



Analyzing Pandemic Gaps: Effects of Online Education on English Language Skills among Tertiary-Level Students in Dhaka

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><i>Article History</i></p> <p>Date of Submission 30-09-2025</p> <p>Date of Acceptance 29-10-2025</p> <p>Date of Publication 30-12-2025</p>	<p>This study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the English language skills of tertiary-level students in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who shifted to online education. It focuses on the emergence of learning gaps in English proficiency due to the pandemic and the effects of online education on four essential language skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening). The results indicate significant declines in speaking and writing proficiency, attributed to reduced interaction, limited feedback, and technological barriers. Listening and reading were also affected, though to a lesser extent, due to poor audio quality, reduced concentration, and limited access to resources. These findings highlight the vulnerability of productive language skills to emergency remote teaching and the impact of socioeconomic disparities on outcomes. The study emphasizes the importance of blended learning models, targeted teacher training in digital pedagogy, and improved infrastructure support to enhance post-pandemic English language education in Bangladesh.</p>
<p><i>Keywords</i></p> <p>Pandemic Learning Gaps, Online Education, English Language Skills, Tertiary Students.</p>	

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Introduction

Background of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic, first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, rapidly evolved into a global crisis disrupting all spheres of life, including education (Purcell & Charles, 2020; Xiang et al., 2020; Spina et al., 2020). By March 2020, the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic, and over 190 countries had closed schools and universities, impacting 1.6 billion learners worldwide (Sahu, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Higher education institutions have faced difficulties in ensuring both quality and accessibility (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), while systemic inequalities have become more visible (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

English language teaching (ELT) was among the most affected domains because it relied on interactive and communicative practices. Studies across Asia have highlighted how the rapid transition to online platforms has reduced engagement and limited opportunities for authentic communication (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021; Zainal & Yunus, 2022). Four key language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—were unevenly disrupted, with productive skills particularly vulnerable (Ying et al., 2021; Jayampathy et al., 2023).

In Bangladesh, educational institutions closed on March 17, 2020, and remained shut for 543 days—the most extended closure in South Asia (Mahmud, 2021). While the Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commission authorized online instruction by mid-2020, students and teachers faced significant technological, pedagogical, and socioeconomic barriers. Unstable internet, high data costs, and frequent power outages disproportionately affected learners in Bangladesh, where English proficiency is essential for academic and professional advancement (M. M. Rahman et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, the concept of “pandemic gaps” is used here to refer to measurable declines in English proficiency caused by the limitations of online education. While global and regional studies have documented general barriers in remote ELT (Adedoyin

& Soykan, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Dewan et al., 2022), skill-specific impacts in Bangladesh remain underexplored. In particular, little is known about how speaking, writing, reading, and listening were differentially affected among tertiary-level students, or how digital and psychosocial inequities shaped these outcomes.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the effects of online education on the four core English skills of tertiary-level students in Dhaka. Using a mixed-methods approach, it investigates the nature of pandemic-induced skill-specific learning gaps and the perceived effectiveness of online instruction compared to face-to-face learning. The findings aim to contribute to both theoretical discussions of second language learning in digital contexts and practical strategies for strengthening English education in resource-constrained environments in post-pandemic Bangladesh.

Statement of Problem

Although the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning in Bangladesh, its specific impact on tertiary students' English language proficiency remains underexplored. Existing studies document broad challenges of emergency remote teaching, yet little is known about how these disruptions translate into skill-specific gaps across speaking, writing, reading, and listening (Adickalam & Yunus, 2022; Tasneem, 2021). Barriers such as limited digital access, insufficient teacher preparation, and reduced opportunities for interactive practice are likely to have disproportionately hindered language development (Khan et al., 2021; Qader et al., 2024).

The absence of systematic data on these dynamics hinders the understanding of the extent of proficiency loss and its implications for long-term educational equity. Moreover, the effectiveness of online teaching strategies in Bangladesh's resource-constrained environment remains unexamined, mainly raising concerns about the viability of virtual and blended ELT models in the post-pandemic era (Haque, 2022; Roy et al., 2023). Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how technological, pedagogical, and

psychosocial factors intersect to shape language outcomes and for informing sustainable approaches to English language instruction in higher education.

