Use of ICT Tools in the Online Learning of English Language and Soft Skills Course in the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Ethnographic Case Study

During this testing time of COVID-19, higher education is found to be more balanced with their regular academic routine by compensating the regular classes with online education. This paper is specifically concerned with highlighting how English language and soft skills course in a technical institution has been conducted online on par with the technical subjects in COVID-19. Qualitative research has been undertaken to analyze the pedagogical process of a language and soft skills course, and the teachers' and students' online collaboration are examined. It is found that the use of Smart Phones and Laptop for using Zoom Platform to conduct online classes has been of great resource in online learning. It is implied that by immediately switching to e-learning in this unprecedented pandemic situation, the teachers' tireless contribution and the students' readiness to learn English language and soft skills indicated a positive impact on the successful completion of the course.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, language pedagogy, language and soft skills, online learning, online platform

Introduction

The present pandemic COVID-19 ongoing lockdown has affected every arena of life throughout the world. The benign attitude, resilience, and positivity in the masses have given a cult for reforming a new normalcy to life amid this COVID-19. Though the universities were shut, higher education had its magnifying insight to recover from the desolate situation and can reinvent themselves with quick decisions to revolve around working with a new difference. The digitalization of higher education has been a credit of the only visible choice, so the students could be able to meet their expectations through online pedagogy and evaluation.

In India, higher education has been able to quickly respond with the alternative remote approaches to learning, so the students can compensate for their regular studies with proper planning, practice, and execution. Though there was wide consensus to adopt online pedagogy, there were several doubts raised about its sudden implementation and practice. Several inquiries were on the practicum whether all the teachers would be able to successfully deliver their lectures via video conferences. The most important practical issues in virtual learning are the size, strength and level of the online classes and students' capability to understand all the lectures. Being that all the classes are set with mixed ability students, questions were particularly raised on their comfortable participation through online learning – Will all the students be able to attend and understand the lectures online? How can the students confidently interact and clear their doubts with the teachers? How will the students be able to prepare and face online exams? Will the teachers be able to track the performance of the students by giving online assignments and mock tests? These questions were of actual concern of all the higher education

stakeholders, and they remain evasive with no other choice but to try remote learning.

Being soft skills are taught to bridge life management and placement prospects, this paper probes on how soft skills can be taught through the online course. As the employers look for the soft skills of their employees for creating a diligent, consistent, and palatable workforce, technical students consider learning soft skills as one of the most important twenty first century skills and a positive indicator for grabbing employment opportunities (Kovács, 2021; Steurer et al., 2023). The teaching and assessment of soft skills in an online course remains a challenge, as to develop the personal attributes of the students and to enhance consistent improvement of their soft skills competencies, they need to be given sufficient training to display their capability and integrity in any workplace (Giacomazzi, 2022; Manville et al., 2022; Shtaltovna & Muzzu, 2021; Volfová, 2023). To facilitate the students become employable while they study, technical institutions are much concerned with promoting campus recruitment drives, and hence a separate wing on training and placement is established to provide placement training to them. In order to meet the expectations of the employers, English language proficiency and soft skills courses are conducted so that the technical students can develop adequate knowledge, communication skills, and soft skills to confidently face job interviews. With reference to remote learning contexts and in these trying situations of pandemic lockdown, the present study, with the aid of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools, attempts to conduct an online language and soft skills course and critically analyzes the use of digital learning skills and its effect on students' virtual learning culture and practice.

Literature Review

In the mid-March of 2020, all the educational institutions remained closed to immediately restrain the growing impetus of COVID-19 throughout the world. It was a sudden, impulsive moment that nobody knew how to immediately encounter COVID-19 (Crawford et al., 2020; Gonzalez, et al., 2020). Nicola et al. (2020) discusses the socioeconomic implications of COVID-19 and how it has affected the routine life of the world. Chaudhary & Niaz (2020) discusses and compares how higher and lower income students are affected in the lockdown and how the familial and home environment influences their mind and studies. It is reflected that in the lockdown, the students hailing from the rich families can enjoy considerable spaces in both physical and emotional set up, whereas the students from the economically less privileged classes living in congested houses are much occupied with anxiety due to domestic work responsibilities. Brown & Ahmed (2020) discusses global education needs and the prevailing economic crisis in this disastrous pandemic lockdown and reflects that the deprived children may be forced to work to support the income of their families, and hence they may not be able to continue their regular education. In this context, they emphasized that both the governments and the international community should come forward to shoulder

