

# Online Learning and Teaching Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Bangladeshi Students Receiving China's Higher Education

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This work was supported by Yunnan University's Research Innovation Fund for Graduate Students under the Grant [2019077]

Received: May 26, 2020

Accepted: June 23, 2020

Online Published: June 24, 2020

doi:10.5430/elr.v9n2p37

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v9n2p37>

## Abstract

While facing the COVID-19 pandemic attack worldwide, international students are forced to turn to online instruction for academic study. Based on a longitudinal ethnography with a cohort of Bangladeshi students who study in English-medium degree program at software engineering, this study reveals a series of challenges confronting both Chinese teachers and Bangladeshi students for their online interactions. Data were collected through online classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, audio-recording and online interactions. From the perspective of Chinese teachers, they lacked of control on their students' class participation given the poor network infrastructure in Bangladesh and the time gap between China and Bangladesh; in terms of Bangladeshi students, they felt frustrated in access to Chinese-mediated online teaching applications due to their insufficient Chinese proficiency; their inaccessibility to operate their subject learning also made the online learning tedious. Based on the findings, the study offers several suggestions to respond to teachers and students' difficulties and challenges in online lessons and sheds some lights on improving online education.

**Keywords:** online learning and teaching, COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladeshi students, China's higher education

## 1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has been declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization. Since its outbreak, the pandemic has saturated the headlines of various international media channels that disseminate information to global citizens (Zheng & Goh & Wen, 2020). In such particular time, people have been stuck at homes for several months. As COVID-19 has been restricted effectively, in China, only those graduation classes have been allowed to return school in March until present time. Successively, some universities in different provinces have announced the opening time of new semester. However, for those regions and countries where the pandemic is prevalent, universities and educational institutions have set out to adopt new ways to reach the students in different levels through online teaching.

The global learning landscape of the twenty-first century is being transformed and shaped by the uptake of digital communication tools and online-networked applications, along with the changing characteristics, demands, and challenges of teachers and students (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). Meanwhile, online teachers and students are confronted with unprecedented difficulties and challenges as well. To be more specific, online courses require the instructor and learner to be online at the same designated time using technology that offers real time communication and instant feedback (Charlton & Law, 2014).

In poor countries, international students who study in Chinese universities might be unable to attend online classes in their own countries as their Chinese teachers because of internet problem and time difference. This is particularly true with Bangladeshi students who are stuck in Bangladesh due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the challenges and difficulties of online instructors and learners and the increasing significance of online education, this article attempts to explore the teaching and learning experiences in online lessons in light of Chinese teachers and Bangladeshi students, and investigates their attitudes and expectations towards online education.

## 2. Previous Studies on Online Instruction

A bulk of literatures concentrate on online education have been conducted on different thematic topics from various aspects. Accordingly, topics such as students' experiences, perceptions, expectations, needs and difficulties in online lessons are the most prevalent (Hamann & Pollock & Wilson, 2012; Charlton & Law, 2014; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Joyner & Fuller & Holzweiss & Henderson & Young, 2014). Specifically, Joyner et al (2014) studied online graduate students' perceptions of best learning experiences, revealing that students desire a deeper level of learning that requires more instructional forethought and planning in light of constructivist theory. Similarly, students' writing skills in English, insufficient and deferred feedback and the lack of cultural exchange are the major concerns regarding online learning (Thompson & Ku, 2005).

Furthermore, some scholars focused on the influencing factors and strategies in promoting the efficiency and quality of online courses. For instance, Akcaoglu & Lee (2018) asserted that Facebook groups can create supplemental social spaces, indicating that students felt more positive about social presence and learning interactions with other classmates and their instructors, as well as perceiving the course as having more sociability after they joined the class in Facebook groups. In the context of historically Black colleges and universities, Alston & Moore & Thomas (2017) suggested that educators must embrace the inherent potential of online teaching and learning while guarding against its tacit disempowering features (Maidment, 2005) and a need for a reliable and effective information technology department, more staff, additional computers, and software for faculty in order to improve online teaching.