Objectives of the Research

The primary objectives are:

1. To identify skill-specific learning gaps emerging from the pandemic in English language learning.
2. To assess the effects of online education on developing English language skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening)

Review of the Literature

Pandemic Gaps in Education and ELT

Learning gaps are defined as stagnation or decline in skill development, often intensified by inequities in access (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Engzell et al., 2021). In language education, losses are severe because acquisition requires sustained exposure, interaction, and feedback (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Past crises show long-term effects: the 2005 Kashmir earthquake caused literacy setbacks (Andrabi et al., 2023), and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa increased dropouts and hindered language development (Smith, 2021). In South Asia, Shrestha et al. (2022) found that technical issues and unprepared teachers impeded online language instruction in Bangladesh and Nepal. Together, these studies show that external crises interrupt learning and widen language proficiency gaps, with recovery reliant on targeted interventions—critical for tertiary students in Bangladesh.

Globally, ELT during the pandemic often failed to sustain interactive learning. Gonzalez et al. (2020) and Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) found online platforms comparable to in-person settings for literacy but significantly less effective for speaking and listening. Such findings resonate with Bangladesh's tertiary sector, where infrastructural challenges left oral-aural skills particularly vulnerable. For tertiary students in Bangladesh, these issues were

compounded by pre-existing weaknesses in English language teaching (ELT), including reliance on rote learning and inadequate communicative approaches (Ali & Walker, 2014; Rahman & Pandian, 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, similar patterns emerged globally, with ELT struggling to maintain interactivity and communicative practice (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020). These findings suggest that crises not only interrupt learning but also deepen inequities in language proficiency.

Online vs. In-Person Learning in English Language Learning

Online English learning, delivered via platforms such as Zoom or Google Classroom, offers flexibility and asynchronous access, while in-person classes emphasize real-time interaction and immediate feedback (Means et al., 2009). For language acquisition, which depends on listening, speaking, reading, and writing, these modalities differ in effectiveness: online learning provides convenience, but in-person settings better foster oral proficiency and peer interaction, aligning with constructivist views that language thrives on social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Blake, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, tertiary institutions in Bangladesh suddenly transitioned to online education, with uneven success due to infrastructural and socioeconomic barriers. This transition offers a crucial lens for evaluating the pandemic's impact on English language skills in developing contexts.

Challenges of Online ELT in Bangladesh

Research shows that online education provided continuity of learning and revealed gaps in access to technology and dependable Internet, especially in developing countries (Kansal et al., 2021; Kara, 2021). In Bangladesh, students faced unstable internet connections, frequent power outages, and high data costs, all of which hindered sustained engagement in online English classes and limited opportunities for communicative practice (Khan et al., 2021; Haque, 2022). Teachers

reported inadequate training in digital pedagogy and difficulty adapting language curricula (Dewan et al., 2022; Shrestha et al., 2022).

Comparative evidence from more resource-rich Asian contexts suggests that targeted interventions—such as blended learning models and ICT-focused teacher training—can help narrow language proficiency gaps (Alarifi & Song, 2024). However, Bangladesh continues to face structural inequalities, including rural–urban divides, limited device ownership, and poor digital literacy, which restrict participation (Mathrani et al., 2022; Shrestha et al., 2022). Gender disparities also came to light, with female students facing additional problems due to household responsibilities and discriminatory practices (Mathrani et al., 2022). The pandemic exposed deep-rooted socio-cultural and psychological issues within the education system (Aziz et al., 2020). Misinformation, stigma, and a lack of culturally sensitive communication created additional barriers to effective learning (Aziz et al., 2020). These findings highlight that challenges in online ELT extend beyond technological access to include broader socioeconomic and sociocultural factors.

Psychosocial Factors Affecting English Language Learning During Online Instruction

Psychological pressures were central to the pandemic's impact on education, particularly English language learning. Rutkowska et al. (2022) found that 58% of students experienced high stress, with social isolation, reduced motivation, and perceived academic decline predicting depressive symptoms. Such challenges hinder ELT, as anxiety and low motivation reduce willingness to communicate and practice language. In Bangladesh, over 70% of tertiary students reported anxiety or depression, and more than half decreased English study time (Piya et al., 2022; Hossain, 2024), with academic uncertainty and urban living conditions, especially in Dhaka, intensifying stress (Islam et al., 2020; Mamun et al., 2021). Reduced motivation lowered engagement in online classes,

critical for language acquisition (Hasan & Bao, 2020). Sociocultural inequities further compounded these effects: female learners and students from low-income households faced additional financial and household burdens (Aziz et al., 2020; Bashir et al., 2021). These findings indicate that barriers to online ELT went beyond technology, encompassing psychosocial and social factors that undermined language learning.