1   the responsibility to educate and bring new hope and life to every child in this
2   world.
3   In India, all the modes of public and private transport have been affected and
4   the entire districts, state and country are imposed for a national and international
5   wide lockdown at the end of March 2020 (Vibha & Kamath, 2020). This affected
6   every arena of routine life and especially with concern to safeguard the health of
7   the students, it is extended to the education sector compelling all the primary,
8   secondary and tertiary levels of educational institutions and including higher
9   education and research institutions to get remain closed (Pandit, 2020). The
10 indefinite closure and the uncertainty of the opening of the schools, colleges and
11 universities made the academics stranded to doubt the timeline to complete the
12 syllabus and subsequently to conduct the end semester examinations. Due to the
13 vigorous invasion of COVID-19, nothing can be speculated about the relaxation of
14 the lockdown and the way back to our normalcy. As COVID-19 is found to be
15 prolonged till a complete cure vaccine is to be discovered, the World Health
16 Organization (WHO) urged to severe lockdown and social distancing measures to
17 control the further containment of the disease. It recommended bringing significant
18 constructive changes and sudden massive transition to our new normalcy in every
19 walk of our life.
20   The primary, middle, high and higher secondary schools suffered incessantly
21 as it was really incongruous to understand how to function the curriculum to the
22 present educational norms. The present face to face real time classes is not possible
23 to conduct for several months due to this unprecedented Coronavirus pandemic
24 lockdown (Macwan, 2020). It can be generally noticed that neither the teachers nor
25 the subject content can be reached out to the students without the aids of
26 technology (Bhat et al., 2020). Due to the sudden havoc of these vulnerable
27 circumstances, both the teachers and students are not prepared, well-informed, and
28 trained in online teaching learning practice. Teachers teaching through vernacular
29 medium instruction are not prepared for content delivery as they are confined to
30 their printed materials rather than to supply with the electronic version of their
31 content. Students studying through the vernacular medium are at more
32 disadvantage as they are not supplied with their expected content of learning their
33 courses. Though disparities in the level of standardized content prevailed, students
34 were also on the receiving end as they expected their routine face to face classroom
35 pedagogy. As the schools, colleges and universities are uncertain about their
36 reopening for normal functions, a sort of bleakness prevailed for the next course of
37 action. Due to the limited technical aids and resources, both public and private
38 educational institutions were in sheer doubt to reorganize the shattered structure for
39 a concrete teaching.
40   The tertiary level institutions instructed the students to go through the online
41 platforms to resume their study with the related course instruction and materials
42 (Gohain, 2020; Kumar, 2020; Education Desk, 2020). Still, the students who are
43 habituated with the traditional course structure and pedagogy relied on the face and
44 content value of their own teachers. Students are advised to go through the free
45 online courses and materials for their continuous learning of the subjects available
46 in the online learning platforms like Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young

1 Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) and National Programme on Technology Enhanced
2 Learning (NPTEL). Though the students refer those online materials for guidance,
3 they exclusively depended on their respective teachers for the narrow angle
4 delivery of their course instruction. The teachers too need to reorganize themselves
5 to realize their teaching goals to the needs of digital age. Being twenty first century
6 is scrupulously the age of technology and digital communication, the teachers need
7 to integrate themselves to practice and apply relevant twenty first century skills and
8 strategies to promote technology enhanced language learning (Crosta et al., 2023;
9 Prasojo et al., 2018). The unparalleled sweep of COVID-19 over the oncampus
10 learning has compelled the education industry to immediately trust on virtual
11 learning. Hence, this invoked the technical institutions to make an immediate
12 transition to initiate experimenting online education with assured quality in
13 managing the curriculum on par with the standard and scheduled framework of the
14 academic calendar (Mishra, 2020).

15 　　　Higher education responded immediately to the needs of the new normalcy to
16 overcome all the upheavals of the prevailing stress and anxiety in education to
17 complete the curriculum within the scheduled timeline (Ahmed et al., 2020; Herold
18 & Chen, 2021; Lau, 2020; Liang et al., 2020; Shih et al., & Lai, 2020). In this
19 context, Rajhans et al. (2020) discusses how the fast evolution in optometry
20 education in India is possible, even in the commotions of COVID-19. Daniel
21 (2020) and Strielkowski (2020) stress on the practical facets of how this pandemic
22 has augmented the digital revolution in professional education. Eachempati &
23 Ramnarayan (2020) reviews the academic challenges of COVID-19 and provides a
24 suggestion for web-based education. Roy (2017) stresses how the initiative of
25 making Digital India will help it into becoming of a digitalized empowered nation
26 and could contribute to increasing our knowledge economy. Kandri (2020)
27 highlights how COVID-19 is driving the universities in making a stupendous
28 initiative through encompassing online pedagogy in their curriculum and thus
29 making digital revolution and transformation in higher education.

