

Exploring Post-COVID-19 Challenges in Inclusive Classroom Interaction among Tertiary EFL Learners: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

The global pandemic has greatly affected tertiary EFL learners due to the emergency online shifts from the face-to-face (F2F) learning mode. The fever, trauma, anxiety, social distance, masking, global shutdown, freeze, digital divide, and augmented reality created through video conferencing have caused several psychological issues among learners. The post-pandemic uneasiness extended from the pandemic tenure among the learners has received less attention in the popular pandemic literature. So, a research has been conducted to explore the issues that EFL learners still struggle with managing themselves in inclusive classroom interaction. Through the lenses of critical pedagogy and social justice, the study has tried to concentrate on the post-COVID-19 challenges that obstruct learners' performance inside the classroom. These led them to perform unprecedented roles, making the inclusive classroom larger than during pre-pandemic times. This narrative inquiry as research design tries to delve into the inner struggles of five learners during the post-COVID-19 transitions from online to F2F classroom interactions. The study recommends solutions focusing on the L2 learners as essential stakeholders for their sustainable growth in higher education.

Keywords: post-pandemic challenges, new inclusive principles, classroom interaction, educational inequity, social justice

Introduction

The pandemic outbreak of COVID-19 has created disruptions in academia. But its after-effect is more disruptive than the visible attack of the SARS-COV-2 virus (WHO, 2020) among tertiary-level EFL learners. Experts have anticipated a 'tsunami of psychiatric illnesses' in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tandon, 2020). According to them this large-scale event and its impact on mental health can create long term effects among these learners (see Galea et al., 2020). Extended imposed social isolation from outside stretches the avoidance behavior from inside of an individual for safety reasons. Along with other pandemic attributes, this leads to social withdrawal, lack of compassion, personal disconnection, and a sense of isolation and stratification. These make one suffer from anxiety and lead to more seclusion. COVID-19 has created all these for learners, especially at the tertiary level, who have suffered greatly as they missed their parents, mentors, peers, assessments, classrooms, and campuses during their maturation age (Kato et al., 2020; Nash, 2021).

This large-scale pandemic freeze, lockdown, social distance, sanitization, and augmented reality generated through the emergency shift to carry out new learning and teaching in distant mode has created several issues for learners in a higher education EFL context. Moreover, constraints on the ability to interact with peers and teachers have imposed segregation and thus have led to an extensive increase in feelings of isolation, loneliness, and the sense of division between the self and the other learners. Constant virtual presence through videoconferencing learning sessions, mask-wearing, and social distancing at home and from peers have augmented the learners' self into others, making them suffer from exclusion in many ways. Researchers have argued on the issues of sociality, mental health, new normal socio-cultural formations, interconnectivity, and interdependence:

... issues of sociality – how, under the new conditions, might people within and across communities relate to each other, and what new cultural and social formations might emerge in their aftermath. ... How might they lead to the emergence of a new kind of world society? (Peters et al., 2020)

In the wake of COVID-19's 'go viral' for safety reasons, learners suffered immensely from the pandemic's digital adaptation through virtual extension, isolation, and protection (Shrestha et al., 2022; Nash, 2021). Again, after the subsequent shifts, transitioning from online to face-to-face, learners face social, physiological, and psychological challenges in their post-pandemic new regular alteration. The digital and other 'divides' have developed a sense of exclusion among themselves, which still resists them from participating in classroom interaction that they used to have in the pre-pandemic time. Nevertheless, they are afraid of the risk of the

new possibilities of changes, insecurity, and a new dimension of adaptation even after the pandemic term is over.

Facing the new normal in place of the pre-COVID-19 background has made the mind 'racing back and forth' and long to return to 'normality.' Since turning around to the pre-pandemic 'normality' seems impossible (Roy, 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2020), it gives rise to many challenges for learning and teaching to accommodate the novel, during, and after situations that affected higher education with the post-pandemic attributes. Learners suffer from inertia, withdrawal, lack of confidence, attention, and interest after the closures are withdrawn. These, significantly evident among pandemic-affected learners' classroom interactions, assessments, and even participation in classroom activities, have made EFL classrooms more inclusive and diversified. So, the post-pandemic classes have become full of challenges for the teachers and the learners to make classroom interactions more inclusive and participatory. However, details of these accounts of learners' and teachers' experiences of post-pandemic challenges are noticeably less evident in the available literature. Therefore, this study attempted to explore the challenges that learners and teachers are suffering from during this post-COVID-19 era. The study also made a journey on the possible way-outs regarding maintaining classroom interactions and inclusivity for the pandemic-affected learners. So, this research reports the findings of a study that explored EFL learners' epistemic shifts and their challenges from online to FTF after the pandemic in the context of higher education in Bangladesh. The following section details the broader landscape of the context of this research—challenges of the post-COVID-19 in an inclusive EFL classroom interaction.