Skill-Specific Impacts on English Proficiency

Research consistently shows that the four language skills were unevenly disrupted during the pandemic. Listening was limited by Poor audio quality, unstable internet, and lack of teacher scaffolding, which limited comprehension and vocabulary development (Susilowati, 2020; Nurkhamidah, 2021; Shrestha et al., 2022). Speaking skills were hardest hit due to reduced peer interaction and elevated anxiety. Over 70% of learners reported declines in fluency and confidence (Kamal et al., 2021; Adickalam & Yunus, 2022). In Dhaka, 60% of tertiary students faced barriers to developing speaking skills (Roy et al., 2023). Assessing speaking skills online posed challenges, with instructors facing difficulties in maintaining fairness due to technical limitations (M. A. Rahman et al., 2022). Reading outcomes diverged, with well-resourced students sustaining progress while others disengaged due to connectivity and support issues (Mahardhika, 2022; Yoestara & Irnanda, 2023). Writing development suffered from Limited feedback, plagiarism concerns, and assessment overload, constraining writing development (Anasse & Rhandy, 2021; Tarrayo et al., 2022; Dewi et al., 2023; Juliandini & Sari, 2023). In Bangladesh, these challenges exacerbated existing weaknesses in academic writing (Roy et al., 2023).

Research Gap

While global and regional studies have documented the general challenges of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer studies have examined these disruptions through a focused English

language education (ELT) lens, particularly in the Bangladeshi tertiary context (Tasneem, 2021; Haque, 2022). There remains limited empirical evidence on how pandemic-induced online instruction differentially affected listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, or how psychosocial and digital inequalities shaped English language learning outcomes. Addressing these gaps is essential for informing effective and sustainable online and blended ELT practices in Bangladesh's higher education sector.

Research Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to higher education in Bangladesh, with tertiary institutions closed for over 18 months and English language teaching (ELT) abruptly shifting to online platforms. This transition raised concerns about the development of essential English skills—speaking, writing, reading, and listening—particularly given the importance of English proficiency for students' academic progress and employability.

While international studies have highlighted challenges of emergency remote teaching, localized evidence on skill-specific learning gaps in the Bangladeshi context remains limited. Existing research has identified barriers such as weak digital infrastructure, high internet costs, limited teacher training, and increased psychological stress, yet their combined impact on English language development is underexplored.

Therefore, this study is necessary to address these gaps by systematically analyzing the impact of pandemic-induced online learning on tertiary students' English proficiency. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the research aims to provide skill-specific insights into how students and teachers experienced the transition. The rationale lies in both the theoretical need to understand second language acquisition in digital crisis contexts and the practical urgency of informing future ELT policies, blended learning models, and digital pedagogy in Bangladesh's higher education system.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What pandemic-induced learning gaps emerged in tertiary students' English language skills?
2. How effective was online education in supporting the development of English language skills?

Hypotheses

To address Research Questions 1 and 2, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₀1: Students did not perceive significant gaps in their English language proficiency due to the pandemic.

H₁1: Students perceived significant gaps in their English language proficiency due to the pandemic.

H₀2: Students perceived online English education as equally effective as in-person instruction.

H₁2: Students perceived online English education as less effective than in-person instruction.

Research Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes that language development occurs through social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In traditional classrooms, peer collaboration and teacher guidance play a central role in scaffolding language learning. The abrupt transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these interactive processes, limiting students' opportunities for real-time communication and collaborative learning. Vygotsky's framework, therefore, provides the central lens

for interpreting how the reduction in interaction contributed to skill-specific learning gaps among tertiary students in Dhaka. In addition to this primary theoretical foundation, three supporting perspectives help to deepen the analysis. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) explains the role of reduced comprehensible input in online settings, particularly in listening and reading skills. Limited exposure to meaningful input beyond students' current level ($i+1$) hindered their ability to develop receptive skills effectively. Brown's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Brown, 1987) highlights the psychological barriers—such as stress, anxiety, and low motivation—that many students reported during the pandemic. A high affective filter obstructs language acquisition, especially in speaking and writing. Finally, Kramsch's sociolinguistic perspective (Kramsch, 1993) emphasizes how unequal access to digital resources impacts learning outcomes, with socio-economic and cultural disparities affecting students' ability to benefit from online education.

Taken together, these theories create a comprehensive framework: Vygotsky's sociocultural lens anchors the study, while Krashen, Brown, and Kramsch provide explanatory support for the linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions of pandemic-induced learning gaps. This integrated approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the impact of online education on English language skills in the Bangladeshi tertiary context.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2012; Dörnyei, 2007) to examine pandemic-related learning gaps and the effectiveness of online English language education. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches allowed both breadth and depth of understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire survey, while semi-

structured interviews with teachers provided qualitative insights. The quantitative component provided detailed information about students' beliefs and experiences regarding online English learning, whereas the qualitative component enabled an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives, accounting for individual contextual factors. Interviews were particularly appropriate, as they allow participants to describe detailed personal experiences (Creswell, 2012).