30 　　　Fore & Moritz (2020) report the prospects of students' expectations and
31 understanding of skill development in this pandemic. As technology aided
32 language learning has become a compelling force for online education in these new
33 normal times, suggestions need to be sought through university and industry
34 collaboration to incorporate the necessary changes with relevant technical
35 capabilities for new education and professionalism (Ankrah & AL-Tabbaa, 2015).
36 Kasrekar & Wadhavane-Tapaswi (2020) and Hudson (2022) emphasizes the
37 advantages of online learning and flipped learning approaches and considers it a
38 blessing in disguise for not disrupting the completion of curriculum framework, but
39 further supplementing digital literacy and technology enabled learning practices.
40 Citing the report of Andrew Norton of the Australian National University that due
41 to the prevailing unemployment problems in this COVID-19 students opt for
42 higher education placements, Hillman (2020) reflects that due to the present job
43 attrition, more graduates prefer to continue with higher education and hence, this
44 practical move happens to help them prepare for "a more highly skilled workforce"
45 at the end of this recession. While discussing how to diminish the negative impacts
46 of COVID-19, Burgess & Sievertsen (2020) reflect that the continuous lockdown

1 of educational institutions will affect students' learning and their score in internal
2 assessments and the possibility of the cancelation of central evaluation or providing
3 a marginal solution for their qualifications.
4 In light to resolve the interruptions found in virtual education, Goyal (2020)
5 stresses the use of digital learning through facilitating continuous power supply,
6 Internet connectivity and through digital teaching and learning skills of teachers
7 and students. While discussing the challenges and reforms to be undertaken in
8 Indian higher education, Choudhary (2020) reflects that the major task in EDTech
9 reforms is through integrating technology in the education system. In context to
10 creating and experimenting and introspecting online education platforms, Farooqui
11 (2020) emphasizes the unvarying role of teachers and students and the need to train
12 them for a successful online education. Tripathi and Amann (2020) commend for
13 innovative and collaborative approaches to mitigate the challenges and prevailing
14 higher education issues of the COVID-19. Tertiary level students need to adopt
15 autonomous language learning strategies for their successful online learning. With
16 their peer support and teachers' guidance they can gradually engage in
17 collaborative learning too. It is the students' interest and involvement that can truly
18 help them to apply various strategies and engage in remote learning and attain
19 desirable success (Kim & Bae, 2020).
20 A recent study of the IESALC, UNESCO Report (2020) entitled, "Impact
21 analysis, policy responses and recommendations" stresses that the higher education
22 needs to provide necessary amenities and tools like laptop and smartphones to help
23 the students engage in technology enabled learning and should provide better
24 educational climate to respond and collaborate positively in this COVID-19 crisis.
25 It can also be recognized that the government should undertake necessary steps to
26 provide uninterrupted power supply and Internet connection across the country as
27 most students hail from the locations where Internet network service is scarcely
28 found. Hence, with the unprecedented challenges that the higher education is
29 presently facing, a transparent and well-informed online teaching and assessment is
30 needed in these difficult times as we need to seek confidence with both institutional
31 and student support virtual education services. Mirza (2020) reflects that the most
32 positive impact of COVID-19 is the blended or complete digital transformation of
33 higher education. It can be generally acknowledged that the educated masses are
34 able to recognize that through virtual learning they are able to save their time that
35 they invest in reaching the classes and could easily proceed with learning through
36 technology. Both teachers and students can experience and acknowledge the
37 benefits of E-learning and being simultaneously witnessing the prevailing barriers
38 in adopting virtual education, they need to resolve their language, cognitive as well
39 as technical issues for successful learning (Mudra, 2020).
40 Rogoff & Thomas (2020) reflect that the outbreak of a pandemic has
41 severely affected universities with positive and technical solutions, and this is really
42 an opportunity to change over, curb inequality and to make society even better.
43 Gopinathan and Ramachandran (2020) commend on practicing online teaching and
44 learning and suggests that the universities need to adopt technical solutions to train
45 their teachers and students to adequately develop higher education. Though online
46 courses have been available for the last two decades, it is presently COVID-19 has

