

English Learning Experiences Pre-, During, and Post- COVID-19 Pandemic: Narratives of College Students from the Bara District

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Abstract

This study explores the narratives of college students in the Bara district of their English learning histories before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the narrative inquiry approach, this study examines students' accounts as they navigated the transition from face-to-face to online classrooms during a global crisis unprecedented in human history. The study documents the experiences of these students during this transition and examines the difficulties of learning English in various learning environments affected by the pandemic. We used in-depth interviews and reflective accounts from our research participants as data for this study, drawing on the connection between Social Constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the digital divide (van Dijk, 2006). A critical data analysis yielded the prevailing themes of access to online materials, emotional resilience, teachers' support, motivation, and learning outcomes. The results highlight the discrepancy in students' learning experiences, the digital divide, and the resilience demonstrated by learners as they adopt online learning. The study contributes to the discourse on emergency education, focusing on transforming students' attitudes towards learning English and creating more flexible, inclusive, and caring learning spaces in post-pandemic higher education contexts.

Keywords: *Learning across COVID-19, pandemic, education, post-pandemic, learning English in rural spaces*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the global education system, disrupting conventional learning spaces and forcing a hasty transition to online and alternative forms of learning. Nepal, particularly districts such as Bara, where digital penetration and accessibility are significant challenges, poses a special challenge for college students to continue their studies (Gupta & Poudel, 2024). Learning the English language requires interaction, practice, and exposure to spoken and written communication, which has become especially challenging due to a lack of physical classroom interaction and limited technological facilities in online learning spaces. Undergraduate students' stories are presented in the form of learning difficulties, perspectives, and the impact of technological challenges while adapting to online learning platforms, and also reflect the roles of instructors, institutions, and their long-term effects on language acquisition (Bakia et al., 2012). Exploring students' perspectives on learning experiences in the transition from physical to online learning spaces, this study aims to understand their learning experiences and adaptation strategies in new online learning environments.

The COVID-19 Pandemic drastically reshaped the education sector, forcing a sudden transition to online learning and exposing both opportunities and difficulties. As Tarkar (2020) realized, the pandemic disrupted life across the world, culminating in school and university shutdowns. When online education was introduced as an alternative to traditional education, it presented significant challenges for students, teachers, and parents (Greer, 1991). Technological access has led to a loss of social interaction and increased psychological issues, only exacerbating the issues for students. Meanwhile, policymakers were wrestling with enacting measures to mitigate these interruptions and minimize long-term educational setbacks.

I, Puja Kumari Gupta, the first author, directly relate this study to my experience as a student and assistant lecturer at Bara College. My experience during the COVID-19 pandemic motivated me to conduct this research. When the pandemic broke out, I was studying in the first semester of my Master's degree. All of us faced a countrywide lockdown just before my first exam in March 2020; consequently, I was unable to appear for the exam. Ever since, I have had to continue my studies in an online mode, relying heavily on ICT tools and digital platforms. However, being in a rural setting (pseudonym: Kalikapur), I frequently encountered a series of issues, particularly sporadic internet connectivity and irregular power supply. These technological and infrastructural limitations consistently disrupted my classes, delayed my assignments, and negatively affected my learning process entirely (Gupta & Neupane, 2024).

