Social Constructivist Approach: A Panacea for EFL Learners' Stress and Anxiety during Covid-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 has forced many educational institutions to shift to online learning methods. Many educational institutions have adopted methods like flipped classrooms or blended learning. Such schools have also associated it with the issues of recruitment of qualified teachers and their training during the pandemic, particularly in EFL online teaching. To build a framework,the study has adopted a social constructivist theoretical approach, which facilitated identifying online environmental tools, techniques,and instructional practices to help teachers and learners in an engaging online environment. The study explored the students' attitudes toward online learning methods and instructors' capabilities to useonline platforms, such as Blackboard and Microsoft Teams. The researcher administered a questionnaire with closed-ended questions about learners' perception, attitude, and levels of anxiety or stress to a group of 60 students. While the respondents accepted having high to moderate levels of anxiety and stress, the instructors also admitted the challenges related to technology, time management, and assessment of large class size. However, respondents admitted that online learning and the emotional support from the instructors helped them to shift attention from the pandemic and focus on their education. The limitations included lack of focus, demotivation and limited availability of space at home, family distractions, and multiple assignments. The study recommends establishing a teacher-student rapport to cope with the anxiety and stress involved in online teaching.

Keywords: social constructivism, Online Teaching, EFL rapport, anxiety, Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in March 2020 and onward has turned out to be anunprecedented crisis that has unsettled not onlythe healthcare system butall other aspects of human life, politics,and education .Other than the upsetting reports of increased mortality rates of people directly affected by the virus, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications on the way higher education students spend their academic time. The UNESCO report of April 2020 stated that schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) were closed in 185 countries, affecting more than one billion learners, which constitute 89.4% of total enrolled learners (Marinoni, 2020). The global impact of this pandemic has reshaped the teaching and learning process, in turn ushering in a new chapter of online, remote social interaction in the world of higher education. The uncertainty felt by the world in the face of this pandemic is undoubtedly experienced by students too. As the crisis continues, the universities worldwide are adopting extraordinary containment measures starting with the suspension of face-to-face academic activities in all HEIsand the continuation of these activities remotely.

Despite the fact that almost all HEIs (91%) have the infrastructurein place to communicatewith their students and staff about COVID-19, universities reported an immediate challenge to

ensure clear and effective communication streams with staff and students while upholding their fundamental values and ethical responsibilities, which give education a sense of direction and credibility. One can see this as the evidence of the social-constructivist approach,which draws on the idea that people pursue education to serve their specific ends. In this way, their learning environment plays a significant role in determining their academic excellence.

Regarding EFL, reading, writing, and speaking are sets of social practices that enable participation in particular cultural activities in various cultural communities. Significantly, these social practices include more than mastering a set of linguistic skills (vocabulary, syntax, etc.). Language practices, for example, always involve ways of behaving, thinking, interacting, valuing, believing, and speaking;in short, becoming particular kinds of people (Gee 2008). Social construction of learning emphasizes the profoundly social/cultural character of learning.

Social constructivism can be applied in the classroom by focusing upon the coherence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge. In this regard, the teacher's role is to guide the learning process considering the ideas and experiences of the students and ensuring maximum interaction,participation and coordination. Therefore, the teaching-learning interaction rests on how far can the teachers and students actively participate in the curriculum, school policies, and culture of the school and classroom.

In this context, we can implement social constructivism by modifying content, shifting instructional strategies, promoting team-work, and involving them in open-ended discussions.Moreover, creating assignments using cognitive terminologyand fostering an environment for analysis,and developing creative and critical thinking skills can be useful.

The shift from face-to-face to online teaching did not come without challenges.The main challenges are access to technical infrastructure, competencies and pedagogies for distance learning and the requirements of specific fields

of study. The HEIs confronted with the hefty task of remodeling the teaching-learning environments instantaneously.To ensure pedagogical continuity in the given scenario, online teaching is not only an intelligent solution but also can surely be considered as the internationalization of revolution, that cuts through the borders of countries and continents alike.