1 affected the higher education scenario to bring teaching, learning and evaluation
2 practice through virtual mode, and hence today, E-Learning has become the order
3 of the day. In this context, Fernandes (2020) highlights that though online courses
4 were available for many years, it was COVID-19 that made the universities quickly
5 respond to the only available digital solution for uninterrupted virtual learning.
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7
8 **Research Design**
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10 To critically understand the feasibility and quality of online education and to
11 replace the conventional classroom teaching in the sudden misgivings of COVID-
12 19 and to analyze the conduct of a Humanities course like Language and Soft
13 Skills, the following research questions are put forward for an analysis through
14 ethnographic qualitative research.
15
16 **Research Questions**
17
18 1. Is online education a trusted alternative enterprise for curriculum instruction
19 amid the COVID-19 lockdown crisis?
20 2. How did the use of ICT tools in online pedagogy proved to be successful
21 during the high-time pandemic COVID-19?
22
23 **Context and Course of the Study**
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25 The English Language and Soft Skills course are conducted for the sixth
26 semester technical students as an open elective course in a reputed technical
27 institution in India. As the nationwide lockdown was imposed due to COVID-19,
28 all the educational institutions are advised to remain closed until further orders
29 received. Even the residential students in the campus are instructed to vacate from
30 their hostels until they receive further orders from office. Students have given their
31 Quiz test and Mid-semester examination, and they are expected to face their
32 examination in the last week of April and first week of May 2020. Teachers are
33 expected to complete their syllabus by the third week of April 2020, and the closure
34 of the academic year 2019–20 is just yet to happen. As the nationwide lockdown
35 prevailed from the last week of March 2020, the education sector, the higher
36 education and research institutions in particular, stood for incorporating web based
37 education and online education as an alternative approach to typical learning. The
38 technical institution in which the present research was conducted is of no
39 exception, and it immediately adhered to the changing norms of new normalcy.
40 This study specifically aims at emphasizing the effectiveness of the use of ICT
41 tools in online education and the smooth and successful conduct of the course in
42 terms of new demands in these crucial predicaments.
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44

1 **Participants**
2
3   Seventy-three technical students hailing from different branches of technical
4 disciplines are the key players of this research. Sixty-five boys and eight girls are
5 the total students who enrol in this Open Elective - Language and Soft Skills
6 course. Most students hail from neighbouring states and only a few belong to the
7 native state. Two English language teachers, including the researcher as a
8 participant, along with the Heads of CSE, ECE, Design and Mechanical
9 Engineering departments participated in the study. The Academic Dean and the
10 Director monitored the curriculum development and advised the teaching and
11 learning fraternity through providing systematic academic guidelines throughout
12 the successful completion of the course. Being it is online classroom-based
13 research conducted in pandemic without any preparation and planning but
14 attempting for an uninterrupted learning process, students gave their oral consent to
15 participate in this study and continue online learning with the available ICT tools
16 like computer, laptop and smart mobile phones found with them.
17
18 **Procedures**
19
20   Qualitative ethnographic case study research is conducted to analyze the
21 effectiveness of the online teaching of a language and soft skills course. Qualitative
22 research analysis is found to be more apt to analyze the formal and social
23 intelligence of the students in indulging themselves in online learning. And
24 moreover, their learning motivation and preferences can be analyzed through
25 ethnographic insights. In this unprecedented pandemic, being online learning has
26 been considered as the only mode to deliver higher education, the institution
27 considered that neither the teachers nor the students are really prepared or trained
28 for online, but in the strictest sense, they should be keenly practical to make it
29 realized. This led the present researcher to undertake an exploratory ethnographic
30 case study research practice to observe the teaching learning and evaluation
31 processes and in completing the course online to the changing needs of COVID-19.
32 The institutional authorities encouraged the faculties that they will support them in
33 this new online venture and asked all the faculties and students to confidently
34 engage through online. The present researcher informed all the students that this
35 research study is undertaken to explore their new attempt in the process of online
36 learning and will help them proceed without any interruption or break in education.
37 All the students, being the key players of this study, considered that online learning
38 is inevitable during this unprecedented pandemic, and hence they revealed their
39 willingness and oral consent to be the part of the study. Their sheer interest and
40 involvement in this study was considered as a positive note and none of them had
41 any oppression or intimidation on their act of participation, rather they considered
42 that their online learning process needs to be properly investigated.
43   It is evident that the present researcher, being a language faculty faced
44 tremendous challenges in immediately adopting online pedagogy. The challenges
45 of the teachers and students in adopting technology with language learning in this
46 disruptive situation are continuously monitored through online meetings in the

1 Zoom platform. All official instructions, guidelines and procedures are sent through
2 official emails to both the teachers and students. All the authentic communication is
3 exchanged through official emails by all the teachers and students. To keep the
4 pace with social obligations, instant mobile calls and messages are entertained
5 through WhatsApp. Being the course is conducted through online, students are
6 communicated through all the means of online communication tools like
7 WhatsApp, Emails and Zoom platforms for their immediate reach and ease of
8 understanding.

