

ELT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS FOR CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL TEACHING: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE OUTSET OF COVID-19 & POST-COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

In today's scenario, virtual teaching has become a significant trend in English Language Teaching (ELT) across the globe. The implementation of e-learning has also become a new norm in Pakistan since the emergence of COVID-19 has affected all the aspects of life. In this relation, online teaching plays a prominent role in the field of ELT in Pakistan at higher education institutions (HEIs). This pandemic has induced online teaching; therefore, numerous HEIs utilized the technology as the only alternate option to continue teaching. The integration of the technology in ELT has posed both challenges and advantages at teachers. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the challenges and advantages encountered by teachers during pandemic, and it also measures the differences in the intensity of the challenges and advantages at two point's time, i.e., COVID-19 outset and post COVID-19 era. A quantitative approach has been employed by using questionnaire with both the close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean values and Cohen's *d* difference for effect size values to evaluate challenges and advantages. To analyse open-ended questions, Mayring's (2004) approach has been used to find more advantages from the teachers' responses. The findings highlighted a decrease in the challenges in post COVID-19 era (with the mean value of 2.2) as compared to outset of COVID-19 (with the mean value of 2.7). Moreover, the study also displayed an increase in advantages in post COVID-19 era (with the mean value of 2.4) as compared to the time of outset of COVID-19 (with the mean value of 2.9). Therefore, the results indicated that more advantages are achieved and less challenges are faced by ELT teachers over time. Thus, virtual teaching opens up a new avenue for ELT for any uncertain scenarios in future.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19, E-Learning, ELT, HEIs, pandemic, challenges, virtual teaching

Introduction

The whole world is in anguish as a result of the ongoing pandemic outbreak COVID-19, and the reality of the situation is difficult to endure. People's lifestyles have been drastically altered; as a result, the pandemic has severely restricted everyone's mobility. The pandemic has also ravaged Pakistan since March 2020, and it led to the closure of

numerous institutions across the country. In response to this challenge, many online courses have emerged in schools, colleges, and higher education institutions (HEIs). Consequently, e-learning, distance learning, hybrid teaching, virtual teaching and flexible learning have become increasingly essential components of curriculum in educational settings particularly in ELT. In this regard, several e-learning technologies and technology integrated pedagogies have flourished in the field of ELT.

This technological development has had a significant impact on teaching. The teachers serve as facilitators in teaching their students (Hussin, 2018), and the students get benefit from e-learning by improving their academic performance (Mulyadi, 2018). Hence, both teachers and students are engaged in a virtual classroom through audio/video meetings via applications such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and others (Kitishat, Omar, and Momani, 2020). The teachers were expected to use online technologies to meet the educational requirements and adapt to online learning (König et al., 2020). The use of technology in pandemic induced online teaching is critical in dealing with the teaching and learning processes. It requires creativity and a mature instructional thought on the part of the teacher particularly in an online classroom. Thus, it is impossible to avoid using the internet and associated applications in the teaching and learning processes.

Unfortunately, teachers are seen facing a variety of instructional challenges when they are engaged in teaching online. These challenges will have impact on teachers' readiness as well as the efficacy of students' learning processes (Lynch, Smith, Provost, Yeigh, & Turner, 2017). When we consider the challenges that teachers face in the virtual teaching, it is reasonable to consider the role of an online teacher has become increasingly significant in recent years, and the role of technology in ELT is undeniable. Moreover, with time, these challenges become more or less severe for the teachers. Based on this fluctuating situation, the researchers are trying to discover the challenges and advantages at two points time during the pandemic. Thus, this study also investigates the differences in the intensity of challenges and advantages of virtual teaching by ELT teachers during online teaching in the time of COVID-19 outset and post-COVID-19 era.

Review of Related Literature

Globalization has resulted in advancements in the fields of information and communication technologies (ICT) and education sector. The internet is a vital component of ICT that is extremely fascinating to use in teaching and learning processes. The concept of internet and technology as a support system is inextricably intertwined with the conduct of virtual teaching system in order to teach during the pandemic. This virtual teaching system is important in the processes of teaching and teach (Williams, 2016) particularly in facing COVID-19 outbreak. Nowadays, rapid growing technology-based learning is the most promising in educational industry (Hall, 2001). Likewise, digital technologies and blogs have gained traction as a means of providing reflective and

collaborative learning that has led to self-directed and research-based learning (Alfiras et al., 2020).