Overall, the mixed-methods design was well-suited to this study, as it facilitated the examination of pandemic-induced learning gaps and the impact of online education on English language skills from both student and teacher perspectives.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across six public and private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the entire research was carried out between January and March 2025. Participants included 36 tertiary-level students (final-year undergraduates and graduate students) (Table 1) who had experienced online English classes during the pandemic while residing in various parts of Bangladesh.

The six higher education institutions were selected through purposive sampling to ensure institutional diversity and contextual relevance. Selection criteria included representation from both public and private universities, institutional location within Dhaka, experience conducting online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, and participant accessibility.

Interviews were also conducted with 3 English language teachers who had taught in these contexts. Students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance (Creswell, 2012), while teachers were recruited using criterion sampling, as they all had direct experience teaching online (Patton, 2002). Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity.

Table 1: *Demographic characteristics of participating students (N = 36).*

Category	Options	Counts	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	9	25.0
	Female	27	75.0
University Type	Public	18	50.0
	Private	18	50.0
University Name	Jagannath University	6	16.7
	Dhaka University	6	16.7
	Jahangirnagar University	6	16.7
	BRAC University	6	16.7
	East-West University	6	16.7
	North South University	6	16.7
Department	Architecture	1	2.8
	BBA	1	2.8
	CSE	2	5.6
	EEE	1	2.8
	ESOL	3	8.3
	English	24	66.7
	English (IML)	3	8.3
	TESOL	1	2.8
Year of Study	1st Year	0	0.0
	2nd Year	0	0.0
	3rd Year	0	0.0
	4th Year	11	30.6
	Graduate level	25	69.4

Instruments

The student questionnaire included 24 closed-ended items, covering attendance, skill-specific impacts, online challenges, and perceptions of learning effectiveness. Content validity was established through expert review by an experienced English-language teacher, who confirmed alignment between the items and the research objectives. The questionnaire

was distributed digitally to ensure accessibility and anonymity, in line with best practices in applied linguistics survey design (Dörnyei, 2007).

Teacher interviews were semi-structured, consisting of 11 open-ended questions guided by a protocol adapted from Patton (2014). This format ensured consistency while enabling follow-up questions to enhance depth (Dörnyei, 2007). A pilot interview refined the protocol and ensured clarity (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Two interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet office settings, and one was conducted via Zoom. All interviews lasted 25–30 minutes, were audio-recorded with the participant’s consent, and were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The whole student questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. The teacher interview protocol is included in Appendix B

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Jamovi (v2.6.25) (The Jamovi Project, 2024). Descriptive statistics summarized key patterns. Qualitative data were transcribed and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework, with NVivo 15 (Lumivero, 2024) employed for coding and organization. Themes were generated inductively, including “Proficiency Impact,” “Engagement Decline,” and “Connectivity Barriers.” Triangulation was conducted by comparing quantitative results with corresponding qualitative themes. Declines in speaking and writing proficiency were examined alongside interview excerpts describing reduced interaction, limited feedback, and loss of confidence. Similarly, survey data on engagement and connectivity were cross-checked with teachers’ and students’ accounts of attendance, classroom passivity, and technical disruptions. Areas of agreement and difference between data sources were analyzed to validate interpretations and enhance credibility (Patton, 2014).

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses, one-sample Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were employed. A non-parametric approach was chosen due to the ordinal nature of the data and modest sample size.

For RQ1, the perceived proficiency gap among students was measured using a 3-point scale derived from survey responses. The categories “No, there is no gap” and “Not sure” were combined to represent the absence of a gap or uncertainty, resulting in a scale where 1 = no gap/uncertain, 2 = yes to some extent, and 3 = yes significantly. The null hypothesis specified that the median perceived gap would equal 1, while the alternative hypothesized that the median would be greater than 1.

For RQ2, perceived effectiveness of online English learning was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = much less effective to 5 = much more effective, with 3 = equivalent to in-person learning). A composite effectiveness score was computed by averaging students’ ratings across the four language skills. The null hypothesis specified that the median effectiveness would equal 3, while the alternative hypothesized that it would be less than 3.