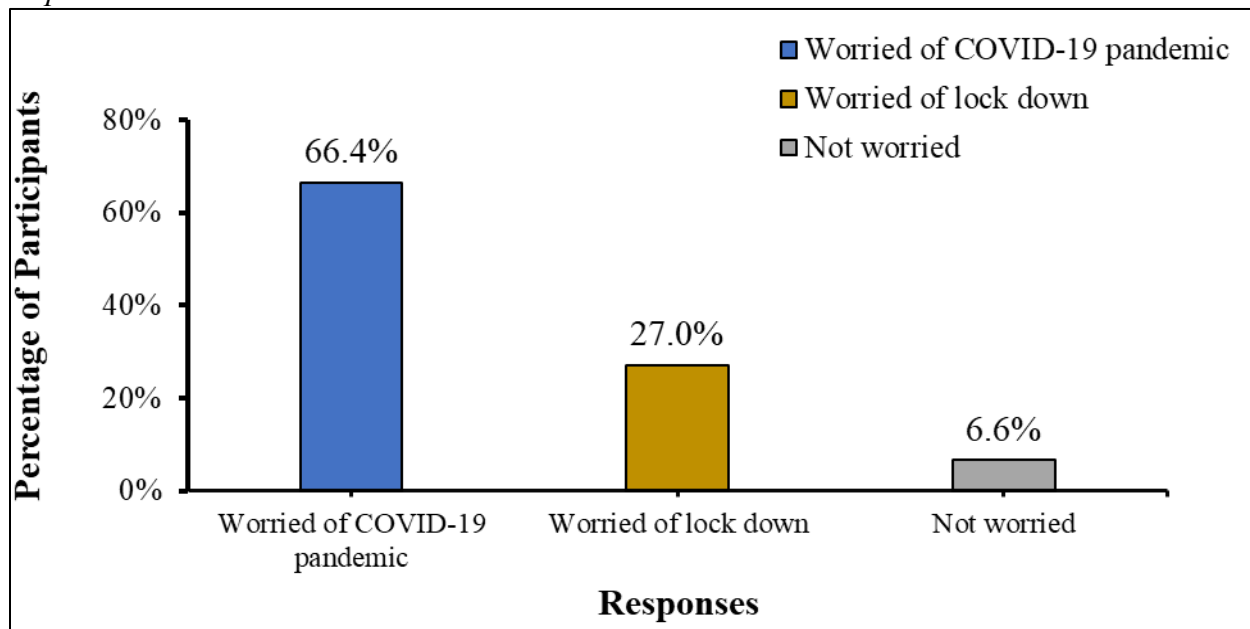
The COVID-19 pandemic affected the career goals of students as it caused unprecedented fear, anxiety, and confusion. In a national-level study of Nepal, Chaudhary et. al (2022) found that more than two-thirds of students were anxious or stressed because of the uncertainty about their classes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 27% of students worried because of the lockdown, and 6.6% did not become anxious or stressed about either of these (Figure 1).

While conversing with peers, I realized that I was not alone in having faced such issues. The majority of college students living in rural and semi-urban areas also face network disruptions, a lack of access to required reading materials, and inadequate technical support. I also found myself among those 66% in Figure 1 above. This realization made me more curious about how students from various backgrounds coped with the sudden transition to online learning during the pandemic. Upon examining the relevant literature, we found that most

research studies have concentrated on school education, addressing the problems faced by students and teachers at the school level during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawan, 2020; Poudel & Gnawali, 2021). Few studies focused on higher education in international settings (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). However, we felt this area is under-documented in the context of Nepali university or college students. There appeared to be a lack of research specifically targeting the unique experiences of Nepali students, particularly those from rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 1

Percentage of participants becoming stressed or anxious about the study because of the COVID-19 pandemic/lockdown



Source: Chaudhary et al. (2022)

This revelation led us to explore the broader learning crisis caused by the pandemic. Shifting to online study, uneven evaluations, and shortages in face-to-face instruction left significant knowledge gaps among learners. International educational debates reflect a crisis in education, where, if properly assured, learning means learning outcomes that are reflected among students. It would neutralize setbacks (Greer, 1991).

This study documents the experience of students' journey through English language learning before, during, and after the pandemic, with an emphasis on their resilience, challenges, and shifting connection with the English language in a post-pandemic classroom context (United Nations, 2020). We examine the impact of technological issues, pedagogical transformation, and emotional and learning problems faced by students through their narratives. Moreover, we document their strategies for coping with the problems and adapting to new learning spaces. Since learning loss continues to have its impacts, interactive pedagogies and student-led approaches are crucial in bridging learning gaps and facilitating academic resilience. Through these narratives and the theoretical construct of social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and digital divide theory (van Dijk, 2006), we answer the question:

- How do college students of Bara narrate their experiences of learning English before, during, and after COVID-19?