On 8th March, 2020, all schools, colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia were directed to suspend classes and to activate distance mode education. The universities around the country took prodigious steps to provide primary manuals to equip teachers for online teaching. The teachers were entrusted with the enormous responsibility of ensuring the quality of teaching by assessing all course learning outcomes (CLOs) and by using appropriate methods. Carnevale (2000) explains, "Distance courses shouldn't follow the lecture approach of a traditional course, or just offer students online content to read...You don't transmit knowledge; knowledge is constructed".

Lectures: Online lecture sessions were conducted using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, a real-time video conferencing tool that organizes everything into three convenient areas: a media space, the Session menu, and a Collaborate panel. The lectures were prepared mainly as PowerPoint presentations and posted a week before the classes. The teachers monitored their students' participation and actively involved them by questioning and soliciting questions.

Written Assignments: Individual or group assignments were given to be completed on a weekly basis complying with course specifications. Students have the choice of forwarding the scanned copy of the written assignment or publishingit electronically. The students submitted written assignments using Blackboard.

Reading exercises: Teachers usually posted an article or suggested a book chapter and asked their students to compile and post the key points. During the lecture, the teachers discussed the key issues to assess their comprehension. Worksheets based on the contents of the topic were posted as a learning task.

Listening &Speaking tasks: Teachers identified relevant and interesting 'Podcasts' for their subject and recommended the same to the learners. Podcasts are digital audio files made availableonthe Internet for downloading to a computer or a mobile device. Students listened to the podcasts and finally answered a self-assessment questionnaire. The teachersconducted speaking tasks in the last 15 minutes of the scheduled lectures.

Use of Videos: Teachers posted a video lecture on a subject topic from 'YouTube' or from other free video-sharing sites and asked their students to give their comments in the form of crucial points about the issue and post their queries on online platform. Interaction sessions were frequently hosted to discuss the students' views, answer their queries, share their observations and hold a talk on basic concepts covered.

Discussion Board: Teachers announced a subject topic and asked their students to browse through Internet and posted their short write-ups on the Discussion Board. The students have to reply to at least two posts in about 50 words during the week.

Assessments: Complying with the directives of the Ministry of Education, the evaluations of the semester were distributed by assigning 80% of the total coursework as assignments, tests, projects, and presentations and 20% was allocated to online final exam. The evaluation criteria for grading different kinds of assessments were set up and the teachers informed the students about grading parameters via course announcements. Oral examinations and project or research presentations were

conducted twice the semester to measure students' command of content and communication skills. The teachers created video lectures/PowerPoint with voice-over and slide-notes, and circulated them to their students followed by a self-administered online objective-type test. A series of online quizzes, short tests and opinion polls were conducted with different possible questions and varying time duration on the course topics instead of taking one single exam for evaluation in a scheduled manner.

The teachers undoubtedly have a pivotal role to play in the teaching-learning process. During the pandemic, they were multitasking on different fronts. Primarily, they were dealing with fluctuating schedules, quick preparation of online lectures, assignments, multiple assessments while meeting quality standards and deadlines. Though blended learning has been a crucial component of our teaching for a long time and most of the teachers are well-informed, the task of switching to fully online mode was quite exhaustive. To assist the teachers in good time, the university conducted a series of online workshops and seminars on increasing awareness of Blackboard tools for creating lectures, assignments, and assessments using various video conferencing platforms like Google Meet and Zoom.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Social Constructivist Approach.
In the early 20th century, the instructor was solely responsible for teaching the subject with minimum involvement of students. The role of the students was limited to rotelearning, which was highly encouraged and considered the only method of learning. In the 1930s, the ideas of a Russian psychologist- Lev Vygotskyrevolutionized education by the following proposal, first published in 1930 in the work "Mind in Society": "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people, and then, inside the child … All the higher [mental] functions originate as actual relations between human individuals."(Vygotsky,1978)