Reliability and Validity

Several steps ensured rigor. The survey was carefully structured to reduce misinterpretation (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Interview neutrality was maintained through open-ended questioning and careful transcription (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Coding was conducted in iterative cycles. Inter-rater reliability was assessed through an expert review of a subset of transcripts, yielding an agreement of 91.67% (McDonald et al., 2019). Although the use of non-probability sampling and a small sample size limit generalizability (Johnson & Christensen, 2017), triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, combined with systematic coding of themes, ensured consistency, transparency, and verification of patterns, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the department. Informed consent was secured from all participants in line with established guidelines (Seidman, 2013; Bailey, 2007). Student responses were collected anonymously, and teacher identities were anonymized through a coding process. All data were stored in password-protected files.

Participation was voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any point.

Results and Findings of the Research

Findings for Research Question 1

The results indicate that the pandemic created substantial learning gaps in English language skills among tertiary-level students. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test confirmed that students perceived these gaps as statistically significant (Median = 2.00, $W = 406$, $p < .001$) (Table 2). Both student survey data and teacher interviews highlighted similar challenges, especially in productive skills, engagement, and retention.

Table 2: *Wilcoxon signed-rank test for perceived proficiency gap (N = 36)*

Variable	W	p	Median	Mean (SD)
Perceived Proficiency Gap	406	< .001	2.00	1.97 (0.65)

To gain a deeper understanding of these gaps, survey data were analyzed descriptively (Table 3), and teacher interviews were thematically analyzed. Four themes emerged—skill-specific declines, retention difficulties, emotional strain, and inequities—which help explain the survey patterns (Table 4). The quantitative survey results are presented under these qualitative themes.

Table 3: *Descriptive Results from Quantitative Data (RQ1)*

Variable	Response Category	n (%)
Attendance During the Pandemic	Decreased significantly	13 (36.1)
	Decreased slightly	11 (30.6)
	No change / Not sure	12 (33.3)
Disruption Due to School Closures	Yes	24 (66.7)
	No	12 (33.3)

Variable	Response Category	n (%)
Length of Disruption	Less than 1 month	6 (25.0)
	1–3 months	3 (11.1)
	4–6 months	8 (33.3)
	More than 6 months	3 (11.1)
Confidence in Using English	Significant decrease	11 (30.6)
	Decreased to some extent	16 (44.4)
	No impact	9 (25.0)
English Skills Affected	Reading	5 (13.9)
	Listening	4 (11.1)
	Speaking	26 (72.2)
	Writing	17 (47.2)
Stress and Anxiety Impacting Learning	Yes	26 (72.2)
	No	10 (27.8)

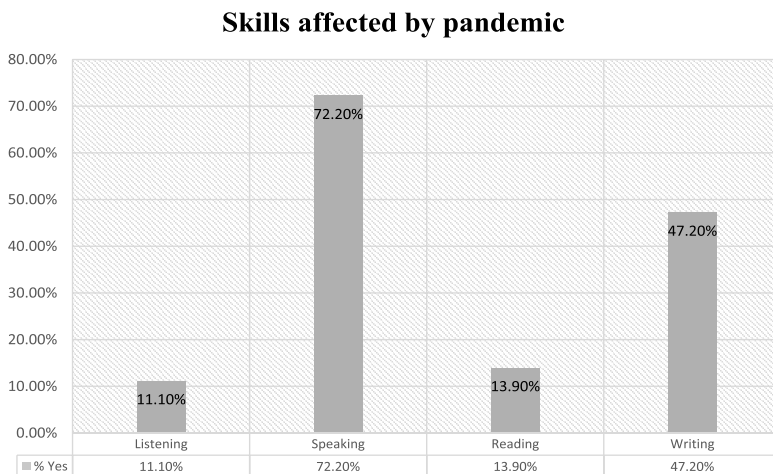
Table 4: *Qualitative themes and subordinate codes for learning gaps (teacher interviews, RQ1).*

Emergent Theme	\Subordinate Codes/Keywords
Skill-Specific Gaps	Oral Communication Gap, Writing Coherence Gap, Reading Comprehension Gap, Speaking Skill Gap
Retention Challenges	Retention Struggles
Emotional Barriers	Stress and Anxiety Impact
Attendance Barriers	Motivated Attendance by Marks, Connectivity and Resource Constraints, Lack of Motivation
Demographic Disparities	Rural vs. Urban Disparities, Strong vs. Weak Students

Skill-Specific Gaps Quantitative findings showed that speaking (72.2%) and writing (47.2%) were the most affected skills, while reading (13.9%) and listening (11.1%) were comparatively less disrupted (Figure 1). Teachers reinforced this pattern, noting that oral communication and writing coherence suffered most. As one teacher explained, “*Students’ speaking skills were greatly affected*

due to reduced real-time interaction and less practice” (T3). She added, “Gaps in writing coherence and reading comprehension were common” (T3).