Method of Inquiry

We employed narrative inquiry as our research method under a qualitative research design. Enquiring narratives from research participants enabled us to explore the complex facets of pandemic education in a rural setting in Nepal, as this setting is ideal for capturing the stories of individuals. We selected participants purposively from the Bara district, focusing on students who faced challenges due to COVID-19, to ensure that the participants could provide rich, detailed accounts of their English learning experiences. The following are the details of the participants with their pseudonyms.

Table 1

Personal information of participants

Samhita	Amrita	Raj	Dhiraj
She is a 20-year-old undergraduate student at a government college.	She is enrolled in an undergraduate program at a public college in her local area.	He is a 22-year-old undergraduate student.	He is a 23-year-old undergraduate at a community college.

We collected the data from these participants by obtaining consent from their respective college principals to conduct interview sessions. We conducted interviews and had casual conversations in different locations at their convenience. During the interviews, I (Puja Kumari Gupta) recorded the participants' responses using my mobile phone. We interviewed each participant three times, each lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, to ensure the richness of the data. After the first round, we conducted a preliminary analysis to ensure the temporal, spatial, and social aspects of narrative research. The preliminary analysis enabled us to identify the gaps in the data and those indicated in the literature. After identifying the gaps, we met with the research participants for further interview sessions and casual conversations as part of an in-depth data collection process. We were attentive to avoid repetition in the collection of information.

We also observed the participants' language use during the interviews, reading several times to understand the patterns. After that, we transcribed the recorded narratives and translated them into English. Then we coded and categorized them according to Saldana (2016) to identify recurring themes and patterns. We followed the thematization process of Braun and Clarke (2006). Finally, we interpreted and discussed our findings within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and digital divide theory (van Dijk, 2006).

English Learning Experience before COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students enjoyed and appreciated classroom learning, particularly due to teacher support, peer interaction, and traditional yet structured routines. Interactive methods were more effective for urban students, while rural and semi-urban students

relied heavily on teacher explanations. Samhita shared her experience of learning before COVID-19:

Before the pandemic, I used to attend regular classes and my English teacher was punctual as well as adhered to the blackboard approach. We had group discussions, writing practice, and grammar classes. I felt more connected. I loved learning English, but sometimes I was afraid to speak in front of the class. My teacher would explain complex concepts in Nepali and provide us with some grammatical exercises through drills. I also practiced by reading aloud, which helped me with pronunciation.

Students' memory of pre-pandemic English learning brings to attention some of the most salient aspects of successful language pedagogy in the Nepali context. Our participant enjoyed regular face-to-face lessons, in which the teacher used the blackboard approach and translated the material into Nepali (Rana, 2023). I interpret it as the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching, whereby teachers mediate instruction through learners' native language to facilitate comprehension and understanding. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the mediation of learning through social interaction, a set of specific capabilities, each of which is, to some extent, independent of the others and develops independently.

In spite of feeling shy about speaking in front of the class, she benefited from formal classroom activities such as group discussions, reading aloud, and grammar practice. These activities lower her speaking anxiety, a common phenomenon in second language acquisition. This research shows that the mind is not a complex network of general capabilities—such as observation, attention, memory, judgment, and so forth (Vygotsky, 1978). Grammar-based teaching remains a significant component of English language learning because it provides learners with explicit structures and rules, making it easier for them to understand (Neupane & Gnawali, 2023).

Similarly, Amrita explained a collaborative and interactive classroom where the teacher used Nepali to explain English grammar and encouraged students to read aloud. Learning is more than acquiring the ability to think: it is the acquisition of many specialized abilities for thinking about various things (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, she was able to pronounce it more easily due to such practice. She delighted in learning English in class. Her teacher used Nepali to explain concepts, focused on grammar exercises, and encouraged her to read aloud, which helped improve her pronunciation. Students felt comfortable asking questions, and the instructor promoted active participation. There were many group discussions as well as peer-checking activities. Through these group activities, she gained confidence and was able to learn from the ideas of others. She was heard in class, fostering a sense of learning community (Rana, 2023).

