examinations and the achievement of learning outcomes as well although the teachers' opinions differ from theirs.

As for RQ2, according to the majority of the teachers, fairness and accessibility are the major challenges in online assessment though slightly more than 50% of students find it fair and accessible. Teachers mention different factors, including increased workload, urban-rural divide, limited access to gadgets, and lack of training in conducting the online assessment, which are responsible for affecting fairness and accessibility. However, when asked about the reliability issue in online assessment, teachers are found to be equally divided in their opinions. In FGD sessions, students also expressed their dissatisfaction with 'over marking' and average assessment, where often good students were underrated. Both the teachers and the students were concerned with different forms of cheating, especially plagiarism.

As for RQ3, flexibility in term papers or assignments submission, accepting the photos of the hand-written copies, designing analytical, creative, and critical question papers inviting more subjective replies, using technological opportunities to identify plagiarism, adopting more process-oriented approach in writing, giving presentations, ensuring immediate feedback—all these are some of the choices the teachers and the students had to choose to effectively deal with the challenges of an online assessment. Adhering to such choices undoubtedly increased work stress. Hence empathy and resilience for both the

teachers and the students towards each other was required. However, flexibility can often be misused and can affect the reliability or integrity of tests. Students getting extra time to submit their tasks on humanitarian grounds may have access to others' papers already submitted and copy from them. Hence, the necessity of ethical awareness, value education, and positive utilisation of humanitarian consideration needs to be inculcated among them; flexibility can cost test reliability and thus, validity.

The study reveals that the assessment process is affected due to challenges in logistic support including digital devices, connections, and cost, pedagogical support, including an increase in workload, lack of training, lack of experience, anxiety, depression etc.; and assessment literacy, including teachers' (in)capacity to use alternative approaches in assessment, maintaining academic integrity, and dealing with traumatic experiences. However, both the Bangladeshi teachers and students, despite having a lot of challenges, reverted to their use of potentiality to proactively engage in educational activities. The institutional and individual resilience enabled them to combat the challenges. Any innovation requires a lot of hard work; yet, empathetic treatment of issues emerging from innovation can maximise potentiality.

The invention of numerous vaccines leads us to think that very soon, the world will be able to fight COVID-19 successfully but the knowledge and experience that our learners and teachers gathered will stay. Perhaps they will be used in different ways in different contexts. Though these mostly self-adopted resilient strategies helped teachers confront the challenges transiently, methodologically, they were not flawless as they were not supported by research informed knowledge. Furthermore, disasters in any form can occur in this quickly evolving and globally politically unsettled world. As a sustainable measure, all educational institutes need to include an emergency contingency plan in their in-service faculty development programmes. Students need to have an orientation with such measures as well. Cutting edge practices where technology is used to facilitate education, such as blended learning, flipped classroom etc., need to be introduced, popularised and utilised in a systematical and informed way. An effective and long-term institutional system needs to be developed and curriculum innovation needs to be brought about to employ technology in education.

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Ethics Statement

We, hereby, state that we have conducted the research and prepared the manuscript following the protocol of research and publications ethics. We are solely responsible if any deviation or mistake (in content and language) is identified in the manuscript.

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