Post COVID-19 Landscape: Challenges of the Learners

According to UNESCO (2021), pandemic school closures have affected 94% of the world's learner population. The limitations regarding movement and the imposed constraints on the physical-mental-social-self imposed by COVID-19 redefined the identity of the HE learners in a new way. Despite facing the physical and visible technological and viral barriers, the struggle to configure self-esteem and self-efficacy during the crisis moments of the pandemic and isolation made HE learners lose the 'I' in the social group of 'We.' This loss of the self-continued with the fear and trauma that COVID-19 brought to the human body. Learners suffered from detachment, and isolation in video conferencing sessions that obstructed them from flourishing and grow through the tangible and intangible resources of campus life:

In the online teaching and learning space we have already experienced the death of the vitality and vibrancy of the teacher's body and students' laughter; no longer shall a transgression happen between two students while the professor lectures. While the

virus has become mundane, the everyday, so have we all become barricading ourselves at homes, and not at the universities as the resistance used to (Peters et al., 2022).

The changes caused from 'zoomed in' and 'zoomed out' significantly affected the interaction that learners experienced in the pre-pandemic classroom. The movement of the body and the mind of the learners inside the four walls of the classroom, the campus, and the world beyond suffered from several interventions of social distancing and isolation. Moreover, the resistance and the anxiety of their caregivers they have experienced about this unknown has influenced their behavior in the most detrimental ways.

Social distancing in the social space was the most injurious experience for the learners. Living in the family as the member, learner, and test taker, many in one, made the learners unable to compare their capacity and potentiality with others. These overwhelmed/underwhelmed learners suffered from the lack of chances of using and exercising their social power to influence others or being influenced by others in their social interaction. This social stress and anxiety among HE learners are already a public health concern. Social disconnectedness created emotional disconnection during COVID-19, leading the learners to suffer from social and emotional anxieties. Scholars worldwide discovered the same experience among HE learners who still feel challenges getting back to the pre-pandemic era of co-existence (Drubas et al., 2021).

Academic stress is another area where learners face challenges 'as human encounters had decreased and negative academic behaviors had increased.' Learners had a relieving and curious encounter with online education at the initial stage of the pandemic closure compared to the situations of the pre-pandemic time. However, that effect brought disappointment and certain deficiencies among the learners due to the lack of interactions (Moralista, 2020; Karalis, 2020). In addition, learners suffer from academic stress as the changes in the HE environments and practices increased academic burden and expectation after the pandemic and the separation from school after the massive attack of the virus. Researchers emphasized that stress before and after the pandemic differs as classes and academic environments fundamentally change. This needs consideration to deal with this novel academic stress (Kim et al., 2023)

Inclusive Principles at Present

Inclusion refers to real learning opportunities and systems that value the equal access, participation, and contribution of students of all backgrounds, disregarding the abled and

disabled, race, color, and gender (UNICEF, 2021). Previously it referred to the inclusion of people with disabilities who could not receive equal quality education due to several obstacles in a normal classroom. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the inclusive classroom became bigger (Chua & Bong, 2022). During the pandemic and emergency remote teaching, many learners with or without disabilities could not receive equal quality teaching for several reasons. All learners lived in different geographic areas where internet connections worked equally. Access to the internet and connectivity was a privilege many learners missed during the pandemic term. Other factors, such as lack of electronic devices, spatial arrangements to follow virtual learning in their own spaces, and digital competence, also affected the inclusive classroom during the pandemic.