As a response to the question on how his experience was before COVID-19, Raj, another participant, responded:

I was fully engaged in creative activities, such as role-plays and class games. Our English lessons were always full of energy and fun. I was exposed to modern teaching methods, such as presentations and word games, which were exciting to master. My favorite subject was English. There was a very open atmosphere in our class. Our teachers spoke to us in a very informal and friendly way, and these activities motivated us to use English freely.

The participant's experience demonstrates the positive effects of interactive and student-centered English teaching. Exercises like role-playing, games, and presentations made learning exciting and boosted his confidence in speaking. These activities affect the overall development of learners when learning elements, material, and processes are similar across specific domains (Vygotsky, 1978). Communicative methods improve oral fluency in low-exposure contexts (Dewan et al., 2022). The calm, casual classroom environment also alleviated tension and encouraged frank expression of the importance of safe learning spaces. Finally, the participant's willingness to try new words underscores the importance of learner autonomy.

Similarly, when Dhiraj experienced it, he was in a mood of explanation about English being very challenging, but it became fun because of the assistance of his instructor. He explained things clearly and was extremely patient, which made him increasingly more confident. He primarily learned through the use of the grammar-translation approach and read books. These methods made it easier for him to understand things, although he still had difficulties at times.

In spite of the absence of interactive activities, the teacher significantly encouraged the learners to boost their confidence (Dewan et al., 2022). The development of consciousness is the development of a set of particular, independent capabilities—or a set of particular habits (Vygotsky, 1978). The pre-COVID-19 experience was characterized by teacher-centered learning, with a focus on lectures and grammar-translation methods. Limited interactive activities were available, and face-to-face learning and teacher support were highly valued, even for those attending irregularly. Most participants felt inhibited when speaking English and used Nepali to ask questions, and listening to teacher explanations and discussions helped them learn (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Experiencing Learning Difficulties during COVID-19

Another central theme from the participants' experiences was learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic. They experienced difficulties in learning due to poor internet access, a lack of online skills, and less interaction, especially for students in rural areas. Learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for students, particularly those attending under-resourced learning centers. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning as well as development are deeply interconnected processes. With minimal face-to-face communication, with Samhita explaining her COVID-19 learning strategies:

I had tremendous challenges during the lockdown. Without internet access at home. I often could not attend online classes. My teacher tried to reach out to us by sending voice messages, but the distorted voice quality and fuzzy instructions made learning difficult. Without face-to-face guidance, I was usually lost. At times, I would have to climb trees to receive a mobile signal, which highlights the difficulty of getting guidance for students like myself in rural schools.

Vygotsky emphasized that the ZPD is a space where children learn best with the support of a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or peer. Samhita's experience reveals that restricted internet access, as well as poor sound quality, interfered with online learning for rural students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Paudel, 2021). Climbing up trees to access a stronger internet signal reveals an infrastructure problem. Additionally, household chores limited her study time, a challenge especially faced by female students. These conditions disrupted her

learning, as well as highlighting the need for greater support during times of adversity (Poudel & Kapar, 2024).

She acknowledged that home learning fragmented her attention and did not allow for immediate support, either from the teacher or peers. The sudden shift to online and remote learning environments disrupted the natural scaffolding process that Vygotsky viewed as essential to development. Her drop in confidence and rising anxiety reflect emotional struggles noted during online learning (Poudel, 2020). When further asked about her creative strategies to improve English learning during crises, she explained, "During the Pandemic, she improved her English by writing a diary, listening to the news, and joining English-speaking Facebook groups. She reviewed dubbed cartoons, used vocabulary apps, heard Teacher Education Development talks, and read them aloud to herself."

Usage time and number of applications increase with social categories as digital media merge into daily lives. Listening as well as speaking were facilitated by watching TED Talks and cartoons (van Dijk, 2006). Without regular teacher facilitation, students search for themselves beyond their current independent capabilities, leading to stagnation or regression in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Strategies reflect enhanced learner autonomy (Krashen, 1982). When another student, Raj, explained:

Although I had access to technology like a laptop and Wi-Fi, I struggled to manage my time during the pandemic. I had to help with my family's business. So, I often missed online classes. Learning at home had many distractions, and I couldn't concentrate.