In addition, Ni (2013) conducted a comparison study of the effectiveness of classroom and online learning, suggesting that persistence in an online environment may be more challenging in research methods classes than in other public administration classes, and students' participation may be less intimidating, and the quality and quantity of interaction may be increased in online classes. However, few researchers have focused on the online teaching and learning experiences of instructors and learners in the particular time of COVID-19 pandemic. Different from above studies, this article attempts to explore Chinese teachers and Bangladeshi international students online class experiences as well as their attitudes and expectations of online lessons.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants and Setting

The participants for this study are online instructors and students recruited from Yunnan university in China. A total of five instructors participated: three of them are from school of software, the other two from the school of international studies. They have different educational backgrounds different from master to PhD. In turn, student participants are also solicited from these instructors' classes. A total of fifteen Bangladeshi international students have participated in the online classes from the beginning of March in 2020 to present time. Among the student participants, four are female students, while the rest of them are all male students. They are the first year of undergraduate students major in software engineering, studying in China around 5 months. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, they all go back to Bangladesh. Owing to the long duration of the outbreak, Chinese universities and educational institutions have decided to adopt online teaching for students. Based on four-month-ethnography, both teacher and student participants' educational trajectories are also listed in the following table together with the above information (see Table I and Table II below).

Table I. Five Teacher Participants' Profile

Participants	Nationality	Gender	Courses	University	School Department	of	Educational background	App used for class
T1	China	Female	Professional reading and communication	Chinese and Yunnan university in China	School of software	of	PhD	Ding Talk
T2	China	Male	Introduction to Software Engineering	Yunnan university in China	School of software	of	PhD	Zoom
T3	China	Male	Computer Architecture and Composition	Yunnan university in China	School of software	of	PhD	Zoom
T4	China	Female	China overview	Yunnan university in China	School of international studies	of	3 <sup>rd</sup> year of Master in Yunnan University	Ding Talk
T5	China	Female	Chinese reading and writing	Yunnan university in China	School of international studies	of	2 <sup>nd</sup> year of Master in Yunnan University	Ding Talk

Table II. Fifteen Student Participants' Profile

Participants	Nationality	Age	Gender	Major	Degree	University	School of department
S1	Bangladesh	22	Female	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S2	Bangladesh	21	Female	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S3	Bangladesh	20	Female	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S4	Bangladesh	23	Female	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S5	Bangladesh	19	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S6	Bangladesh	20	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S7	Bangladesh	22	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S8	Bangladesh	21	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S9	Bangladesh	23	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S10	Bangladesh	22	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S11	Bangladesh	23	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S12	Bangladesh	20	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S13	Bangladesh	18	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S14	Bangladesh	21	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software
S15	Bangladesh	23	Male	Software engineering	First year of undergraduate	Yunnan University in China	School of software

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were mainly collected through online classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, audio-recording as well as online interactions. In the initial period of online classes, I was permitted by the subject teachers to enter into the online classroom observing how Bangladeshi students interact with their teachers and classmates. I paid special attention to students' language use and performances in online classes. I also showed interests in teachers' feedback and evaluation to students' performance and focused on what difficulties and challenges online instructors and learners have encountered. All the data were collected by taking field notes and audio-recordings.