In the developed countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States, virtual teaching is not anew as they are well-acquainted and well equipped with many tools and aspects of virtual teaching. On the contrary, virtual teaching system is not widely used in developing countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, as there are numerous barriers that impede the teaching and learning processes in virtual education systems.

Challenges of Online Teaching and Learning

Several prior studies have focused on the challenges of technology integration in online education. According to Buabeng-Andoh (2012), teachers were discouraged when they used technology in the teaching process due to obstacles at the levels of teacher, school, and the education system. Similarly, Haber and Mills (2008) also identified a lack of training, the size of the institutions, and programmes complexity as prominent obstacles to successful online teaching. Likewise, institutional barriers, a lack of training, digital illiteracy, and cost-benefit obstacles in online teaching were also identified by Lloyd, Byrne, and McCoy (2020) at south-eastern universities in the United States. Additionally, Berge and Mrozowski (1999) identified and classified online teaching obstacles into nine categories: academic, economic, geographic, governance, labour management, legal, student support, technological, and cultural.

During COVID-19, much research has recently been carried out to address challenges in online teaching and learning. However, majority of the studies have focused on the students' experience while neglecting the issues that the teachers encountered (Pastor, 2020). Only a few researchers have addressed the challenges that teachers faced while teaching online. Those researchers are: Pustika (2020), Gratz and Looney (2020), Onyema et al. (2020), Arora and Srinivasan (2020), Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), Kaup et al., (2020), Verma et al. (2020), Onyema et al., (2020), Punit and Qz.com (2020), Todd (2020), and Diaz and Entonado (2009). According to these researchers, virtual system is a new social activity that has gained popularity as an alternative to conventional classroom teaching (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). This digital innovation in higher education that would normally take years to develop due to various management regulations were made available in a matter of days (Strielkowski, 2020).

A study by Pustika (2020) conducted a study to gain insight into the perspectives of English language teachers on the adoption of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic era. The items of the questionnaire were designed to analyse the benefits and drawbacks of e-learning from sixty respondents. The data was examined using the Corpus analysis method. The findings revealed that prospective English instructors believed that e-learning is beneficial to them, but there were still certain shortcomings that need to be addressed. Thus, it is important to know since the future of teaching and learning is in their hands. They may reflect on the benefits and drawbacks of e-learning that they have encountered in order to enhance and assist virtual teaching. According to another study

by Arora and Srinivasan (2020), instructors encountered considerable challenges in online teaching which were a lack of training, a lack of knowledge, a lack of enthusiasm, lower attendance, network troubles, a lack of personal touch, and a lack of connection.

Onyema et al. (2020) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on education. Data was gathered via standardised questionnaires. The questionnaires were given to 200 respondents across the world, including teachers, students, parents, and policymakers. The data were then analysed using STATA/Regression. According to the results, COVID-19 has shown detrimental effects on education which are: learning disruptions, decreased access to education and research facilities, employment losses, and higher student debts. The results indicated that during the pandemic, many teachers and students relied on technology to continue studying online. Thus, poor infrastructure, power outage, inaccessibility and unavailability of internet, and a lack of digital skills have all hampered online education.

In addition, Aliyyah et al. (2020) carried out a case study on teachers' attitudes towards online teaching system during COVID-19 in Indonesia. The data was collected using operational definitions, and the entire teaching training was divided into three sections: instruction, psychological problems, and social concerns. The information was gathered in phases, starting with online surveys and proceeding to semi-structured interviews for more in-depth information. The questionnaires were filled online using Google forms by the representatives who had access to schools in the five provinces. The themes were identified, analysed, and then interpreted using inductive approach of thematic analysis for the interviews. The researchers used NVivo 12 software to code and categorise the themes and organised into nodes and cases, which were then grouped into data with specific codes. Based on the results, the researchers identified four main themes: teaching methods, obstacles, support, and teacher motivation.

Moreover, Kaup et al. (2020) identified difficulties in maintaining academics throughout the pandemic with respect to technology, training, and students' involvement. While conducting online sessions, teachers encountered connection difficulties, system failure, interconnected network, and other obstacles which they were unable to address due to a lack of technical support. According to the study many instructors lack the necessary equipment to effectively impart instruction, such as preconfigured computers, internet, and microphones.