Furthermore, demographic factors, i.e., age, gender, income, race, location, and education, made variations among learners to adopt virtual classrooms among themselves. Also, teachers' choice of digital platforms to conduct classes often excluded learners from participating in the lesson. Several studies found that the measures of inclusivity—*affective, cognitive, behavioral, competence, and awareness*- were not maintained in many cases as teachers expected to do. To many, “digital language with which remote teaching actualizes, is by itself a decoding of the signifying language and produces ‘dividuals’ rather than individuals” (Deleuze, 1992, in Peters et al., 2022). That remote learning has made divides among learners was the concern of many researchers in pandemic and post-pandemic scenarios. They proposed that this pandemic has pushed the inclusion agenda even more strongly because marginalization happened in many ways during the pandemic term (Acharja, 2021).

To minimize the learning and achievement gaps due to several divides and obstructions and social-psychological marginalization of all types of learners, this post-pandemic large inclusive classroom needs to address environmental, structural, and attitudinal challenges to ensure the cycle of presence- acceptance-participation-achievement (Acharja, 2021).

Classroom Interaction

Regarding classroom interaction during the pandemic, researchers have found that learners were less willing to interact during online classes. However, online classes are more interaction convenient for many teachers than the face-to-face ones. According to Khan and Hasan (2020), interaction among learners, teachers, peers, technical support, teaching method, material, and support service facilitate learners' satisfaction with online learning. In contrast to face-to-face interaction, online classes are more supportive for learners to develop closeness among peers and teachers. However, during the pandemic lockdown time, learners' lack of interest to make interacting in online classes and their preference to face to face classes have

made the teaching-learning sessions more taxing and less attractive (Febrianto et al., 2020; Al-Tammemi et al., 2020).

The pandemic, the first massive global disruption in recent times, has made challenging experiences for academics and learners. Studying learner experiences during the pandemic is essential to be appropriately prepared for future disruptions in higher education (Bashir et al., 2021). Also, it is necessary to understand how the pandemic has shaped our learners, mainly how it affected their mental health and wellbeing across the general population (White & Van Der Boor, 2020).

Research Gap

While pandemic closure has given attention to the pedagogical and other shifts, it has bypassed learners' needs and training to address the Pandemic and post-pandemic changes. Few attempts have been made to facilitate learners and their spontaneous shift to virtual classrooms, managing appropriate online learning behavior and etiquette (Neuwirth et al., 2020; Bashir et al., 2021). Even after this ambiguous, complex, volatile, uncertain, unpredictable, 'the ever-present possibilities of insecurity, risk and relentless change,' four million learners from tertiary institutions in Bangladesh have had no direction on how to manage the post-pandemic disruption with their affected mental health and psychological unwellbeing, economic, digital and other segregation. Also, there is very little available literature on these post-pandemic challenges causing a silent 'tsunami' in the Bangladeshi tertiary EFL context. However, the Pandemic and its aftermath effects have already created a critical incident, and it needs to be handled critically by empowering learners and providing social justice. Hence the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do tertiary learners narrate their experiences of the post COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) Why do they feel challenges in classroom interaction after the pandemic?
- 3) How can these challenges be addressed in the light of social justice to maintain inclusivity in EFL classroom?

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two theories-- critical pedagogy (CP), where the emancipation of the disempowered, underprivileged, and oppressed is highlighted (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989). This theory emphasizes individual and collective efforts. Participation seeks to bring changes, development, and improvements in every social member's individual and collective lives. The researcher has taken the learners as the participants to make the dialogues between the issues of during and post-COVID situations, and the oppressions of trauma, anxiety, social distance in a social setting, augmentation of reality created through virtual reality and thus struggling

now to manage with the transition to the post-pandemic that the global pandemic has brought to them and the world. CP allows teachers to critically analyze the existing practices and ideologies of second language teaching to develop alternative consciousness. This consciousness considers language teaching a critical socio-political process (Pennycook, 1999; Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