Although the participant was exposed to technology distractions, home duties also affected his learning, as documented by Adhikari and Rana (2024). Lack of organization in online lectures reduced motivation and consistency. Moreover, he explained his experience concerning the influence on perception and attention.

He found it difficult to maintain concentration during online classes. Even though he had a personal study room, the lack of classroom discipline led to frequent distractions. Sometimes he felt bored or sleepy during virtual lectures, which showed he was less engaged. In contrast, online learning gave him flexibility. It didn't have the same interactive and motivating feel as face-to-face classes (van Dijk, 2006). Participants' low attention and boredom in online classes reflect common issues in virtual learning, where a lack of structure reduces engagement (Laudari et al., 2021). The limited interaction also affected motivation as well as understanding.

He asked about time constraints: "My confidence dropped during the pandemic. I forgot some grammar rules, and my writing became weaker, although my speaking and vocabulary slightly improved. Here, most of my skills declined." Participants' writing and grammar skills declined due to the reduced number of practices and feedback in online courses. Some improvement in listening and vocabulary was noted, but overall confidence declined (Adhikari & Rana, 2024; Gajurel, 2023). When I asked Dhiraj about the practice, he had to share one smartphone with his sister, resulting in missed classes or delays in accessing materials. Internet access was unstable with constant interruptions that would last for days. He had no space to study, and his teachers were not supportive, only sending PDFs occasionally without follow-through. All these factors contributed to a learning deficit, making him feel isolated and demotivated; however, the motivation to obtain digital media increased quickly (van Dijk, 2006). Learning and development occur together; however, in the case of my research participant, it failed to account for the emotional, cognitive, and social setbacks students experienced during

lockdowns. Cognitive development is unevenly affected, especially in emergencies, and is not merely for those without digital access or adult guidance at home (Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, Dhiraj has confessed to an impact on concentration and comprehension:

My irregular schedule compromised my understanding. Following hours of work spent commuting home, I was exhausted. I could not learn information when at school. I tried to work around this. It's playing taped lessons repeatedly and using self-study devices. Although it helped to some extent, it was still not quite as effective as attending an online class.

The challenge for learners to study after work highlights how fatigue and a lack of immediacy through contact can reduce learning outcomes in online education (Poudel, 2020). Similarly, reports identical findings that asynchronous learning materials, such as video lectures, offer flexibility but not immediacy, and an emphasis on live teaching. This resulted in a weakening of understanding, particularly among working students who are conscious of self-study. Particularly, van Dijk (2006) explains the concept of social and information inequality based on online platform learning. Inclusion and exclusion in particular types of social units are common concepts in terms of learning. Students need structured support, emotional scaffolding, and targeted instruction tailored to their current developmental stage to recover their lost learning trajectory (Vygotsky, 1978).

Learning English transitions after COVID-19

After the COVID-19 pandemic, students transitioned to a blended approach in learning English, combining classroom instruction with digital tools, which enhanced autonomy but also posed adjustment challenges. While talking with Samhita about Learning English transitions after COVID, she argued:

When the college resumed offline classes, I found English very challenging. When I was in lockdown, I didn't have regular classes, but I received some notes from teachers via WhatsApp. I couldn't have discussions or even communicate. It felt like being a beginner once again after COVID. I was too timid to read aloud in class. But slowly and gradually, our teacher began to assign us group work and role-playing exercises, making it less difficult. I also began watching YouTube videos on grammar. Today, I am more confident, but I still feel a little nervous when giving presentations.

Students lost English proficiency after the COVID-19 pandemic due to limited communication during lockdown, as indicated by Gharti (2023). However, it was regained through group work, role-plays, as well as technology, such as YouTube (Ghimire et al., 2022). Furthermore, she found some positive refinement in reading, but the opposite condition in writing and speaking skills. Sita's experience illustrates the profound impact of socio-economic as well as digital disparities on rural learners, particularly girls. Vygotsky's (1978) position argues that learning stimulates development, but only when tasks are connected to the Zone of Proximal Development, where the child cannot complete a task alone but can do it with guidance. Similarly, more psychological theories, such as the Technology Acceptance Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior, indicate that focusing on motivation and attitudes of students is crucial (van Dijk, 2006). She suggested that the government and schools should provide free internet data, print materials, and short recorded lessons to support students like her in the future.