Furthermore, teachers also found it difficult to monitor students in remote education (Punit & Qz.com, 2020). Playing music, making noise, posting nasty comments using fake accounts, eating, and playing games in several windows were all common disciplinary issues by students. As a result, instructors regarded virtual teaching as an exhaustive and demotivating experience. Bao (2020) highlighted a lack of online teaching expertise, early preparation, and assistance from educational technology teams as major reasons for the failure of virtual teaching system in Peking University in China.

Thaheem et al., (2021) conducted another research on teachers at higher institutions in Pakistan and Indonesia. The teachers confronted difficulties as well reaped advantages.

In order to address the study questions, they utilised a mixed-method research approach. The teachers from Pakistan's Mehran UET and Indonesian University provided the data. For the quantitative data, the personal, technical, and pedagogical difficulties were described using descriptive statistics in SPSS. As a result, the independent samples t-test was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the views of the teachers. For the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews of 10 teachers, five from each country, the advantages of online teaching were recorded. There were no statistically significant differences between Pakistani and Indonesian teachers' views in terms of psychological and pedagogical difficulties, but there was a significant difference in terms of technical challenges. The interviews showed several beneficial features of virtual teaching.

In a community college in Hong Kong Wu and Shi (2021) performed a case study on emergency remote teaching (ERT). They looked at the challenges that ESL teachers faced during ERT. A qualitative method was used to examine the teachers' responses. The study showed that the participants encountered a variety of challenges such as: developing technical abilities, preparing online resources, conducting and marking assessments online, and interacting with students.

Advantages of Online Teaching and Learning

According to Shashaa and Al Taher (2020), teachers have realised that under the new conditions of the pandemic, students' engagement may be attained through virtual teaching. Distance learning is not a new idea; it has evolved into a new type of teaching and learning in which materials have been digitalized and teachers have access to a variety of resources such as iTools, question banks, and an infinite database. Bailey and Lee (2020) performed research in South Korea on how EFL teachers teach communication courses online. This study looked at teachers' expectations for benefits, and solutions at three levels of experience of online teaching: high (HE), low (LE), and no experience (NE). A snowball sampling technique was used to collect the data. A survey of 43 EFL university teachers was conducted to determine the advantages of virtual teaching. The anticipated advantages for teachers were comparable in all categories. According to the NE group, the main advantages were more familiarity with technology, better knowledge and skills, and more experience to add to our CVs. Grading, giving comments, and collecting assignments are the most common advantages for the teachers.

Another research by Halim and Hashim (2019) found that students' enhanced engagement in online classroom, improved communication skills, and increased self-confidence when they were exposed to a virtual system. They also asserted that the learning environment might be more comfortable for both teachers and pupils.

Furthermore, many studies have shown that online education offers numerous benefits for both teachers and students. Among these are advancements in teaching methodology, instruction methods, curriculum design, and language learning (Wang et al., 2019). According to Guha and Maji (2008), virtual learning has been shown to be an

effective tool for overcoming equity and access barriers. They also agreed that students would be able to take quizzes, participate in class activities, and interact more with their peers online; thereby creating a new form of learning. They further explained that asynchronous teaching allows students to send emails to their teachers at any time. Yang and Li (2018) also agreed that online teaching training is essential for both students and teachers.

Bakhmat et al., (2021) also looked at the satisfaction and acceptance rate of online education besides challenges and advantages voiced by Ukrainian professors. An online survey was utilised in the research to look at the technological assistance, tools used during the quarantine, the benefits and drawbacks of online teaching, and the degree of satisfaction and acceptability. According to the results, instructors received varying degrees of technical assistance and utilised a variety of technologies to organise online instruction. The major advantages of online education were highlighted: time efficiency, increased mobility, unambiguous management of students' work, and individualization. The research also showed the major issues that teachers had to deal which are: low quality or no internet connection, software and hardware issues, a decrease in the quality of students' work or assignments, and computer and digital incompetence are all mentioned as major issues.

Therefore, pandemic induced virtual teaching has its reasons to support and reasons to oppose since it has its strengths and weaknesses. There is a possibility of change in the intensity of the strengths and weaknesses which necessitates this study. Keeping in mind the aforementioned concept, the current study attempts to find challenges and advantages for virtual teaching at two points time to gain insight into the potential change over a period of time. The current study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges and advantages of pandemic induced online shift for ELT teachers?
2. What are the differences in the intensity of the challenges and advantages at two points time (outset of COVID-19 and post COVID-19)?