After conducting the field work for almost one month, informal and semi-structured individual and group interviews with Bangladeshi students and Chinese teachers were conducted in WeChat groups and through voice calls. The advantage of group interview is that it is a socially oriented research procedure (Krueger, 2014). With the agreement of the participants, 15 students and 5 teachers received in-depth interviews and each interview lasted for at least 30 minutes. The semi-structured interviews concentrated on their online learning and teaching experiences, such as difficulties, attitudes, expectations and needs in online courses. This approach allowed individuals to be able to respond in their own ways. Also, researcher was able to explore new ideas about the topic based on the respondent's emerging world view (Merriam, 1998). Interviews with Bangladeshi students were conducted in mixing languages of Chinese and English and they could answer questions in either language. Interviews with the five instructors were conducted in Chinese language.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify emerging themes and patterns in present study. According to Braun and Clarke (2017), Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns. It is a powerful yet flexible method for analyzing qualitative data that can be used within a variety of paradigmatic or epistemological orientations (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The data was first aggregated into categories and then collapsed into meaningful patterns. Techniques for direct interpretation and detailed description of the case were also used throughout the data analysis (Thompson & Ku, 2005).

In order to explore the online teaching and learning experiences of Chinese teachers and Bangladeshi students and understand their attitudes and expectations of online class, I have asked two research questions in present study:

- (1) What are Chinese teachers and Bangladeshi students' online class teaching and learning experiences?
- (2) What are teachers and students' attitudes and expectations for online courses?

## 4. Findings

The above two research questions are addressed in this section, which is consist of three subsections, including instructors' online teaching experiences, students' online learning experiences and their attitudes and expectations of online classes.

### 4.1 Instructors' Online Teaching Experiences

The teacher participants in the study mainly use "Ding Talk" and "Zoom" for online classes. Ding Talk is a multi-terminal platform for free communication and collaboration created by Alibaba group for Chinese enterprises. It provides PC version, Web version, Mac version and mobile version, supporting mobile phone and computer file transfer. On April 8, 2020, Ding Talk (Chinese language: 钉钉) was officially released overseas version named "Ting Talk Lite", supporting traditional Chinese character, English, Japanese and other languages, mainly including video conference, group broadcast, chatting, schedule arrangement and other functions, as well as free use for users around the world during the outbreak of COVID-19. Likewise, founded in Japan, Zoom originally makes recording equipment. It has a variety of functions, such as participating in the conference without limitations of time and place, supporting PC/MAC version, iPad, Android and iOS, and providing the conference room system. Similarly, through Zoom, local documents, videos, computer desktops, and mobile desktops can be shared with attendees. Attendees can also make real-time multi-party comments and notes. The network meeting is simple to operate in Zoom, the meeting number up to 100 guests and 10,000 audiences can carry on the real-time interaction (Retrieved from Wikipedia). Due to their helpful and multiple functions and simple operation, the teachers claim that they are the best choices for online teaching currently.

According to the authors' class engagement and observation as well as interviews of teachers, teachers' unpleasant teaching experiences are founded, mainly including poor network; understanding barriers caused by language problem; students' less participation and less interaction and feedback in online classes.

#### 4.1.1 Poor Network Infrastructure in Bangladesh

It is generally known that Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. Owing to its poverty and huge amount of population, Bangladeshi development lags behind. This is very evident in its infrastructure. That is why most of Bangladeshi international students are unable to use internet as same as Chinese students. This has seriously affected the online classes both for teachers and students.

T2: Because of the internet problem, I can see some students attend class for a while, and then leave the class again and again (Individual interview translated by the author).

T5: When I ask one student to answer my question, the student asks me to repeat my question many times. Student says that the internet is very poor, he cannot hear me. At the same time, I also cannot hear student's voice clearly. That is very terrible. Then, I choose to send my question to the class chatting group in order to interact with them (Individual interview translated by the author).

#### 4.1.2 Understanding Barriers Caused by Insufficient Language Proficiency

In order to examine teachers and students' class performance, the author pays lots of attention on the language use in terms of the communication and interaction between teachers and students in online class. Bangladeshi international students, major in software engineering, accept English as medium of instruction courses in Yunnan university in China. As a result, teachers and students mostly use English in class. Nevertheless, there are some understanding barriers because of teachers and students' different English levels.