In the latter half of the 20th century,this approach was used right from early education to college. The ideas of Vygotsky (1978), which eventually came to be known as Social Constructivism, exerted an enormous influence in the development of modern education. This theory pointed out that learning is a social process and knowledge is created collaboratively. This led to the transformation of the learner to be an active participant in the learning process. Gradually, teacher-centered classrooms evolved into learner-centered spaces. The socio-cultural context answers three essential concerns: how people learn through participation, the learning outcomes, and the effects of socio-cultural factors on their learning. Crucially, psychological (learning) processes are not free

from the socio-cultural context; indeed, they are constituted by the context of which they are part of (Cole 1996; Gee2008).

2.2Digital Learning Platform.

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, when the world is continuously in a flux, several universities have developed creative solutions at short notice by implementing online teaching through digital learning media to keep student retention and maintain access to learning through diverse platforms. With the incorporation of digital technology in education, which "opens a world of possibilities for higher educational institutes" (Aljabre, 2012, p.26), the role of a teacher is more of a facilitator than an instructor.

The strategic objectives of the university require the appropriate utilization of digital learning platforms in building a knowledge-based society, while balancing the prospects of the institution's output and the job market requirements (Rahmatullah, Sultana & Sultan 2020). On the one hand, the teachers had no time to prepare for these conditions at workprofessionally…they have to prove as active agents intransforming the classes to a virtual mode, but without changing the curriculum, methodology, and course design. On the other hand, higher education students experienced anxiety and depression due to the crisis.

2.3 Coping with Students'Anxiety.

There are many psychological factors that affect learningEFL. The most relevant of them is language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986),resulting from fear of negative evaluation, apprehension from communication with teachers, and anxiety related to tests. In one of the studies on factors affecting the performance of EFL learners, Young (1991) asserted that learners in oral courses express high anxiety level compared to other classes. It propels a negative impression about oral tests among learners.

In higher education, the pandemic has affected the working of educational institutions, changed the teaching environment and disrupted students' lives. Though the use of online pedagogies has increased, it is ironic that: "some of the most popular technology-mediated forms of education – such as TED talks, MOOCs and the numerous professional and amateur instructional videos on YouTube – are all staged in traditional ways, with someone talking and explaining so that others can watch, listen and learn" (Biesta, 2019, p. 55).

The students experienced and shared high levels of stress, anxiety and lack of motivation in self-isolation as their classes got suspended in no time. The instructors in online courses create an interpersonal feel by treating students as unique (not as impersonal pixels on a screen), by building choices into the course and by creating a positive emotional climate (White, 2000). Previous research findings have ample evidence about sources of students' anxiety ranging from disorganized classrooms to students' grades (Saito and Samimy, and MacIntyre, 1993; Liu and Huang, 2011). Studies have also accepted the prevalence of anxiety among EFL learners (Jin, De Bot and Keijzer, 2015). They observe that anxiety is inevitable in learning an L2/FL. Other studies like (Liu, 2006; Wei et al., 2015; Kralova and Petrova, 2017) have recognized that anxiety is because of personality traits mainly reflected in a teacher-student interpersonal behavior. Liu and Huang (2011) have found anxiety affecting L2/FL learners' performance as they speak briefly and sometimes even inaudibly.

The impact of Covid-19 on higher education is the latest source of anxiety, which seems to be long-lasting unless it is dealt with, prioritizing the students' academic and overall development. In a student survey conducted at Arizona State University, the findings (Aucejo et al. 2020) brought out a consensus that the pandemic was broadly disruptive to students, particularly those who belonged to lower-income groups.