Another one employed here is the theory of social justice by Fraser (2009; 2012), which appeared in contrast to the conceptualization of what is mainly known as universal principles of fairness and equality after World War II (Rawls, 1972). Fraser's concepts of social justice circles around recognition, redistribution, and representation — 'Overcoming injustice, then, means dismantling the obstacles that "prevent people from participating on a par with others, as full partners of social interactions"' (Fraser, 2008). The social justice framework can be applied in the post-pandemic new normal education (Xiao, 2021) by redistributing or allocating resources to those with less. Recognition of justice by recognizing diversity and representational justice by empowering the learners to participate in education as active contributors can pave the course to justice. Although it is not possible to respond to everyone's needs, and also, as Fraser (2012) remarks, that ideal definition of social justice is not possible, one can, at least in theory, try to create access to resources, recognition for diversity, and empowerment of learners to have their voices heard. When their voices, causes, and concerns are addressed, the barriers of misrecognition, misrepresentation, and maldistribution of rights, opportunities, and resources will be gone. Moreover, social justice can be exercised in reality.

Research Design

This study uses narrative inquiry as the research method. Barkhuizen et al. (2014) state that narrative inquiry helps us understand language teaching and learning from the perspectives of teachers and students. Understanding human perspectives is now at the center stage of any participatory research that assembles the participants' personal experiences, beliefs, views, and attitudes through a moderated interaction (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996).

Narrative inquiry studies an individual's experience in the social, cultural, and institutional setting where individuals' stories are generated, shaped, shared, and enacted with its three dimensions: spatiality, temporality, and sociality (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006). This inquiry space sheds light on the relational aspects to delve into participants' own and co-constructed experiences developed in a social setting. The stories of during and post-pandemic situations highlight the learners' experiences of the lived and the living time. Through inquiries, in collaboration with that of the researcher, the EFL learners' experiences and challenges have been better explored through the participants' stories. It has opened the inner world and the

struggles that they are facing now. These inquiries helped the participants retell and negotiate their position in the changed landscape to enrich and transform themselves and others. Thus, it is aptly called the 'pragmatic ontology of experience.'

Research Setting and the Participants

A private university in the port city of Bangladesh is the research setting. The participants, who first came to share their challenges, are five (one boy and four girls) learners from advanced semesters and two teachers of this university. The reasons behind selecting them are their availability and the chances of observing and interacting with them.

Data Generation

The researcher has used three data generation tools— written narratives, focus group discussion, and close observation of the participants. Discussions are the familiar sources to collect narrative data for a detailed exploration of an issue (Murray, 2018; Newby, 2014). As participants were the learners of the course the researcher conducted, they supported the study with close observation of them to generate data. A written narrative that learners share is the best record to explore the inner world of the participants. The researcher-directed narrative made learner participants inquire by themselves about the pre- and post-pandemic changes. It is different from regular dairy writing as it is produced for research on a particular problem and time (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Diary writing empowers the participants as they get a chance to edit and control what they narrate (Holliday, 1999). This study used structured diary writing that reported specific information, perceptions, and accounts that influenced factors and constructions of the challenges of their post-pandemic days.

Data Analysis

As data analysis tools, narratives analysis (Polkingthorne, 1995) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) are used. Narrative analysis (NA) chronicles personal experiences and observations and transports fresh insights to often familiar situations. Polkingthorne (1995) labels a narrative as a type of discourse composition that combines diverse elements, incidents, and actions of human lives 'into a thematically unified goal directed process'. They are highly interpretative construction narrating the subjective reality of an individual. Here the researcher analyses the data produced through the participants' narratives as they lived the phases and experienced the events of the COVID-19 pandemic. In thematic analysis, the researcher explored the data from experiential to critical dimensions through observing some aspects of a phenomenon (learners' lack of interest to study, lack of attendance). It helped the researcher develop a detailed picture of the phenomenon of the post-COVID situation generated

through the participants' narratives and their shedding light on those in the data analysis phase. It also supported the development of a critical and constructionist data analysis to identify the concepts, ideas, meanings, and assumptions that reinforce the explicit data content.

Findings

The findings of the study have been arranged into four major themes that describe how EFL learners suffer from anxiety and trauma, lack of interest and confidence to participate in classroom interaction. Also, the findings reflect on the teacher participants' observation on the learners' facing challenges to interact in onsite classroom environment that has made the post pandemic classroom more inclusive and accommodating one on their part.