Participants' narratives revealed that peer interaction and peer support have significant potential to enhance English learning; however, they also present several challenges (Ajayi et al., 2024). While talking with Samhita about peer interaction and peer support, she argued:

I stayed connected with my peers through a WhatsApp group, where I shared answers and motivated one another. I joined a Facebook speaking group to practice English regularly as well. Although my interaction was sometimes limited, I still took part in basic group chats and discussed lessons with a friend over weekly calls. Peer learning became my substitute for classroom interaction, and I noticed that those of us with better digital access could engage more actively.

The learning experience suggests that peer learning via WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as access, is linked to a particular methodological point of view, which involves investigating social and information (in)equality. This approach worked well in maintaining motivation and language practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic (van Dijk, 2006). Both of these online social media sites served as substitutes for classroom interaction; however, restricted digital access affected the degree of participation, as evidenced by Joshi et al. (2023) in their study on the utilization of peer support and the challenges of digital inequality in foreign language learning.

When asked about more intentional post-pandemic, Raj explained,

Post-pandemic, learning English became more intentional for me. Lockdown caused me to get out of touch with the language and speak Nepali only at home. But when I returned to college, I was so far behind. Our teacher introduced interactive methods, showing us how to devise our own stories in English and read them aloud in class. That motivated me to work harder. I also started reading English storybooks and keeping a daily diary. After COVID, I am better equipped to study and teach English more effectively in the future.

The pandemic became more meaningful; he acknowledged his privileged status and noticed how many of his rural-area peers were not even able to take online classes. He admired the initiative of his teacher in using quizzes and Google Forms to get feedback as well as maintain the students' interest. He was encouraged to learn more since he aspired to apply for a scholarship (Angwaomaodoko, 2024).

Overall, Raj believed that both online and offline classrooms had their merits, but that he preferred face-to-face classes for tasks like writing. He suggested increasing teacher training, providing more speaking practice, and offering offline content for underprivileged students to read. He added more information about motivation and independent strategies. He stated:

I was kept motivated by maintaining a diary, listening to BBC podcasts, and joining online clubs. Support from my mother and teacher, as well as dreams of a scholarship and professional success, drove me, although the absence of feedback sometimes reduced my motivation.

The participant's motivation was inspired by family support and personal goals, in line with Sharma and Neupane (2022). Conversely, the lack of feedback lowered student motivation, aligning with Poudel and Gnawali's (2021) findings about the role of teaching guidance during distance learning. Samhita responded to the query on the challenge as follows:

It is challenging to adapt to regular English classes after the COVID-19 pandemic. I had forgotten many grammar rules and many words from memory, as there was no practice whatsoever in online classes. There were connectivity problems with the internet in our

college, and I would only receive PDF notes, which were inadequate. But our English teacher used to help us a lot and gave us extra speaking classes after class. I also went to a local English coaching center. Now I feel that I am slowly regaining my confidence, although essay writing in English remains challenging for me.

The participant's inability to relearn vocabulary and grammar. Following COVID-19, there is an indication of learning loss due to brief interactions and compromised connectivity (Paudel, 2021). Teaching guidance and joining coaching classes helped restore confidence, in line with the conclusion of Sharma and Neupane (2022) on the necessity for individual guidance following the pandemic. After the dark experience of the pandemic, the participants felt that learning improved as they began to receive regular teacher support. Her English phobia has now worsened, and she spoke about the need for remedial support to build confidence back. Her recommendations included distributing tablets on a distribution basis, recording classes on video for offline viewing, and emphasizing access to digital infrastructure for marginalized students. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that true development happens when learning encourages understanding of deeper principles and is supported socially. She also made some recommendations about post-COVID, she disclosed:

I believe learning can be improved if I am provided with internet data, short audio lessons, and print worksheets. Teachers must be better trained, especially to provide us with more practice speaking and offer offline content to students like me who come from rural backgrounds. Tablet distribution and class recording for offline viewing would actually be helpful. Offline and online modes, combined with free data and personalized support, would enhance learning efficiency. I actually need access, interactive support, and offline capabilities, as not everyone has good connectivity.