Objectives:

The present study aims to identify instructors' strategies to utilize online learning platforms,investigate the anxiety and stress levels among students, explore students' attitudes towards online learning methods, and determine the effects of implementing a social constructivist approach in fully online classes.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a deductive approach, which includedqualitative and quantitative methods to probe the practices, perceptions, and

experiences of EFL teachers and students. The nature of the present study is also cross-sectional as it took place during a specific period. The cluster sampling method was used for this research, as the participants of the study consisted of faculty members and students from the female colleges of King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The researcher calculated the sample size using the Krejcieand Morgan (1970) table.A sample size of 120 was obtained to study the three variables of the study with the COVID-19 perspective: anxiety, virtual learning environment and teaching methods. To study the impact of this pandemic on our EFL students, a close-ended survey questionnaire was administered online. This questionnaire was based on the researchdone by Lukowand Ross (2003) that investigated the students'attitudes in an educational scenario. However, it was modified to meet the requirements of this study.

InstrumentsThe questionnaire (See Appendix) comprised items on coping with Covid-19: stress and anxiety in a virtual learning environment, including 30 questions which were divided into four sections on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire sought information on academic life, infrastructure and skills for studying from home, psychological stress or anxiety, general circumstances and practices to cope with their anxiety during the pandemic. The SPSS software, version 25, was used to analyze the data. A set of open-ended questions were asked through telephonic interview with EFL faculty members.

Participants
The faculty members were chosen regardless of their years of experience. The faculty participants had heterogeneous (Urdu, Arabic, Bangla and English) linguistic backgrounds, and were already exposed to the blended learning environment before the pandemic. The sample size consisted of 60 students from first year of graduate program. All student participants were native Arabic speakers with limited exposure to English language.All students had studied English as a foreign language till grade twelve.

Data Analysisand Reliability Testing
The data obtained from the questionnaire was coded and analyzed using SPSS version 25, which revealed the mean score, standard deviation, percentage, and sum. These statistical items were used to determine how students felt anxiety or felt comfortable with the virtual environment and their opinion about the teaching methods. The study evaluated the validity of the questionnaire in two steps; first, it assessed the internal consistency of the questionnaire; second, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the scores of each item. Table1 shows the correlation coefficients on each variable scale. The data reveals that all correlation coefficients are between (0.950-0.968) and significant at the 0.01 level, which indicates that all items are valid

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Table-1. Correlations coefficient on each variable scale

Variable Scale	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig.
Anxiety	0.950	0.01
Virtual Environment	0.955	0.01
Teaching Methods	0.968	0.01

To assess the reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher calculated alpha Cronbach for the scale as a whole. This reliability test used the "one-shot" technique or one-time measurement by making a correlation comparison of responses to questionnaire items that were considered reliable if Cronbach's Alpha was > 0.5. Table 2 shows the reliability test results for 30 statement items in the questionnaire.

Table-2. Cronbach's Alpha for the questionnaire

Sub Scale	Items	Cronbach's Alpha

Anxiety	10	0.88
Virtual Environment	10	0.87
Teaching Methods	10	0.93

A well-constructed scale should have a reliability coefficient of 0.80 or higher. The alpha coefficient of the anxiety subscale had an alpha of 0.88; the subscale "Virtual Environment" had an alpha of 0.87; and the sub-scale "Teaching Methods " of 0.93.

RESULTS

The studyconducted the first analysis through a telephonic interview with the faculty members measuring their satisfaction with the new system of e-Learning under current circumstances. The respondents had developed various innovative strategies in e-teaching and analyzing students' formative and summative assessments using Blackboard Collaboration. The majority of them claimed that the most challenging part of teaching and assessments was to strike a balance between the poor internet connectivity on the students' side, leading to low attendance and ensuring the proper delivery of course content in the given time frame.