Method

The present study aims to find both challenges and advantages in COVID-19 scenario and specifically seeks teachers' perceptions for two points time: COVID-19 outset and post-COVID -19 era. For this purpose, the researchers have employed quantitative approach to examine the differences in the intensity of challenges and advantages of virtual teaching over time. The data was gathered through the questionnaire based on both closed-ended and open-ended questions in the google form.

The quantitative data analysis for close ended questions adopted linear numeric scales for two points time. It calculated Cohen's d difference for effect size values at two points time as proposed by Cohen (1988). Mayring's (2004) approach was employed for the analysis of open-ended questions to develop categories and present raw data in a more

organized form for the responses which justifies the selection of the approach. The overall methodology serves the purpose of analysing responses, interpreting the statistical data and uncovering the underlying meanings to gain insight into challenges and advantages of pandemic induced online teaching.

The questionnaire was sent through Google form due to restrictions on commute pertaining to Covid-19 lockdown throughout the country. Before forwarding the Google form link to their e-mail addresses or WhatsApp, the respondents were asked for their consent via emails, and they have been assured of the confidentiality of their identities. After receiving the consent, the questionnaire (in the form of Google form) was sent to them. Their responses were automatically recorded in the google sheets which were later analysed by the researchers.

Participants

The participants of the underpinned study were the ELT teachers teaching online and face-to-face at university level in the public sector. All the ELT teachers were MPhil and Ph.D. holders. As the study focused on higher education institutes, the qualification matters as they have more knowledge and experience for teaching both face-to-face and online. The average experience of teaching face-to-face was 8 years whereas the average experience of teaching online was one year. The researchers gathered data from these participants because the teachers were more qualified and experienced for teaching at higher education institutes and have undergone online shift during the pandemic.

The participants of the study have used Google Meet, Zoom and LMS system as their main tool for teaching English both in May 2020 and after a year which establishes the teachers' prompt intellect in opting for the appropriate tool for virtual teaching. Some teachers have also used Facebook, WhatsApp and other social platforms; however, they discontinued using these by May 2021.

The Research Instrument

The instrument of the current study was adapted from Todd's (2020) questionnaire since it was aligned with the aims of the current study. Two ELT experts were requested to provide the guidelines to ensure the validity of items in the questionnaire, then it was updated as per their instructions. After final approval, the validated questionnaire was sent to 75 ELT teachers, and only 69 teachers filled the form willingly. The questionnaire was focused on two points time to understand the difference in the intensity of challenges and advantages of virtual teaching. The teachers were asked to rate all the challenges in May 2020 first (the outset of the Corona outbreak), and then in May 2021 (post COVID-19 era). The motive behind two points time was the anticipated change in the intensity of challenges and advantages of virtual teaching with the passage of time.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first section was about demographic information for the respondents. The second part comprises close-ended questions

focused on challenges faced by teachers related to technology, online tools, and professional training. The last part focused on the advantages of online teaching in the form of open-ended questions to gain in-depth information and clarity about the underpinned phenomenon. The first two parts of the questionnaire were analysed by statistical tools while the Mayring's (2004) approach was employed for third part.

In the quantitative analysis, the responses to close-ended questions were represented in the form of graphics to analyse the key trends, whereas the responses of open-ended questions were developed into categories. The categories were made with special care by both researchers separately, and later on, these are compared, discussed and finalized. To finalize and validate categories, an expert opinion was also considered. The categories which were repeated or synonymous are combined and settled for interpretation.

Results

The results are shown in the form of frequencies, mean values and Cohen's d interpretation in tables for challenges and advantages.