T1: In students' presentation time, if I do not look at the words in their PPT, I cannot understand them at all. Their English pronunciations are more or less influenced by their native languages. In order to continue the class, I must give students feedback immediately even if I do not understand their speaking. Moreover, students also cannot understand my English. Some students ask me to write the key words in the chatting group when they cannot understand the words I speak. (Individual interview translated by the author).

#### 4.1.3 Students' Less Participation

When it comes to students' engagement and participation in online class, all of teachers claim that there are just a half of students attend the class.

T3: Online classes are very flexible and free. There are no time and place restrictions. Students are all in Bangladesh, they cannot get into class due to many kinds of reasons. When I ask the students who attend the class, they say that many of their classmates don't care about the class, some of them have internet or electricity problem and so forth. So, we teachers don't know how to solve this problem (Individual interview translated by the author).

#### 4.1.4 Students' Less Interaction and Feedback

Furthermore, many teachers state that they feel embarrassed in class, from time to time, because of students' less interaction and feedback. Some teachers encourage students to open their camera and microphone in that teacher and student can see each other face to face and hear their voices online, but students tend to close camera and microphone. It brings a sense of isolation and embarrassment to teachers.

T4: When I want to discuss a question with students, I ask them questions. To my disappointed, only one or two students would interact with me, sometime, no one responds my question, as if I were the only one in class (Individual interview translated by the author).

T5: From my experience, if I do not call a students' name, no one will answer my questions. Meanwhile, the students not only have little interaction with me, but also with their classmates (Individual interview translated by the author).

#### 4.1.5 A sense of Helplessness in Online Teaching

Besides above problems, teachers also suffer from the curriculum design. For example, participant T1 usually logs in Ding Talk more than ten minutes before the appointed class time for checking the devices and waiting for students. However, she feels a sense of helplessness, particularly in teaching design and lesson plans. And she is eager to participate trainings for online teaching.

T1: It is my first time to take an online course. When the university leaders tell that I need to take online class for international students. I feel very anxious and helpless. I have no clue about instructional design, lesson plans. From my one-year experience in teaching Bangladeshi international students in real class, I think it is a big challenge. I try to ask students to do presentations by selecting some topics and chapters in our online course. But most of them could not understand my requirements. I explain to them many times. Just two or three students could understand. One class is divided into two small parts, each part lasts for 45 minutes, I have to spend around 40 minutes to tell

them the presentation requirements. That wastes lots of time. So, students could not learn too much new knowledge. What should I do? Last year, I attended a bilingual teaching training for international students for real class teaching. As for online class, it is very different from real class. I really hope that there are some trainings for online teaching. (Individual interview translated by the author)

In a word, many difficulties and challenges instructors have encountered in online lessons. On the one hand, the overwhelmingly external factor, like the poor network infrastructure in Bangladesh, cannot be avoided. On the other hand, we cannot neglect the internal factors which include understanding barriers caused by language problem, students' less engagement, less interaction and feedback as well as teachers' helplessness in online teaching design. These negative factors have exerted crucial impacts on the quality of online class and caused unpleasant online teaching experiences to teachers.

#### *4.2 Students' Online Learning Experiences*

Apart from teachers, students play the most essential role in online courses. When evaluating the quality and validity of a class, students' performance, evaluation and feelings are particularly important. The findings show that students have both positive and negative experiences towards online classes, including: a sense of freedom (positive); tedious teaching styles and uninteresting contents, less interaction with teachers and classmates, unfamiliarity with online teaching applications (negative).

##### *4.2.1 A Sense of Freedom*

Without the restrictions of time and place, most Bangladeshi students feel a sense of freedom. Some of them also think that online class is very interesting and attractive.

S5: The advantage of online class is that students are very free. For example, I can eat or work during class time (Individual interview by WeChat voice call).

S8: In online class, I don't have to get up 30 minutes before the class to get ready and go to class, I can attend the class in my bed. Also no one talks and there are no distractions so I can focus on the whole class (Individual interview by WeChat voice call).