The subsequent analysis (Figure-1) is based on the data received from the teachers through a Likert scale questionnaire (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree). The result is displayed in the mean value for each statement.
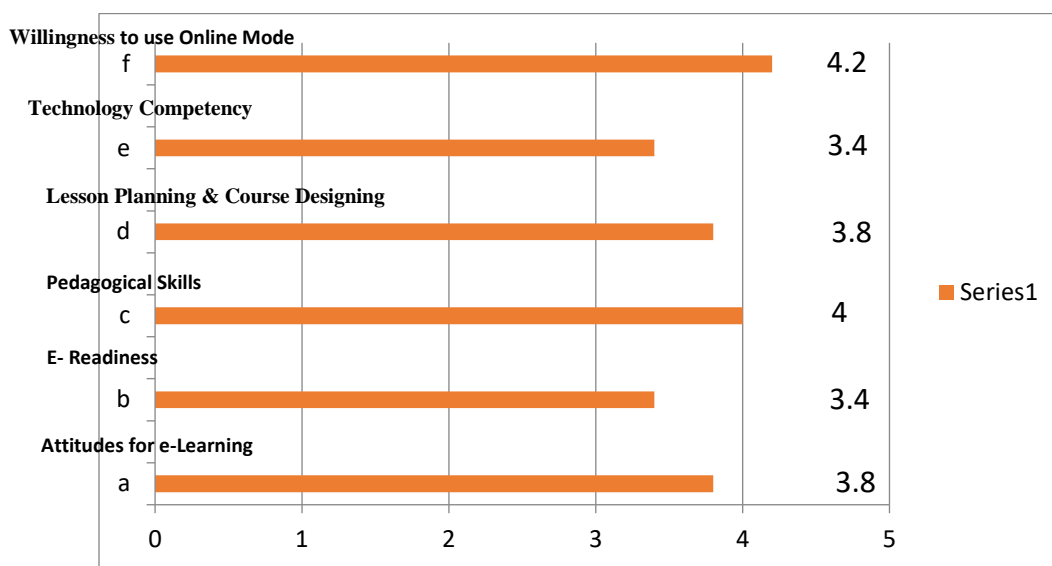

Figure 1: Analysis of Teachers' Satisfaction regarding teaching in a fully online mode.

Though Blackboard is a highly efficient platform for online teaching and learning, almost 82% of the instructors showed a highly positive attitude towards the use of online instruction in the current circumstances. They admitted that teaching through virtual mode definitely provides an excellent experience. The teachers (73%), through their previous experiences of online teaching in a blended mode,displayeda readiness to optimize to the virtual learning environment. The teachers developed technological skills through the consistent virtual training sessions and orientation programs offered by the university.

The study figured out that, though most of the teachers (78%) possessed required pedagogical skills, a considerable number of them expressed their concern for the lack of information regarding updates on which would ensure compliance of the course content, changes in course design, and methods of assessment with the course learning outcomes (CLOs). Since the assessments should follow the set quality

standards, the teachers had to redirect the students to scale up their written assignments by providing regular feedbacks since many students wrote in informal style rather than in the prescribed format. It amplified the teacher's responsibilities as they had too many reviews to be marked weekly.

Most of the teachers were adept in using Blackboard for course delivery. Though the university supported the faculty by conducting frequent webinars and training sessions, the sessions could not be scheduled well in advance and proved quite exhaustive at times. A rapid transition to the online mode and lack of time for reflecting on what more could be done to improve the learning outcomes were the key deterrents. The teachers also expressed their concern regarding low attendance at online classes and contacting the students in case of missed submissions or assignments despite deadlines.

The second analysis comprised of the data collected from an online close-ended questionnaire completed by the students of the English Language Graduate Program. The questionnaire was sent to 73 students, but only 60 students sent the complete responses. The majority of the participants in the present research were in the first and second years. Most of the students expressed their satisfaction that the transition from face-to-face learning to online mode was relatively smooth and took place without wasting any academic time. However, some were dissatisfied with the constrained schedule, which made them "too tired to enjoy the course".