Challenges of Interaction of Post-pandemic Time: Trauma and Anxiety

I want to let you know that I am a slow learner and it happened after pandemic and lock down. I am losing my memory; I slowly forget everyday incidents. There is a history of losing my memory. The main reason is my mental trauma I have been suffering for 2.5 years. So, I have a hesitation issue, I could not express it to others. I am noticing another problem in my mind—anxiety and overthinking. I could not concentrate on my study or any conversation. I shared it with my friends but got no solution. (Participant 3)

This learner suffered a lot while passing her locked-down days at home. Her prolonged social isolation has caused her to suffer from her physical and mental sickness. Also, her lack of training in handling online classes affected her learning and joining the classes. It was very much troublesome joining the online classes, and when the network was volatile, joining and leaving the classes was happening, and 'I was feeling like destroying the harmony of the classes. I felt ashamed of for this and said sorry every time.' This learner suffered from a fever and discovered that she had lost the capacity for memorization. This makes her very stressed now and anxious about her successful completion of graduation with a good grade.

Post-COVID Challenges: Attention and Memory Problem (from Teacher-Participants)

During those happy days when everything turned normal at the beginning of this year, 2022, some male-female learners shared their problems inside the classroom. They were not showing

any physical disability or any mental disorder in any way. One shared his reading comprehension problem, which was a problem for him before the pandemic. After the pandemic closures, he found it more severe and struggled to interact with peers, lessons, and teachers and follow teachers' instructions during the F2F (face-to-face) classroom. He felt concerned that it continued for a long time and hindered his participation in the final exam.

Another sixth-semester female student found her ADHD problem increasing after the pandemic. For this, she wanted to drop the course. However, it changes when she comes to the class and tries to continue her study. During the same semester, another student was trying to chase me after the class requesting me to upload lessons in Google Classroom as I did during pandemic closures. Her preference for those study materials was to help her learn easily for the preparation for the final term, as those materials were prepared in a bit easy way addressing the pandemic crisis the learners were facing during the school closures.

Related to attention and memory problems, some other learners voluntarily reported their challenges inside the classroom. Some learners reported that many classmates needed to attend classes, examinations and drop courses. Some of them who joined the class sometimes suffered from mood-switching that was not usual earlier.

These made the teacher think about the issues of whether pandemic closures, social distancing, the fever have made these changes or other issues are there. After a few months, when learners were having offline exams in the classrooms were suffering from the same problems and gradually lacked confidence and interest in participating in the test. This led them to use unfair means in the exam hall or drop the semester's final exam. Learners suffering from a lack of confidence, anxiety, stress, depression, and anger show behavioral changes due to the virtual classroom's social distancing and interactional constraints and the pandemic stresses.

Lack of Confidence and lack of Participation during the Onsite Shift

At first, it was like a stigma, a very dark, bad thing for the infected person and the family. I don't know how to describe those days of helplessness. We were treated as the aliens living in the human society. When one member was attacked with the fever other members had to keep that person in isolation. As an affected one, I know how much I suffered physically and mentally. The matter of study had become less important issue to me. (Participants 3, 5)

The pandemic took all learners' attention, from studying to living a life of uneasiness and discomfort to readjusting to the continuously changing mutation of the new normal. They could not give proper attention to their study. This learning gap creates challenges for them to participate in offline classroom discussions.

Participants reported that they did not enjoy the online classes, nor did they like to participate in the classes, for they did not have any physical presence of their friends in front of them, no interaction as before the pandemic. Their online class time is mainly passed with troubleshooting joining, and disconnecting matters. Since they had no experience of having those classes before time, they could not follow or enjoy the classes as the teacher had taken and wanted. This realization, along with other post-pandemic physical, mental, and situational changes, has made learners very much depressed and anxious about their study and their future. These have made them suffer from a lack of confidence when returning to offline classes.