Figure 1: Percentage of Students Reporting Skills Affected by the Pandemic



Engagement and Attendance Challenges

Two-thirds of students (66.7%) reported decreased attendance, with some acknowledging that they attended mainly to secure marks and disruptions (66.7%) due to university closures (Table 3). 33.3% faced interruptions of four to six months. As one teacher remarked, “They were attentive due to their fear about attendance marks” (T2). Teachers also observed low participation, with students reluctant to interact during lessons. “Students were less active in participating during online classes, which affected their learning” (T2).

Retention and Emotional Barriers

Survey data revealed that 75% of students experienced reduced confidence in English use, while 72.2% reported stress and anxiety that hindered learning (Table 3). Teachers echoed this, noting that students were unable to sustain previously learned skills without

consistent feedback: “Many students struggled in retaining previously learned English skills during online education” (T3). Emotional strain also played a critical role. One teacher noted, “Two of my students were stressed and anxious” (T2), while another observed that stress “significantly impacted their ability to learn English” (T3). Finally, a teacher noted, “Affective filters... were quite low” (T1)

Demographic Disparities

The findings suggest uneven impacts across different student groups. Rural students and weaker learners were more disadvantaged compared to urban, self-motivated peers. As T3 emphasized, “*Learning gaps were more prominent among those from rural areas.*” T1 highlighted resource disparities, noting, “*Resources vary in terms of whether you are in a rural place*”. In contrast, stronger students demonstrated resilience by managing independent learning more effectively.

Findings for Research Question 2

Building on the learning gaps identified in RQ1, RQ2 examines how online education contributed to these outcomes. The results indicate that students perceived online English language learning as significantly less effective than in-person instruction. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test confirmed this difference (Median = 2.75, W = 156, $p = .008$) (Table 5). Survey responses and teacher interviews revealed consistent challenges across proficiency, engagement, technical access, and interaction, though a small group of motivated students showed improvement.

Table 5: *Wilcoxon signed-rank test for perceived effectiveness of online learning (composite score; N = 36).*

Variable	W	p	Median	Mean (SD)
Composite Effectiveness Score	156	0.008	2.75	2.69 (0.79)

Both survey data and Interviews extended these findings, highlighting four themes—technological barriers, engagement

difficulties, skill-specific challenges, and uneven resilience (Tables 6 & 7). The quantitative survey results are explained under these qualitative themes.

Table 6: *Descriptive Results from Quantitative Data (RQ2)*

Variable	Key Response Category	n (%)
Prior Online Experience	No prior experience	26 (72.2)
Access to Technology	Own smartphone	19 (52.8)
Ability to Fill In-Person Learning Gaps	To Some Extent	13 (36.1)
	No/Not Sure	19 (52.7)
Online Learning Platforms Used	Zoom	26 (72.2)
	Google Meet	24 (66.7)
Less Confidence in Online Learning	Yes	10 (27.8)
	Sometimes	17 (47.2)
Frequency of Disruptions	Sometimes	20 (55.6)
Impact on Reading Skills	Difficulty concentrating	16 (44.4)
Impact on Writing Skills	Lack of motivation	17 (47.2)
	Lack of feedback	15 (41.7)
Listening Difficulties	Poor audio quality/connectivity	22 (61.1)
	Background Noise	12 (33.3)
Speaking Skill Challenges	Limited real-time practice	22 (61.1)

Table 7: *Emergent themes and subordinate codes from teacher interviews (RQ2).*

Emergent Theme	Subordinate Codes/Keywords
Proficiency Impact	Hindered Proficiency
Engagement and Motivation Decline	Reduced Engagement, Decreased Motivation
Connectivity Issues	Connectivity Challenges
Interaction Barriers	Limited Interaction
Individual Success Factors	Self-Driven Improvement