The results obtained as shown in Figure 2, indicate that majority of the students had no grievances regarding online lectures and assessment methods used in the process. They affirmed that the teachers clarified the course requirements, modes of assessment, and performance expectations gradually. The teachers responded to their academic concerns as soon as possible.
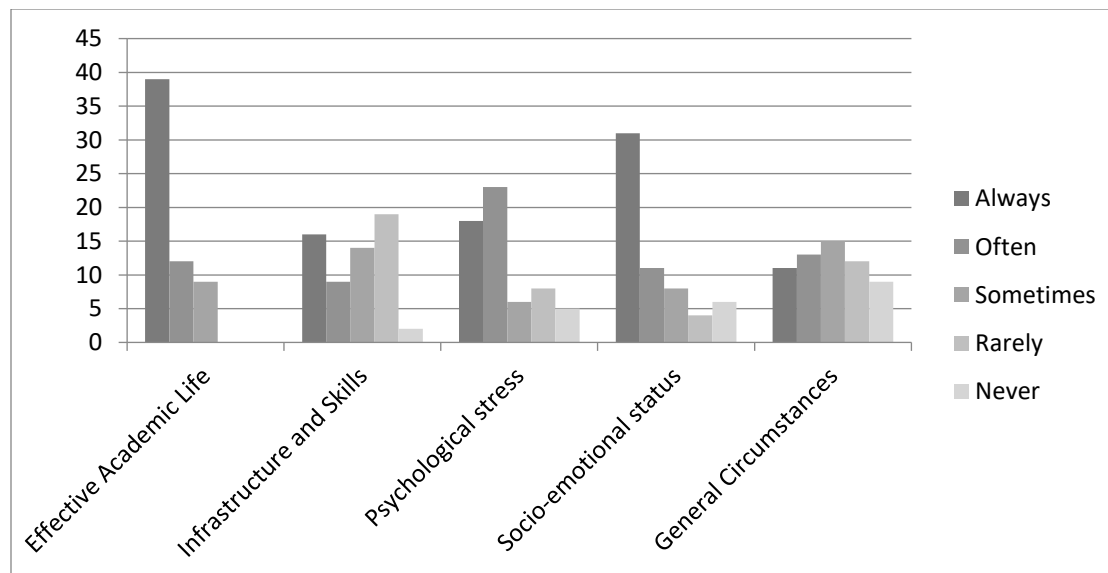

Figure 2: Analysis of Students' attitude towards teaching in a fully online mode

Most of the students admitted that they didn't have much experience of studying in an online environment. The respondents also shared their concerns regarding the lack of separate workspaces at home which created frequent disturbances while attending lectures,and increased the time taken for completing the assignments. The majority of the students were accessing the course via smartphones which at times proved to be inconvenient, especially for

preparing written assignments and taking assessments. Most of the students resided in remote areas, and many of them belonged to low-income families; therefore, they take the courses on mobile instead of laptops. Online exams added to their inconvenience since they had to move to areas with a strong network.

Moreover, traditional curricula have significant course content (Al-Kuwaiti, 1996) and learners with a quest for early graduation enrolled for up to 8 courses in a semester (Razzak& Lee, 2016).Too much to study in less time while struggling withthe language barrier and expectation of higher grades (Dedoussis, 2007) possibly added to the stress of learning. Since the time available for course implementation in Saudi Arabia is often limited to four months in a semester, the students expected the teachers to be more supportiveand adopt step-by-step guidance wherever needed.

The responses obtained through the questionnaire also indicated that (13%) respondents had worries regarding the lack of leisure activities and suffered from adverse effects on physical health due to consistent requirement of completing lectures, assignments, and assessments. To support our students, a positive, lively online students' community was created under the supervision of academic advisors.This is done to make them feel well-connected with their teachers and classmates. Appropriate details about the delivery of the courses, lectures, and assessments were provided through online announcements.

DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions around the world to suspend on-campus learning till further notice. The closures implemented as a measure to contain the Covid-19 pandemic have led to an accelerated deployment of distance education solutions to ensure pedagogicalcontinuity. The universities have exerted tireless efforts to minimize academic losses and immediately provide solutions to ensure continuity of teaching-learning and assessment processes. Though the measures taken are outstanding, yet the obstacles

are multiple, ranging from low connectivity and lack ofthe online content aligned with national curricula, to teachers' unpreparedness for this 'newnormal'.