Data Collection and Analysis

12 Students' learning needs and their perceptions and preferences are elicited
13 through formal interactions in emails and mobile calls. The effectiveness of online
14 teaching learning is monitored through recorded virtual class instructions and
15 Zoom meetings. The audio files and additional course materials sent through
16 emails are found to be the supportive tools for effective e-learning. In Zoom
17 meetings, open-ended questions are asked to the students to analyze their learning
18 difficulties and their constraints to overcome their language problems. Online
19 meetings are periodically conducted by the management and the teachers to gain
20 feedback in their continuous process of online learning. Students are also put to
21 review their peer performances and their insights to this new order of learning.
22 Unstructured formal and informal discussions in meetings, interactions done
23 through calls and text messages over the smart mobile phones and emails are used
24 as the research tools to investigate the learning process of the course.

Findings and Discussion

29 Due to the uncertainties of the possible end of the pandemic, the institution
30 attempted towards the positive direction to conduct classes through online. As the
31 curriculum framework needs to be progressed with the given timeline, both the
32 teachers and students felt responsible that they should prepare for the new
33 pedagogical changes and shifted to online instructional and assessment practices. It
34 can be generally noticed though the teachers and students are in affirmative notions
35 to undertake a new online pedagogical challenge, several inquiries and doubts
36 raised regarding the teacher student immediate preparedness and the effectiveness
37 of the online course in terms of its delivery, observation, testing, and evaluation
38 through digital mode. Questions were generally raised on the technological
39 interventions and its effectiveness and the use of digital tools and platforms for
40 online education. Though the mainstream educationists, professionals, teachers,
41 and students unambiguously consider smartphones as the most convenient tool for
42 online pedagogy, they doubt on the existing several technical fallouts in terms of
43 low Internet connectivity and bandwidth problems throughout the country. Though
44 these technical inadequacies pose a great challenge for e-learning, there is no
45 preference, alternative or choice but to accept the compulsion to use a computer, a
46 laptop or a smartphone in accord with the availability of the learning resources they

should manage for the successful completion of the course. Furthermore, online platforms like Zoom and Google Meet are suggested for conducting the teaching learning process through online mode. Most students reflected that they could use both Zoom and Google Meet platforms but preferred Zoom to engage in regular online classes. They revealed that Zoom settings and menu are clear and better convenient for them. Students raised issues regarding their inability to attend throughout the lectures as they frequently encounter power supply low bandwidth Internet connectivity issues, In the subsequent discussions in the meetings, it is resolved that the students need to be compensated with the recorded audio files of the recorded virtual classrooms for effective learning. This will help all the students listen the audio lectures and discussions multiple times and to those students who missed their online scheduled classes due to low bandwidth Internet connectivity, frequent power cut off or any other unexpected technical problems with the device. This flexibility of learning at convenience helped the students to get involved in their study and, with the availability of their free schedule, they engaged in autonomous learning.

Students are encouraged to exchange their views through creating a WhatsApp group so that they can connect with their teacher and all their peers. This helped the students to instantly connect with the teacher and immediately clarify their doubts on course content and testing. This also happened to be a good platform to exchange short messages instantly through voice or text messages. This particularly helped the students who are comfortable in voice call and some reserved students who preferred to text messages to seek information. This formalized informal communication specifically helped the students to inform their queries, provide any feedback on the pedagogy, instantly reveal their preferred dates for the submission of assignment and mock tests and exchange peer review on any subject. To comply with the requirement to undertake any authentic communication, students are encouraged to write emails to the concerned teachers, department Heads and the Academic Dean to immediately resolve any digital access issue they undergo while e-learning. Students' feedback is always undertaken by the respective department Heads and the Academic Dean to understand their new learning experiences and the difficulties they undergo if any through the virtual learning of the course. Students are expected to be honest and vocal regarding their feedback on the conduct of the course so that they need to be immediately reached out for understanding and resolving their learning issues.

