Chapter 13
Case Study 8, Bangladesh: Ubiquitous Learning Through Technology—A Bangladeshi Story

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1 Background

The increasing use of technology in language education has necessitated the integration of technology in the pre-university English language classroom in Bangladesh, particularly through the nine-year English in Action project that began in 2008 (see Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). With the government's desire to achieve digital Bangladesh by 2021, generally, more emphasis has recently been put on technological development. Private universities, in particular, seemed to have embraced this trend. In the last few years, several independent researchers (see Iftakhar, 2016; Islam, 2019; Rabbi et al., 2017) have explored English language learning and teaching through technology at private universities in the tertiary level. The increase of technology-based research in these universities could be due to a number of things that happened simultaneously. In 2009, the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh initiated the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP), followed by the Institutional Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) project. At the same time, the number of English language teaching/learning conferences increased, particularly in Dhaka where the British Council and The American Center were involved. One of the common sub-themes in these conferences was technology-enhanced language learning/teaching. In 2017, the Bangladesh English Language Teachers Association (BELTA) organized a conference titled 'The Use of Technology in ELT.' In addition, and at the same time, English language teachers started using Facebook and podcasts, and subsequently Google Classroom as a part of a blended learning approach to help their students learn English. Furthermore, some universities started offering

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'Computer Assisted Language Learning/Teaching' (CALL/CALT) and 'Information Technology for Language Teaching' courses. All of these things happened in the last decade or so. Consequently, tertiary English language teachers have made concerted efforts to make use of different types of technology, such as Learning Management System (LMS), Facebook, blogs, forums, and discussion boards to facilitate the teaching/learning of English.

This shift to using technology contrasts with the early days of private universities in Bangladesh: the situation of learning English was quite different fifteen years ago. Teachers tended to use the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to teach English (Farooqui, 2007) with a focus on teacher-fronted explanations and little to no student engagement. However, over the last decade and a half, there has been a shift in English language learning and teaching approaches, particularly spearheaded by the advancement in technology. Contrary to the sophisticated adoption of technology in classrooms in developed countries, *the trend of learning the English language through technology has only emerged in Bangladesh in the past few years* (e.g., Haque & Akhter, 2014; Parvin & Salam, 2015).

In Bangladesh, university teachers have started using Google Classroom as a Learning Management System (LMS) to facilitate English language learning. Google Classroom has potential in a developing country like Bangladesh for its ubiquitous features and because Google Classroom can create a platform for educators to create and teach various courses via this innovative tool (see Alim et al., 2019; Heggart & Yoo, 2018; Muthmainnah, 2019). Unlike *most of the previous studies that looked at pre-university English language learning through technology or focused on one skill (e.g., listening or writing) at a time in tertiary-level English learning through technology, this case study explores the use of Google Classroom in learning three language skills (listening, speaking, and writing) in a university English course.* The objective of this case study is to explore whether it is possible to use Google Classroom with university students who are basically 'technopeasants' to learn and be taught English language skills, on the go. The expression technopeasant may have several meanings as explained through an anecdote by Carter (2010, p. 1):

> "A comedian once performed a skit during which he referred to himself as a 'technopeasant.' Technopeasant is a neologism used to describe individuals who lack knowledge about computers, are unwilling to use computers, and/or are resistant to keeping up with rapidly advancing technology."

In the context of this study, we perceive technopeasants to be young adult students who did not have much knowledge about computers or experience of e-learning.

The case study is based on Bangla/Bengali medium learners who mostly come from semirural locations and have never been taught foreign language skills by means of technology through ubiquitous learning. The mobile device is an integral part of ubiquitous language learning that has the potential of leading to student autonomy (see Wu, 2019; Wu & Miller, 2019). This study is mainly inspired by the connectivist learning theory (Downes, 2008; Siemens, 2006) which suggests that learning resides in networked connection, and people learn through connecting with the ubiquitous network. Moreover, connectivism provides learners "to exploit the affordance of

Web 2.0 and to facilitate personal choices, participation, collaboration, and creating production" (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008, p. 51). Besides, connectivist learning theory elaborates the nature of learning in the virtual environment as a process of making connections with people, networks, resources, and enhancing networks of personal knowledge mediated by ubiquitous technology (Downes, 2008, 2010; Siemens, 2005, 2006).