In this study, the effects of social constructivist approach, which are useful in teacher training, learners' problem-solving, and metacognitive awareness levels, are analyzed. The faculty members were independent choosing diverse teaching strategies to maximize the delivery of teaching content. The incorporation of socio-constructivist approach helped faculty members to adoptto the new teaching mode and provided them an insight into lowering the anxiety levels among students. While the implementation of the approach led to the achievement of optimal learning outcomes, the results from the current study also indicate that the teachers had little time to adapt themselves to the transition and to improvise their lesson plans and assessment methods.

The most significant aspect that needs to be maintained in distance learning is the sense of community. Distance education provides a great deal of interactivity but the real challenge is to provide interaction. Hence, the online mode must be considered as an invaluable opportunity to use alternate methods of teaching like flipped classrooms where pre-recorded lectures, audio/video clips, or assignments are posted on Blackboard.The in-class time is utilized for inquiry, application or assessment of the students to assess their knowledge of the concepts covered. Another helpful method is Collaborative learning, an educational approach in which the strength of working in groups or a team is utilized to solve problems, complete different tasks, or learn new concepts together. Creating Virtual Discussion rooms can eliminate the sense of isolation amongst students caused by individualized learning.

It has been observed that most of the teachers prefer to use static tools than explore new tools for academic improvement. Lane(2008) observed, "more instructors embrace online teaching because they are pressured to", highlighting the lack of interest on the part of teachers. The study recommends frequent

teacher training sessions have to be organized. Office hours may be utilized for live chat to maintain interaction with the students. Proper use of blogs, journals and discussion boards can energize the learning environment, and produce excellent results.The teachers can effectively use Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom, or other virtual platforms in synchronous mode to create breakout rooms during online lectures for an allotted time. After a discussion point is given, the students can be divided into small groups and placed in these breakout rooms to discuss it. At the end of the session, the students share their findings.

In courses requiring research projects, the teachers face the problem of taking oral presentations followed by query sessions. It is suggested to use Second Life's virtual platform to create Virtual Gallery walks to enhance students' learning and engagement. The process starts with students' preparation of a digital poster based on their key findings on a given topic. The posters/media are then transferred to Second Life. Once these digital files are uploaded, the students can log into the virtual world independently or as a class. Assessment of learning outcomes can be done in the form of quizzes before or at the end of the virtual gallery walk in various ways.

To augment teaching and make teachers more technology savvy, Google has permitted access to numerous teaching applications and customizable tools like Google Classroom, Google docs, Google Slides and Google Forms. This fosters collaborative learning and helping in the creation of asynchronous learning environments,which would enable students to learn at their own pace from their home. Moreover,it will enable them to engage with a variety of content like wikis, blogs, video, quizzes, and so on,to suit their schedules and decrease redundancy.An opportunity also exists for extension professionals to enroll in various high-quality courses to improve their skills and understanding of research and different emerging areas. The platforms offering top-notch Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) like Coursera and EdX is a must-try, as it provides several audit courses requiring no enrolment fees.

The study also recommends that appropriate measures be taken to gear up our students for diverse learning environments without being insensitive to their genuine requirements. There is an immediate need to counsel and prepare our students for self-directed learning. Orientation sessions would prove highly beneficial in training the students to reflect on their readiness to learn, set their learning goals, and engage in the learning process using a deep approach, which is a prerequisite for the development of higher-order skills, for example, critical thinking skills.The need of the hour is to build a rapport between teachers and students to minimize communication barriers created by remote learning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the incorporation of online instruction provided a grand opportunity to teachers across the world to showcase their skills and capabilities in technology-based teaching, and students, despite facing academic and emotional stress, gave their best performance. These extraordinary experiences in education have brought us to an exciting threshold. There is a strong possibility of continuing online mode in the future, or in the least, to learn from our experiences. Teachers can use alternative teaching and assessment methods in the traditional mode. The students must be trained for 'self-directed learning' by working consistently on their skills and attitudes and actively engaging in the learning process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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