Post-pandemic EFL Classroom: A More Inclusive and Accommodating One

COVID-19 and its disruptive effects on education could not provide learners with equal opportunity to join online classes. Anxieties were created due to the lack of resources to join the classes, lack of interaction among peers and the outside world, lack or gap of communication, lack of moral and psychological support, lack of basic training for facing the pandemic's technicality and severity, lack of mental ventilation hours or talk time apart from class-hours have made learners suffer a lot both physically and mentally. From two teacher participants' perspectives:

Yes, we made no or a very little space for our learners' ventilation during the pandemic time. They wanted a lot to discuss inside classroom, and I can remember when asked about the fever and their isolation, about other family members they felt tempted to start talking on the issues. But that was not all, they should have been given more time to talk so that they could open their minds to us and could get some relief. (Teacher-participant 1)

You know, pandemic was a new experience for us also. We did not even have, apart from training for conducting online classes, any exposure for managing our learners' mental health during the sudden attack of COVID-19 time. This limitation has made our present time after pandemic a challenging one and we should think for alternative, post pandemic pedagogy as we did during pandemic time. (Teacher-participant 2)

Assisting learners psychologically through a short, introductory training session to manage online resources and classes to pass the pandemic days with positive thinking could have been done by providing teachers with training and workshops for counseling learners to boost their mental health, morality, and active participation. Arranging workshops with psychological experts could have made the pandemic more psychologically sound both for the learners and the teachers. Issues relating to joining online classes and learners' keeping the microphone and video camera off despite asking them to open those several times during pandemic class time have made teachers concerned about learners' interactional and attitudinal matters. Primarily during exam time (oral test), learners used to keep their camera off for their internet issues that, according to them, were lagging for opening the camera. During the pandemic, these vexed teachers a lot and made them think of learners' incapability or immorality in managing online platforms as learning management systems (LMS). This emerging situation demands that the post-pandemic classroom be more accommodating, diversified, considerate, and caring. Since learners had no training to face the pandemic and its effects as the new normal, it is necessary to support them to get into the new classroom with adequate welcoming gestures.

Discussion

This study explored how the pandemic affects the post-pandemic EFL inclusive classroom interaction in higher education in a low or under-resourced country like Bangladesh. Guided by the critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1989) and social justice theory (Fraser, 2009; 2012), this study has found that during the pandemic, online classes, equity, fairness, and thus social justice was seriously affected (Rashid et al., 2022). It happened due to the abruptness of the situation, technical issues regarding accessibility to online learning and teaching, and learners' physical –mental health conditions for COVID-19 affected both physical and mental health, wellness, and behavioral aspects of the learners.

These marginalized EFL learners need to be accommodated in the post-pandemic inclusive classroom interaction to empower them with the awareness that can transform them to raise their voices against the web of misframing, misrecognition, and misunderstanding. So, 'participatory parity' and social justice can be achieved by redistributing equal rights, opportunities, and resources of recognition and representation of equal participation (Fraser, 2009; 1977).

Post-COVID-19 Inclusive Classes in the Light of Social Justice

In a focus group discussion (FGD) with the teachers— ‘How can the post pandemic challenges be overcome in the light of social justice?’ — it came out that they are trying to support learners in the domains of affective, behavioral, cognitive, competence, and awareness:

When my learners are back in F2F classroom, I am trying to manage and accommodate my learners in the most positive ways. So that they would not feel that last two and half years were fruitless. With the positive vibe, I am conducting the classes and taking care of my learners’ wellbeing inside classroom. Now I have increased the interaction turns with them although they can’t make a total delete of the pandemic days’ memories. (Teacher-participant 1)

Teachers are trying to support their learners to meet the five domains of an inclusive classroom—affective, cognitive, behavioral, competence, and awareness (Mahat, 2008; Gilligan, 2020; Green et al., 2020). Although they lack training on managing the learners’ affective factors, they are trying to maintain those from their common sense and social responsibilities as a teacher. I can manage it to the level when I think situation is under control. Since teachers underwent similar experiences regarding the fever and the trauma that it brought for an individual, they can think of the learners by putting them in their shoes. The memories of the pandemic days are still fresh in the learners’ minds what they feel is difficult to erase. In the post-pandemic inclusive classroom, this mental health issue of the learners needs to be addressed with equal care and sensitivity (Durbas et al., 2021) since ‘University students are a risk group for mental health disorders with high rates of psychiatric morbidity, primarily depression, and anxiety’— (Stewart-Brown, 2000). To ensure and support better community health, prevention and reduction of mental health problems are essential since HE learners at this point of time pass a sensitive time regarding psychosocial development and maturation. Regarding mental health, researchers claim that HE learners show a certain amount of stress. However, this factor is found to be highest during and after COVID-19 periods and the disruption it brought to the mental and academic health of the learners.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Creating equal opportunity inside the classroom during this post-pandemic time requires multiple means of engagement, representation, action, expression, and assessment. Experts recommend a universal design for learning (UDL) in education. The design ‘is based on the architectural concept of Universal Design in which spaces are built to be as accessible as

possible by everyone, regardless of disability, age, or any other factors' (Swell & Sugisaki, 2021). This addresses the variability of learners and their needs—