Proficiency Impacts

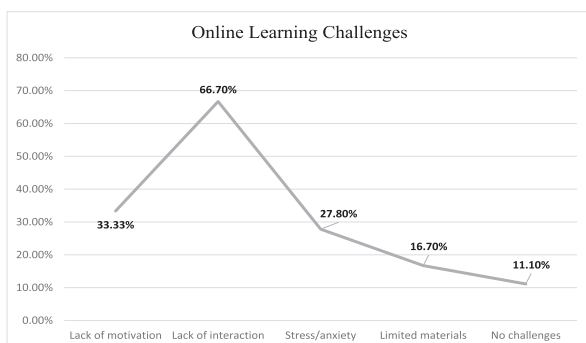
Both student surveys and teacher interviews highlighted proficiency setbacks. As one of the teacher stated, “*There are certain gaps as well, like I cannot interact with them in a very lively way all the time,*

because I cannot assess their progress, their physical position..” (T2). Students reported that online learning was less effective in developing key English skills. Reading was affected by struggles with concentration (44.4%), writing was hindered by a lack of motivation (47.2%) and feedback (41.7%), listening was impaired by poor audio quality (61.1%) and background noise (33.3%), and speaking was hindered by reduced practice (61.1%) (Table 6). Teachers reinforced this perception: *“Online learning hindered students’ English proficiency”* (T3). Another observed, *“There are certain gaps as I cannot interact with them in a lively way all the time”* (T2)

Engagement and Motivation

Over 52% reported that online learning failed to fill classroom gaps, 36.1% highlighted that it did to some extent, and only 11% believed it could. As 72.2% of students had no prior experience with online learning, this also affected their engagement in online classes. The majority of students identified a lack of interaction (66.7%) as their primary challenge, with 33.3% citing low motivation (Figure 2). Confidence in learning was mixed, with only 27.8% expressing low confidence and 47.2% feeling occasionally less confident (Table 6). Teachers confirmed these patterns: *“Online classes were not as engaging as traditional classes”* (T2), and *“Most students became less motivated, less active, and experienced a sense of isolation”* (T3). One teacher summarized disengagement, *“Forty percent of the students were probably elsewhere during class”* (T1).

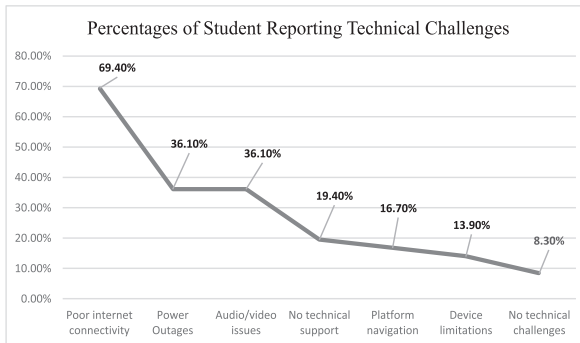
Figure 2: *Challenges of online learning*



Technical and Connectivity Barriers

Most students relied on their own smartphones (52.8%) for online classes, while a small number reported issues with no device or a borrowed device (8.3%). It remains a significant concern. Most students used Zoom (72.2%) and Google Meet (66.7%) as online learning platforms; however, several problems emerged due to frequent or occasional disruptions, as reported by students, affecting 88.9% of them. *“Teachers had to go through a learning arc during this time, because none of them were really prepared. I mean, more so, not trained at all, and they had to shift to cloud classrooms overnight.”* (T1). Connectivity was the most severe barrier, with 69.4% of students reporting poor internet access, 36.1% facing power outages, and another 36.1% citing audio/video issues (Figure 3). Teachers also highlighted these constraints: *“None of us were prepared... we had to shift overnight to cloud classrooms”* (T1).

Figure 3: *Technical Challenges of online learning*



Individual Success Factors

Despite the broad challenges, some students showed improvement. Teachers attributed success to discipline, motivation, and external resources. As one explained, *“Consistent attendance, supportive home environment, and active engagement with online resources contributed to their success”* (T3). Another highlighted the value of free global resources: *“Coursera and Khan Academy had their courses*

open, and students who wanted to flourish had the opportunity” (T1). These examples underscore the importance of individual agency and access to resources in shaping outcomes.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic created substantial learning gaps in tertiary-level students’ English language proficiency, with uneven effects across the four language skills. Speaking emerged as the most severely affected skill. Quantitative results revealed a significant decline in oral proficiency, which teachers attributed to reduced real-time interaction, lack of immediate feedback, and diminished learner confidence. In line with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, the absence of peer collaboration and scaffolding disrupted learning within the Zone of Proximal Development, explaining the steep decline in communicative competence.

Writing skills were also notably weakened. Students faced difficulties in maintaining coherence and accuracy, largely due to limited opportunities for guided practice and formative feedback in online classes. These findings align with prior studies indicating that productive skills are particularly vulnerable in online learning contexts (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Anasse & Rhandy, 2021). The prolonged closure of institutions and limited digital preparedness in Bangladesh further intensified these challenges, especially among weaker learners.