##### *4.2.2 Time Difference between China and Bangladesh*

It is true that there are two hour-time gaps between China and Bangladesh. This is also a vital factor affecting student's participation in online class.

S1: You know, we have morning classes at 8:30 am in Bei Jing's Time. But actually, 8 :30 am is just 6:30 am in Bangladesh. There are two hours-time difference. We were sleeping at that time. So, most of us could not get up at such early time (Individual interview by WeChat video call).

##### *4.2.3 Tedious Teaching Styles and Uninteresting Online Contents*

Except the network problem and time difference, instructors' teaching styles and teaching contents are decisive factors for an effective online class. There is no denying that an interesting and profound contents and vivid class will promote students' class engagement.

S2: In class time, I just open the APP, and then sleep. It is so boring because only the teacher is speaking, he is just reading words from his PPT. I'm not the only one who thinks the class is boring, others also think like me (Individual interview by WeChat video call) .

S10: I think the professional classes are more boring than Chinese language classes. For instance, the subject of professional Chinese reading and communication, I don't know why we need to learn the Chinese expressions of professional terms in software engineering. We can explain those terms in English. And all of our professional courses are taught by English language only. So why we need to learn the Chinese expression of professional knowledge? Also, the subject of an introduction of software engineering, the teacher just reads the definitions and histories about software engineering from his PPT. That is so boring (Individual interview by WeChat voice call).

##### *4.2.4 Less Interaction With Teachers and Classmates*

From the perspective of teachers, students have less interaction with teachers and their classmates. Similarly, students also think that teachers have a little communication with students in online classes.

S15: If this class turns to group (A) students to do presentation, then the other students have nothing to do. Even though they attend the class, but they do not speak words at all. And the teacher just speaks to the students who do presentation. So, I feel very lonely sometimes. I have a sense of isolation and ignorance. Further, teacher also lack of

group discussion with students (Individual interview by WeChat voice call).

#### 4.2.5 Unfamiliarity with Online Teaching Applications

Because of the outbreak of COVID-19, instructor and learner don't have opportunities for teaching and learning in real class. In this regard, the applications and platforms are the essential tools for online teaching. Thus, teachers and students' unfamiliarity with the online teaching applications will also affect the efficiency of online class.

S14: Last week, it was my turn to do presentation. I was very nervous because I did not know how to show my PPT in the main page so that all of the people could see it. Sometime, the teacher asked me to answer questions, but I accidentally turned off the microphone. I felt very sorry and embarrassed about that (Individual interview by WeChat voice call).

Overall, at the initial time of online classes, students embrace a positive attitude towards online class simply because it is an interesting and new teaching style comparing with real class, and they also have much more freedom than used to be. However, later on, students have negative feelings about online class since it brings some difficulties, such as the tedious teaching styles and uninteresting online contents, less interaction with teachers and classmates, unfamiliarity with online teaching applications.

#### 4.3 Teachers and Students' Attitudes and Expectations in Online Courses

It can be seen from teachers and students' online class experiences that there are many difficulties and challenges in online courses during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers' attitudes are very negative and unassisted. Most of them states that their online class experiences are very unpleasant because of the poor network infrastructure in Bangladesh, students less interaction and participants, and understanding obstacles caused by language in class. They are eager to take part in online course training for improving online teaching. By contrast, at the beginning of online class, students show much curiosity and interest in it because there are few constraints and much freedom in online class. Nevertheless, as they participate classes day by day, students come across quite a few problems, such as the inconvenience brought by time difference in two countries, less communication with teachers and classmates, teachers' boring teaching style and uninteresting course contents. Consequently, they are getting pessimistic about online class with a sense of ignorance and isolation. They hope that teachers can change their teaching styles and contents as well as interacting more with students, like asking questions and setting up group discussions.