- Offering variety of engagement technique—listening to or reading a passage in a group-whole class-individual work, variety of interactions allows learners to be engaged in the lessons.
- Providing inputs in multiple forms—listening to the dialogues instead of reading, writing new words in vocabulary notebook, role play, adding definitions or simple drawing/ framework/charting can offer learners multiple ways to create inputs.
- Allowing learners to multiple choices to make the outputs—Learners need to choose tasks among several assignments i.e., writing and commenting on a research report, making a podcast, compiling a photo essay, poster presentation, making video on learners' local delicacies, poets or historical events.
- Providing multiple avenues of assessment—To evaluate learners multiple modes can be used by providing formative for learning, summative of learning and alternative assessments—portfolios/processfolios, project work for lifelong learning (Rapp, 2014; Rapp & Arndt, 2012).

Recommendation and Future Direction

In the daily Prothom Alo, a popular newspaper in Bangladesh, on October 9, 2022, published a survey that reported 76% of learners suffer from depression and lack of confidence due to the pressure they feel during this post-pandemic time. The report says, as the finding of the study remarks, that long gaps in studies, digital divides, low achievement during the pandemic time, high expectations from teachers and other stakeholders to fill the gaps caused by the pandemic, and several technical and non-technical issues have made learners feel less interested in continuing study. After the pandemic, the situation seems more challenging for them as they cannot or feel shaky about sharing their mental conditions and un-wellbeing with teachers and others concerned. Several shifts from F2F to online from offline have caused critical situations for learners to manage this post-COVID-19 situation. These led many of them to the path of self-destruction or suicidal attempts that requires some emergency initiatives to face the situation from different perspectives.

Additionally, this report suggests following a few steps, the same as what came out from the study in the newspaper, to stop the negative attitudes of the learners and the teachers in this

novel disruption of time. Among them, it recommends ensuring a proper learning environment, counseling learners about positive aspects of life, less pressure to cover the gap in studies and every human solution to the learners' problems as human beings. Learners recommend the blending and hybrid mode of learning even after the COVID-19 pandemic. They want to continue using digital artifacts as they received training during the pandemic. Also, they have understood the usefulness of those amenities in real life that causes satisfaction of learners to adopt technologies in higher education (Shreshtha et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has allowed the world to use and rethink the new digital, online, and pedagogical possibilities. At the same time, it has given opportunities to rethink education's primary purposes and to renew the vision of education that can harness the development of democratic and just societies. So that EFL classroom can accommodate all learners and their needs.

Inclusion is the foundation of social justice. Without an inclusive mindset, one is likely to, for example, turn a blind eye to inequality in access to resources (redistributive justice), impose uniformity and standardization in the curriculum at the sacrifice of socio-cultural diversity, with mainstream stories prioritized over marginalized views and experiences (recognitive justice) and discourage full and equal participation of all in co-creating learning and teaching (representational justice) (Xiao, 2021).

Social justice and critical pedagogy can be taken not as theories but as pedagogical practices to allow learners to join the dialogues that allow them to be recognized, represented, and redistributed equally (Phyak & Sharma, 2017). This global pandemic has been a portal, a gateway from one world to the next, offering options to return to the past of the carcasses of prejudice, hatred, avarice, data banks, dead ideas, rivers, and smoky skies. On the other point, it offers one to move forward with a light little luggage to an imagined changed world of more possibilities and opportunities for democracy, justice, and assurance of inclusivity of all.

Implication and Future Direction

The study explored the challenges of EFL learners in post-COVID-19 settings in the HE context in Bangladesh. The study implies that attending to the psychological challenges of the learners is essential to make a healthy growth of the nation. Along with this, the study also recommends further research on the challenges of the post-pandemic demographic-gender context. Also, the study can be done exclusively on the teachers to explore other perspectives on the post-pandemic challenges.

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