In contrast, reading skills were comparatively less disrupted. Students were able to engage with written materials through asynchronous modes, maintaining basic comprehension. Similarly, listening skills showed moderate resilience, as recorded lectures and multimedia input provided continued exposure to spoken English. However, reduced interactive listening limited opportunities for negotiation of meaning and higher-level processing.

The study also indicates that online education was less effective than in-person instruction, particularly for the development of speaking and writing skills. Two-thirds of students reported decreased engagement and attendance, often driven by attendance requirements

rather than meaningful learning. Teachers observed widespread passivity and distraction, which limited interaction and feedback. This disengagement supports both Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective, as inconsistent input and reduced collaboration hindered sustained language development.

Online instruction was partially effective for reading and listening skills, as these receptive skills rely more heavily on asynchronous input. Nevertheless, technical barriers—such as poor internet connectivity, device limitations, and frequent disruptions—restricted the overall effectiveness of online learning. These challenges reflect Kramsch's (1993) notion of the digital divide, where unequal access to technology perpetuates educational inequities.

Emotional factors further constrained skill development. High levels of stress and anxiety raised learners' affective filters (Brown, 2007), reducing motivation, confidence, and retention of English skills. These effects were more pronounced among rural and weaker students, who lacked both technological resources and peer scaffolding, thereby widening existing proficiency gaps. In contrast, urban and self-motivated students demonstrated greater resilience by leveraging independent learning resources.

Overall, the findings confirm that while online education functioned as a necessary substitute during the pandemic, it failed to support balanced development across the four English language skills, with speaking and writing experiencing the greatest decline. The persistence of engagement challenges, technical barriers, and emotional stress underscores the limitations of emergency remote instruction. To address these learning gaps, English language education in Bangladesh should adopt blended and hybrid models that prioritize interaction, targeted feedback, teacher training, and equitable access to digital infrastructure.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight significant gaps in English language learning during the pandemic, particularly in speaking

and writing, as well as broader challenges associated with online education. Based on these results, several recommendations are proposed for educators, policymakers, and institutions.

Strengthening Speaking and Writing Pedagogy

Targeted interventions should be designed to rebuild oral fluency and written coherence, as these skills were most disrupted. Incorporating structured speaking tasks, peer interactions, and iterative writing feedback into post-pandemic curricula would help address these gaps.

Enhancing Teacher Training for Online and Hybrid Modes

Teachers require continuous professional development in digital pedagogy to ensure that interaction, feedback, and assessment are effective in virtual environments. Training should focus on interactive strategies (e.g., breakout rooms, online collaborative writing, peer review) that replicate communicative features of face-to-face learning.

Expanding Access to Technology and Connectivity

Connectivity issues and unequal access to devices disproportionately affected rural and less advantaged learners. Policy measures, such as subsidized internet packages for students, institutional support for device lending, and investment in low-bandwidth platforms, are essential to reducing inequities.

Supporting Learners' Motivation and Well-being

High levels of stress, anxiety, and reduced confidence indicate the need for socio-emotional support alongside academic instruction. Counseling services, motivational workshops, and teacher-student mentoring could lower the affective filter and encourage active engagement.

Integrating Blended Learning Models

Although online learning was perceived as less effective, a minority of resilient students benefited from external platforms. Institutions could

harness this by integrating blended approaches, combining classroom teaching with curated online resources to foster autonomy and digital literacy.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of pandemic-induced online learning on the English proficiency of tertiary-level students in Dhaka. The findings reveal that productive skills—particularly speaking and writing—were most adversely affected, while reading and listening were comparatively less disrupted. Emotional strain, reduced motivation, and inequities in technological access further deepened these gaps.

Students and teachers consistently reported that online learning was less effective than in-person instruction, primarily due to poor connectivity, limited interaction, and lack of feedback. Yet, evidence also suggests that some self-motivated learners with adequate resources managed to adapt and even thrive, underscoring the uneven nature of the pandemic's impact.

The mixed-methods approach contributes to understanding pandemic-induced learning gaps by identifying the extent of decline across the four language skills through quantitative analysis and contextualizing these patterns through qualitative evidence on interaction loss, technological barriers, and affective challenges, thereby informing skill-specific pedagogical responses.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations, including its focus on a single urban setting, a relatively small sample, and time constraints. Future research should examine broader populations across different regions and institutional contexts, and explore longitudinal recovery patterns in post-pandemic learning.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the urgent need for targeted pedagogical reforms, institutional support for digital equity, and policies that strike a balance between face-to-face

and online learning to strengthen English language education in the post-pandemic era.

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