Students' satisfaction and confidence to involve in online classes through Zoom meetings is well planned and conceived as they were all monitored in the recorded classroom teaching as well as the online and offline discussions and interactions conducted throughout the course. The various levels of meeting undertaken with the students by the teachers, department Heads, Academic Dean and the Director instilled them with learning motivation amid all odds they face in COVID-19. The present paradigm shift in the education sector found the online instruction and evaluation to be more effective and productive as it has yielded sufficient positive response in terms of readiness on the part of teachers' and students' participation and involvement in undertaking online pedagogy. Timely dissemination of online materials, hassle-free use of technical resources, digital

access of online learning platforms, facilitating knowledge-based interaction and positive feedback between the institution, students and parents on transparent curriculum management helped all the stakeholders to confidently proceed through the course.

Initially, both the teachers and students had stress, anxiety and doubts about the successful conduct of virtual course, but gradually teachers gain confidence with their repeated guidance on the planning and execution of their online curriculum framework helped students to focus on their studies. All the students affirmed that they are able to engage in synchronous learning in the regular scheduled online classes, able to clear doubts and interact with the teacher. They also expressed their convenience that they are equally benefitting from the asynchronous learning as they are in the virtue to attend the recorded classes in their convenient time and repeatedly listen to the recorded lectures. Student.11, III year, ECE and Student.43, III year, ME revealed with gratitude that they were very much benefitted with the recorded lectures even while serving their parents in the hospital. It was a good soothing effect that both the teachers and students were found to be ardently supportive and mutually concerned by exchanging positive and encouraging messages to one another, and this indicated a good response in undertaking a healthy virtual teaching learning environment despite the threat of pandemic throughout the country. All the students positively confirmed the effective role of their teachers in immediately responding to their queries and facilitating them to overcome from the most disruptive pandemic outbreak, to manage social distancing situations, overcome from the environmental distractions and to continuously engage them in online learning. Social media applications like WhatsApp have been particularly widely used for instant texting and messaging. The transition from conventional classroom pedagogy to online education has yielded in promoting reconstructive and progressive approaches to learning.

Students considered email and WhatsApp as the most widely used tool for formal and social communication. For immediate communication and sharing of information to their respective class group, they considered smartphone as the most compatible device than the tablet, laptop and computer. In this context, most students reflect,

We have got our smartphones for communication and learning purposes. This has immensely helped us in this pandemic outbreak.

(Student.4, III year, ECE)

Smartphones being the only source of Internet connectivity we possess in our hands. Nobody would have ever imagined or known that our pocket electronic gadget would prove to be of so much useful in these difficult times.

(Student.9, III year, ECE)

We have always been depended on smart mobiles for instant communication. But we never expected that this will happen to be the essential tool for our learning.

(Student.15, III year, Design)

I have left my laptop in my hostel. Though I miss my laptop for my technical workouts, I am at least confident that I will be able to continue my studies with my smartphone.

(Student.42, III year, ME)

Despite the laptop, computer or tablet, all the students possessed a smartphone, and they expected that all the files they shared should be able to get downloaded through the mobile data. And students were concerned that they should not be deprived of the daily mobile data limit, due to the over function of the classes on the same day and hence they requested to have the scheduled classes to use their mobile data efficiently and to attend the classes regularly. The Academic Dean was pretty sure in observing all the classes to be equally distributed within their consumption of daily Internet package limit. All the class materials and recordings are sent through the official email, with a copy to the Academic Dean. All the materials can be subjected to scrutinization by the management, and hence the teachers bore more responsibility in designing and preparing the online content and disseminating the information to all the students and authorities. For the part of general transaction of information emails were used, and for informal enquiries and exchange of messages, WhatsApp was widely used. As most students do not possess a laptop or a computer and some have abruptly left the institution, leaving their laptop in their hostels, while they do not know the severity of extending lockdown due to the pandemic, they requested to submit handwritten tests, with subsequent scanning and sending it as a PDF file for testing and evaluation. Though some students have a laptop or computer, they preferred writing over typing as they considered that within the stipulated time of the conduct of the exam, they can write faster than typing. In this context, some students reflected,

We are habituated to writing more than typing. We can type, but typing an answer for a detailed question in the test will be time-consuming. As we can write faster than typing, we wish to write answers on the sheet, and then to scan and upload it in the platform.

(Student.59, III year, ME)

As writing answers in the laptop or smart mobiles is difficult, we expect handwritten tests for descriptive and explanatory writing.