### 5. Discussion and Recommendations

Interestingly, none of the participants in this study completely enjoyed an online class. They suggested that a blended class both with online teaching and face-to-face class would be much better. This is consistent with previous studies, which advocate a blended learning approach (Chen, 1997; Aspden & Helm, 2004). However, in the period of COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face teaching in real class might be impossible for them.

With respect to the teachers' teaching experiences in online education, the findings revealed that the poor network infrastructure in some developing countries, like Bangladesh, was the biggest stumbling block in the online environment. Many of the participants reported that students' less class engagement and participation was the result of the poverty in Bangladesh, particularly because of poor and backward network infrastructure. The findings also pointed out that the language proficiencies (English or Chinese) of instructors and learners are very crucial for the understanding between teachers and students which directly influenced the effects and results of class. In addition to this, many prior researchers (Beamer & Varner, 2001; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Swan, 2002) have proved student-student interaction and instructor-student interaction are the most essential factors that support students' success in the online environment. Unfortunately, in present study, teacher have a sense of embarrassment because there is just a little communication between teacher-student and student-student. So, students' less feedback and participation, as well as the less interaction between students and teachers. More importantly, the results also showed that the teachers are in great need of online course training. Some teacher participants asserted that they are very helpless when they don't know how to make a good teaching plan and course design.

When it comes to Bangladeshi international students' online learning experiences, I found that, at first sight, students have a sense of freedom and curiosity to online class due to its flexibility and convenience. While some of the findings demonstrated that students encountered a series of difficulties and challenges in online class as well. One overwhelmingly factor is the time difference between China and Bangladesh, which makes most of students are unable to attend classes punctually, especially for morning classes. Further, the findings also showed that teachers' teaching styles and contents are of great significance for students' learning and performances. Most of student participants claimed that, in online classes, the teacher took class from beginning to the end with a tedious teaching style. And the teaching content is lack of diversity so that students feel bored and sleepy at most of time. Another

striking finding is that students' unfamiliarity with online teaching applications leads to the ineffectiveness of online class. Thus, universities and educational institutions should provide software technical operation training for students and teachers.

The results of this study provide valuable advice for Bangladeshi international students who are intending to take online courses and instructors who are currently teaching or are planning to teach online courses. Distance education promotes student-centered learning whereby international students can create their own learning opportunities to suit their individual needs and preferred learning styles (Bannon & Milheim, 1997). The following are some of my suggestions in improving online teaching.

First, in order to deal with the online teaching difficulties and challenges, it is essential that teachers and students' class experiences should be concerned and heard by the universities and educational institutions. It would be much easier to make policies and take measures if we have a clear understanding of teachers and students' current situation, like difficulties, needs and expectations.

Second, students are encouraged to take initiatives in online learning. Whenever problems are encountered, students should contact with the instructor immediately and ask for help. Likewise, after class, it is suggested that teachers also should timely communicate with students about their learning experiences in class and listen their feedback and opinions.

Third, universities and educational institutions should provide online teaching training in order to help teachers to make a better course design and multiple teaching styles. Simultaneously, it is also necessary to offer software technical operation training both for teachers and students for the sake of a more effective and qualitative teaching because users' familiarity with application system can ensure an effective and unobstructed class.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored Chinese teachers and Bangladeshi international students' experiences and attitudes to taking online courses in COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the flexible nature of web-based teaching, each teacher and student has different online course experiences. On the one hand, the results showed that teachers negative teaching experiences, mainly including poor internet; understanding barriers caused by language problem; students less participation and their less interaction and feedback in online classes. On the other hand, the findings also manifest that students have both positive and negative experiences towards online classes, including: a sense of freedom (positive); time difference between China and Bangladesh, tedious teaching styles and uninteresting content, less interaction with teachers and classmates, unfamiliarity with online teaching applications (negative). Accordingly, the findings also demonstrated teachers and students' attitudes and expectations for online classes, such as taking part in online course training, multiple teaching styles and contents and more interactions among teachers and students. In the end, the article also provided several suggestions to improve the online education.

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