The participant's suggestions highlight the strong need for accessible digital access and blended learning approaches in post-pandemic teaching and learning. The need for offline content, teacher capacity building, and technical support resonates with broader patterns in Nepalese contexts. As a result, students may have learned isolated skills but not developed intellectually, confirming the concerns raised by Vygotsky (1978). According to Paudel (2021), infrastructure deficiencies and digital inequality in rural contexts limited learner participation in online education during the pandemic. Moreover, Subedi and Subedi (2020) emphasize the necessity for teacher preparedness and the integration of both offline and online to cater to different learner needs. The participant's emphasis on recorded classes, hard copies, and individual support aligns with Gupta and Awasthi (2025), who argue that inclusive strategies are necessary to prevent additional learning disparities during the post-COVID recovery period.

Dhiraj, another participant, noted that despite challenges, opportunities depend on the person's willingness. He further explained:

After the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized how much I had missed during lockdown. Before the pandemic, I was quite confident in reading and writing English, but speaking was always my weak point. Online classes didn't help in that way. After college reopened following the COVID-19 pandemic, I became very self-conscious because I couldn't express myself fluently in class discussions. Our English teacher also asked us to practice speaking in pairs and telling stories in English, which proved beneficial. But I still believe that I have lost two precious years when I could have practiced speaking and

listening properly. Even now, I am exercising on mobile apps like Hello English to compensate for the shortfall. I feel that I am still lagging behind.

The difficulty of participants in speaking skills following COVID is consistent, as they had no interaction and instant feedback from online classes. The participant's process of building confidence through pair work and narration in this study is congruent with Ghimire et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of communication activities in healing. Mobile app practice refers to individual practice, according to Dulal (2024), who views technology as a learning gap-filler.

Besides, the participant's difficulty with oral skills post-COVID aligns with research, which indicates that they lacked interaction and instant feedback from online classes. The participant's experience of confidence development through pair work and narration in this study aligns with Ghimire et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of communication tasks in recovery. Mobile app practice demonstrates independent learning, consistent with Dulal (2024), who views technology as a supplement for learning.

Inadequate access to the internet and devices hampers learning, in line with Ghimire et al. (2022), who highlight the digital rural-urban divide. Blended learning helps. However, educators' training in digital technology is essential. Peer and family emotional scaffolding also enhances motivation and resilience (Angwaomaodoko, 2024). Thus, access to equal facilities, trained teachers, and psychosocial support is what guarantees effective learning in rural areas. Thus, Vygotsky's ZPD directly supports my argument that students require interactive, supportive learning environments to thrive. The absence of these during COVID-19 exacerbated the educational inequality between those with access to and support, and those without.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic severely restricted students' access to their zone of proximal development, resulting in halted or slowed learning. In the absence of teacher guidance, peer collaboration, and interactive pedagogy, students remained confined to their past developmental achievements without progressing toward new cognitive milestones (Vygotsky, 1978). The transition to online and hybrid English learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic introduced tremendous challenges to rural students. The limited utilization of digital technology, inconsistent internet connections, and a lack of interactive, real-time support hindered students' understanding, concentration, and engagement. Despite these issues, many students employed self-initiated strategies, such as utilizing mobile apps, online group membership, video conversational tasks, and other peer-to-peer interactions through imaginative activities, to improve their English language proficiency. The most significant consideration was the involvement of supportive teachers who adjusted their practice to include extra speaking periods and personalized guidance.

However, the digital divide remains a major barrier, highlighting the need for universal coverage of devices, data bundles, and offline learning materials. Similarly, widespread teacher training on digital pedagogy and emotional support platforms, such as peer mentoring and family engagement, is paramount in addressing both academic and psychosocial needs. Especially, a hybrid mode of learning that combines face-to-face communication with readily accessible digital materials and constant encouragement and support is a prerequisite for effective English language acquisition in post-pandemic contexts.

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