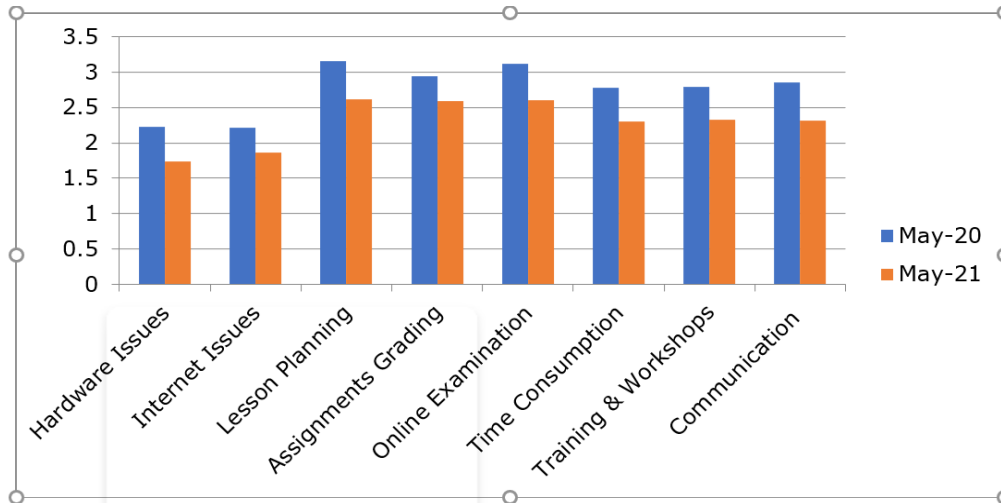
The quantitative data (close-ended questions) represented the challenges and the advantages that ELT teachers encountered at two points time in the past, i.e., outset of Covid-19 and a year afterward that is the post-Covid-19 era. The challenges for both points time with the average ratings and the mean differences in the ratings along with Cohen's d interpretation are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges faced by ELT Teachers (May 2020-May 2021)

Challenges	May 2020	May 2021	Mean Difference	Cohen's Interpretation
Hardware Issues	2.23	1.74	0.49	Small Difference
Internet Issues	2.22	1.86	0.36	Small Difference
Lesson Planning	3.15	2.61	0.54	Medium Difference
Assignments Grading	2.94	2.59	0.35	Small Difference
Online Examination	3.12	2.6	0.52	Small Difference
Time Consumption	2.78	2.3	0.48	Small Difference
Training & Workshops	2.79	2.33	0.46	Medium Difference
Communication	2.86	2.32	0.54	Medium Difference

Additionally, the challenges faced by ELT teachers are also presented in the graphical form. The graph below illustrates the differences and Cohen's interpretations that marked the change in the intensity of the encountered challenges more clearly.

Figure 1. Challenges faced by ELT teachers (May 2020-May 2021)



The graph clearly indicates reduction in the intensity of the challenges. As the teachers gained experience, they overcame problems and found solutions for the solvable ones. Even the most serious problem in COVID-19 outset became less serious in post COVID-19 which highlights a new norm in the education sector specifically for ELT. Most notably, lesson planning, the need for training workshops and communicating with the students were problems that underwent a major change. Initially, teachers spent more time preparing for the lessons; but by the time of post COVID-19, this problem was overcome to some extent.

Similarly, the teachers needed more training and workshops for handling technology and online tools; however, this challenge was also less severe after a year. Lastly, reaching out to students and establishing smooth communication was a serious problem at the outset of COVID-19, but not anymore in the post-Covid-19 era. Thus, it can be noticed that the major reductions were evident in the challenges that were marked by teacher as the most serious ones in the beginning.

The challenges related to hardware, internet connectivity, assignments grading, online examinations and time consumption indicated a small difference on Cohen's (1988) scale. The interpretation for the trend is twofold: firstly, these were not very serious problems even at the beginning for ELT teachers; secondly, these challenges are still there and need attention to be resolved. The latter interpretation is more plausible and appropriate in the current scenario because the challenges are reduced over time, but to further eliminate these, special attention and measures are needed.

On the other hand, there has been an increase in the intensity of advantages which are: enhanced tools' handling, better evaluation for learning outcomes, more students' response, and more clarity for content and overall professional skills development. The average ratings, the differences in the mean values along with the interpretation are shown in the Table 2.