(Student.37, III year, ME)

Students' queries and their technical constraints were acknowledged, and they were advised to write, scan, upload and submit the exam papers. In addition to the online lectures, PowerPoint presentations of the live virtual classes helped the students to understand the course content. Students are found to be satisfied with the audio-visual virtual classes as well as with the recorded and reading materials supplied to them. In addition to the regular virtual classes, revision classes are conducted to revise and clarify their doubts if any in the course content. All the online classes are conducted as per the credit of the course. All the live scheduled virtual classes are conducted from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on all the working days from Monday to Friday. Saturday has been considered for revisions required by the faculty and students, or for any other additional classes than prescribed in the new online schedule. Saturday's classes are purely conducted with the self-interests of both the teachers and students, and in no way, it was compelled by the authorities. The Language and Soft Skills course has been conducted weekly for three days,

and all the instructional materials and recorded session of the classes are sent to the students and a copy to the Academic Dean at the end of every week. While students are constantly consulted for their progress throughout the study, they reflected,

> *We thank the teacher for the immediate response received from her for our queries. We are always considered for our choice and interests in scheduling the classes and tests.*
>
> (Student.72, III year, CSE)
>
> *We have received all the materials relevant to our study. The online classes and the recorded sessions are truly helpful to update the subject and the PPT slides have been really supportive in preparing for our tests.*
>
> (Student.68, III year, Design)
>
> *We are always asked from which location we are from and the mode of Internet connectivity we get, and the teacher is much concerned in delivering all the instructions and materials through our official emails and clears all our queries well in advance.*
>
> (Student.53, III year, Design)
>
> *Our teacher clears doubt in online classes, provides instructions through written emails and also responds to our queries in WhatsApp messages. She never lets anybody down, and her prompting for our studies is really helpful.*
>
> (Student.17, III year, CSE)

After receiving concurrence and positive feedback from all the students on the completion of the syllabus, the end semester examination slot was prepared. For the smooth conduct of the online end semester examinations, the management considered Canvas as a suitable online platform for E-assessment. The teachers are asked to give mock tests to the authorities and if they are thoroughly satisfied, they are asked to undertake similar mock testing to the students. When both teachers and students are found to be satisfied with the online mock testing and evaluation done, and after getting their concurrence, they are asked to undertake end semester examinations through the Canvas platform. It is experienced that the teachers and students are found to be convenient for conducting objective type questions with multiple choice and to answer short questions within the exam sheet, but if they need to take descriptive and graphic tests and upload those files immediately in the due course of the exam time, students encountered submission problems. This may be due to the lack of Internet connectivity or power supply issues or due to the overload of submission in the exam portal at the same time. Hence the management advised the teachers to make their choice to prefer the online platform according to the requirement of their question paper patterns or to conduct a takeaway home test as per the requirement of the evaluation pattern of their courses. This helped the teachers to plan and design the question papers as per the requirement of their courses, and they discussed with the students about all the necessary requirements they need to have at the time of examination.

When the students are asked about their learning preferences and their ability to learn the course on par with the learning in real classrooms, most students reflected that they are able to cope up using online learning tools and techniques and are comfortable in giving exams too. In this context, Student.19, III year, ECE,

reflected that they are really missing the campus, classrooms, teachers, friends, library, canteens, and hostel life. All the students unanimously revealed that the humanistic part of real-life classroom interaction is truly missing as they have to communicate through machines and gadgets. Further, being the present institution is a residential campus based higher education and research institution, all the students revealed their longing on returning to the campus. As Language and Soft Skills Course is a non-technical and humanities course and most of the classes are conducted through continuous interaction and discussion, all the students reflected their easiness and comfortability in attending the course through online mode. They thanked that both the institution management and teachers are very prompt in providing the necessary ICT amenities, instructions, and guidelines throughout the course so that no student is left lost. They also considered teacher and peer support as a necessary intervention in helping them to overcome from any technical glitches as they endure in online learning. In the end semester examination, in the class of seventy-three, fifty-two students gained "A" grade; eighteen students secured "B" grade; two students got "C" grade and one student was a "long Absentee", due to prolonged illness, unable to attend the classes before the outbreak of the pandemic itself. Students' performance in the end semester examination is found to be satisfactory and the students claimed that as they have been sufficiently exposed to use ICT tools in online learning and evaluation, they would perform even better in the next semester online classes irrespective of the new challenges they face in technology aided approaches to language learning in this new normal period.