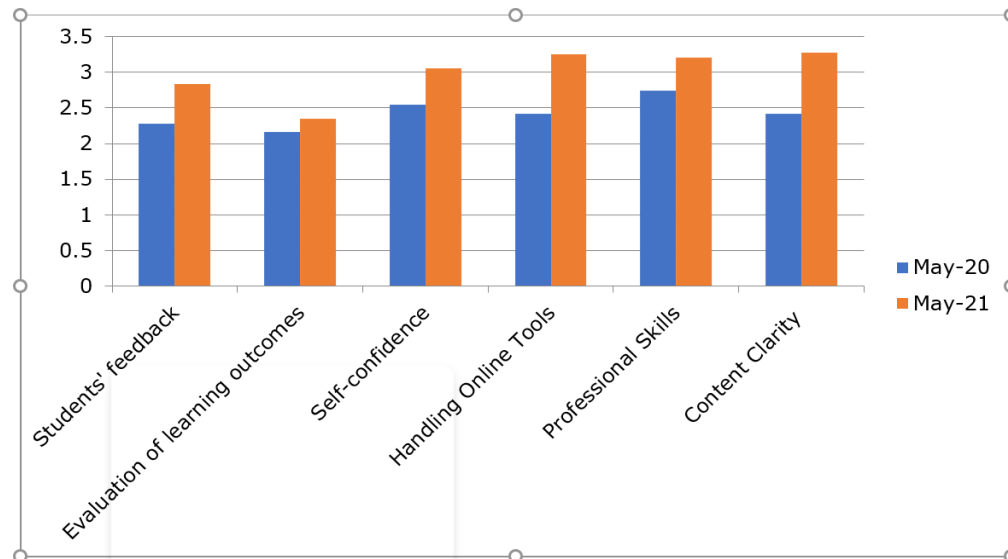
Table 2: Advantages of online teaching

Advantages	May 2020	May 2021	Difference	Cohen's d Interpretation
Students' feedback	2.28	2.84	0.56	Medium Difference
Evaluation of learning outcomes	2.16	2.35	0.19	No Difference
Self-confidence	2.55	3.05	0.5	No Difference
Handling Online Tools	2.42	3.25	0.83	Large Difference
Professional Skills	2.74	3.21	0.47	Medium Difference
Content Clarity	2.42	3.27	0.85	Large Difference

The graphical representation for Table 2 gives a clear indication of increase in the advantages with the passage of time.

Figure 2: Advantages of online teaching

The increase in the advantages over time in the graphical representations above are



based on teachers' ratings for the advantages of the virtual teaching. For the 'evaluation of learning outcomes' and the increase in teachers' 'self-confidence', there is a slight difference which is negligible in terms of Cohen's interpretation. However, its bare visibility cannot be regarded as an advantage because it points towards an interesting view. It implicates that the teachers were already competent in evaluating learning outcomes, and they were already confident. However, the teachers' professional skills have been improved to a greater extent as a medium difference in mean values for the ratings indicates. The overall improvement in the professional skills establishes the improved digital literacy of the teachers.

There is another increase that has been noticed in the 'students' feedback' and participation in the online classrooms in post COVID-19 which is a very positive outcome and a turning point in virtual teaching as this indicates the students' involvement and willingness to learn. A huge difference is visible for 'online tools handling' by the teachers. As the teachers were in chaotic state initially in the outset of COVID-19 with pandemic

induced online shift, they rated this problem as less intense in post COVID-19 which highlights the improvement in their digital literacy. Their knowledge about online tools handling and online resources significantly affects the overall virtual teaching.

The analysis of open-ended questions via Mayring's (2004) approach suggests that the advantages of teaching English online outweigh its challenges. Initially, the challenges were severe; however, with time the intensity of the challenges decreased as the teachers acclimated with the new virtual teaching system. The responses for the advantages of online teaching have been classified into three categories: technological advantages, personal and professional developments and advantages regarding language learners.

The technological advantages according to the responses of the teachers include easy content sharing, ready-made digital content, flexible resources as per the level of students, quick access to teaching materials, accommodating large classes, easy to share audios and videos, interactive and better attention span, cost-effective, advanced and up to date content, easy and quick link sharing, recorded lectures, reusable content, visual presentations, positive use of technology, efficient audio-video aids, and a good alternative to continue education in the pandemic. The advantages are acknowledged by most of the respondents except some teachers who suggested a hybrid approach or blended learning for teaching English. Only two respondents mentioned 'no advantage of online teaching' and this could be due to the reason that their online teaching experience was only a year. Tomlinson and Whittaker (2013) also suggested blended learning for English language teaching as it is a valuable resource, and this supports the advantages yielded in this study. The challenges in the start may be due to a lack of planning and training for the use of online tools; however, the increase in the advantages justifies the success of virtual teaching in a year.

The second category is related to personal and professional advantages for the COVID-19 induced teaching. The sub-categories of the responses were: learn new ways of teaching, explore new strategies, time-saving, cost-saving, fuel-saving, recorded lectures for self-evaluation and professional growth, easy and comfortable from home, opportunity to teach at international levels, flexible working hours, improved digital literacy, tech-savvy, focused and alert teaching, easy for listening and speaking skills, and professional developments. Thus, the pandemic-induced online teaching has improved English language teachers both personally and professionally. Since they have used technology and they are well acquainted with online tools and resources, they can teach anywhere and anytime at their ease. They have been prepared and equipped for the future as well.

The third category outlines advantages with respect to students. The advantages are listed as per teachers' perspectives during online classes. The advantages noted by the teachers are: less hesitant students as no one is watching them, convenience in taking classes, recorded lectures can be revisited, absent students do not miss anything, students are more confident and interactive, easy to reach out to students, providing feedback instantly, positive use of technology specifically mobiles, improvement in struggling learners, increased participation by students, increased attention span due to

audios and videos, and improved interpersonal skills of the students. Halim and Hashim (2019) also found better students' engagement, enhanced communication skills, improved self-confidence on exposure to the online learning environment. Fansury, January and Rahman (2020) also mentioned 'increased interest in students by the use of digital content which is a significant advantage in the current study as most teachers mentioned students' more interest, motivation, engagement and interactivity in online classes. These advantages highlighted positive aspects at students' end despite challenges of technical and personal issues. As English language teaching mainly relies on student-centred approach, the online classroom provides such a platform for language teaching that can be one reason for these advantages in general.

Discussion

The present study has demonstrated that the challenges faced by ELT teachers underwent some reduction in their severity while the advantages increased over a period of one year. The existence of the large difference of the mean values signifies more advantages in the future. The quantitative analysis, thus, provides a view of a promising future for English language teachers in terms of virtual teaching. The data, however, comprised close-ended statements or the limited range of linear numeric ratings; therefore, teachers' views were also recorded for open-ended questions to gain more insight into their perspectives for the advantages of online teaching during the pandemic.

Thus, technology has driven the education sector in case of emergencies like COVID-19 imposed lockdown; therefore, induced online teaching has served worldwide. The results highlight two points: first, the integration of technology in ELT teaching has been used in HEIs to some extent; second, the acclimatization of teachers over the period of time. The findings are supported by Todd's (2020) study who discovered a decline in the seriousness of problems just after a few weeks of pandemic-induced online teaching, and the teachers mentioned the advantages of teaching online even at that time. The underpinned study's results are even more promising for the success of ELT online in the future. Similarly, Younesi and Khan (2020) also foregrounded teaching English online as successful and believe it to have a promising future.

Lamie (2005) predicted the failure of a change in education system because of being 'unplanned' and 'coercive' which this study also anticipated in the form of challenges; on the contrary, the change took just a few weeks or months to take place which would otherwise have taken years as also noted by Strielkowski (2020). The results coincided with Strielkowski's (2020) study that acknowledged the new norm in the education sector. Despite limitations of the educational shift to online teaching, it has undergone significant change and shifted the entire conventional teaching and learning system. Bailey and Lee (2020) also anticipated better familiarity with technology, enhanced digital knowledge and digital skills as advantages of the pandemic-derived online teaching.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of ELT teachers for the challenges and advantages during pandemic. Furthermore, the current study measured the intensity of those challenges at outset of COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era. The challenges faced by the ELT teachers are: hardware issues, internet connectivity issues, lesson planning, grading assignments, conducting exams online, time consumption, a lack of training and workshops, communication. The challenges were reduced in the intensity and this reduction in the severity of challenges' is an indication of a positive outcome in itself. The advantages of virtual teaching are: increase in students' feedback, better evaluation of learning outcomes, improved self-confidence in teachers, efficiency in handling online tools, development in professional skills and more clarity for the content for teaching. The intensity of the advantages was increased which highlights a promising future of virtual teaching in ELT. Some more advantages were found from the teachers' responses. These are technical advantages, personal and professional advantages and advantages regarding students. Hence, virtual teaching has favourable impact on higher education; and it is considered a supplement to face-to-face teaching due to its advantages.

The period of one year has brought significant changes in the perceptions of the ELT teachers. The challenges were more severe in the beginning and less severe in post-COVID-19 era which means that with time the intensity of the challenges may reduce even more. This suggests that more acclimatization with the online teaching approaches in ELT and enhanced teachers' proficiency in digital literacy with the passage of time can yield better outcomes.

Thus, the study has significant educational implications for virtual teaching in ELT: firstly, it will be beneficial for prospective teachers in the field of ELT who wish to teach internationally; in addition, the virtual teaching has the potential to deal with any other similar situation in future in academia. Also, a similar study can be conducted at college or school levels, and for students' perspectives to gain in-depth information about the overall virtual education system in the post-COVID-19 era.

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