Implications and Conclusion

As COVID-19 hampered the routine facets of every day-to-day life, and social distancing has become the new norm of life, people stay connected with the technical tools like smart mobiles for both formal and social communication. Data limit and speed and frequent power cut and shutdown for more than four hours was the major concern of all the students, as they wanted all the online classes to be effective without any technical constraints. The present technical institution responded with a positive approach to engage the students with online teaching, for almost most students had a smartphone for communication. This helped them to immediately schedule online classes, monitor the conduct of online classes, receive feedback from both teachers and students and simultaneously conduct mock tests and seek sufficient input from both the teachers and students to conduct end semester examinations. With the much consensus of the students on their readiness to face the exams, end semester examinations are smoothly conducted through online platforms and take away home tests. The unexpected shift from the real classroom to virtual learning has evinced a great transformative outlook regarding incorporating those relevant skills for E-learning without any substantive coaching on any side. Both the teachers and students became the ever-ready key players and acceptors of change as they were on the receiving end to do any tasks that can be

done for the smooth completion of the syllabus and the conduct of the semester examination. It is found that

- The use of Smartphones and Laptop as a learning tool has been really helpful as the means to participate and perform in the language course. Technical resources like Zoom and Canvas online platforms have been truly beneficial for the faculties and students to virtually engage in the teaching and learning processes; Canvas platform, specifically proved to be a conducive testing and evaluation platform; the classroom recordings have been quite convincing listening at their convenient timings and the use of WhatsApp for instant messaging and connectivity has been indistinctly realized by all the students.
- Due to social distancing and complete lockdown, students attempted to seek guidance from the teachers and peers, but they are adopted to take self-directed learning initiatives to follow their online scheduled classes and prepare themselves for their assignments and tests. Students' progress, self-preparation and autonomous learning skills are thus developed, and this happened to be one of the most demanding challenges in the shift to online education.
- As the students are provided with the new schedule of the online classes and supplemented with regular instructional materials for their continuous reading of the syllabus content and the online recording of teachers' lectures, they find sufficient awareness that they have to go through the materials as they have to face the exams after the completion of the syllabus. Hence, they felt more responsible that they should read the materials provided to prepare for the forthcoming exam.
- As most students are using Smartphones, they considered it as an essential tool for their learning and their accessibility to information is quite improved through mobile learning.
- As English communication skills and soft skills have become the prerequisite skills for employability, and that too, to prepare for online job interviews and work from home, this course has been a most sought-after and opted-for course by the technical students.

Students recognized the value of online classes and thanked the efforts of teachers for their continuous efforts in providing audio recordings and PowerPoint presentation materials and other soft copies of the course materials for their continuous learning. Moreover, online language resources are completely utilized for the successful completion of the course. All the students responded that they never faced any difficulties while facing the exams in the Canvas platform. As they have been practicing all their learning through online classes and were provided sufficient guidance to undertake online exams, they found it easy and confident to face the exams. And, moreover, as they have done their mock tests and assignments, they had no personal or technical constraints to undertake the semester examination. It is found that students experienced unparalleled ease and

comfort for the new online learning as they need not undertake long travel in pollution and can take every dose of knowledge on their smartphone/laptop.

Appendix

Needs Analysis on the Use of ICT Tools in Online Learning

Open-ended questionnaire for conducting online meetings with the students

Name of the Student:
Name of the Institution:
Branch & Year:
Date:

1. Are you satisfied with the Zoom/Google Meet as an online platform for online learning? Please enlist if you have any problems in accessing the Zoom/Google Meet platform while engaging in the online classes?
2. Do you have any problems in engaging in both synchronous and asynchronous mode of learning? Please discuss.
3. Asynchronous mode of learning will help you to compensate with the learning issues that you encounter through low internet connectivity and frequent power supply problems. Are the recorded lectures and the PPTs of the presentations are helping you to track through understanding the subject?
4. How far you can use and benefit from the available ICT tools today?
5. How far you can confidently engage in giving online exams? Are you able to confidently perform in subjective and objective online evaluations?
6. Are you able to easily login to the Canvas platform? Do you face any constraints in accessing and using all the features provided in the online platform while you undertake the tests?
7. Do you think that you are able to learn the subject on par with the learning in real classrooms? If you have any suggestions or grievances kindly share.
8. We always extend to reach and address all the queries of the students. In this pursuit to attempt for new normalcy, are all the teachers and management able to satisfy all your online learning requirements?

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