2 Case Study

This study adopts a quantitative paradigm to understand the phenomenon of English language learning through Google Classroom. This case study explores whether it is possible for a particular group of private university students, who are technopeasants, to develop their English language skills 'on the go' through technology in a developing country like Bangladesh. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *What are students' and course teacher's perceptions of English language learning through Google Classroom?*

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study are 29 first-semester English major undergraduates at a private university in Bangladesh and the course instructor; their first language is Bangla. The reasons for students choosing to attend this particular private university are: it is near to their homes ($n = 11$); it is affordable in comparison to other private universities ($n = 10$); they heard good things about this institution ($n = 8$).

The age of the students ranged from 17 to 25, and the instructor's age is 37. Overall, female participants seemed to be younger as fifteen of them fall into the 17–20 age range as opposed to seven males in this category. Only two males fell into the 21–25 age range in comparison to five females. Since the majority of students were female, their actual age could not be asked due to cultural factors, and thus they have been categorized in terms of range. All the students had attempted to gain admission into public universities, as these are state-funded institutions that provide literally free education. However, most of the students either did not get their preferred majors or did not qualify in the admission tests. All the participants studied English language as a compulsory subject for 12–15 years (i.e. from nursery to class 12), beginning from pre-school education until tertiary level. Even though the participants engaged private tutors or attended coaching centers to study English during their pre-university education, their proficiency levels were quite poor (Approximately IELTS band score 4.5–5.0). The reason for this is that students in Bangladesh take help from professional private coaching not to enhance their English language skill, but rather to produce good results in their Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) examinations. Good results in SSC and HSC are needed in

order to be able to sit for admission tests in public and private universities. Admission tests are considered as critical in Bangladesh in order to get places in universities. Though all the 29 participants each own a smartphone with Internet connection, they were not tech-savvy enough to enroll in any online and/or blended learning courses. Therefore, for the present study, all the participants were provided with the necessary briefing and training to register and complete *ENG 100: English Language Lab* (an English department course), by means of Google Classroom. Participants of the study came from various rural locations around Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dhaka, apart from being the bustling metropolitan capital with a population of over 21 million people, is also the best place for higher education and employment in this country. The instructor holds a doctoral degree in computer-assisted language learning and is active in this research field.

2.2 Project Description

This project focused on using Google Classroom to teach 29 participants who took *ENG 100: English Language Lab* (ENG 100) during Spring-2019 semester in a private university in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Originally, *ENG 100* was taught in a traditional language lab in a face-to-face teaching/learning environment. One of the most telling problems in such a circumstance is the lack of communication with students during unpredictable political turmoil (e.g. political strikes). In such a situation, it was not possible to stay in touch with students, and this affected their homework, classwork, exams, quizzes, and so on; in other words, the entire academic calendar is often disrupted.

To overcome these problems in the traditional face-to-face learning and teaching contexts, Google Classroom was adopted in this university for four major reasons. Firstly, Google Classroom has been found useful in improving the learning process particularly because of the ubiquitous affordances (see Heggart & Yoo, 2018). Secondly, learners can be better motivated by learning in a networked community, which is in conjunction with the connectivist learning theory (see Downes, 2008; Siemens, 2006). Thirdly, Google Classroom enables learners the best to both learning environments: virtual and blended learning. Fourthly, Google Classroom is easy to use and enables us to execute the aims and objectives of the course, that is, to develop student's oral communication skills, as well as their listening and writing skills.

The overall learning goal is to make students more comfortable and proficient in using English as a foreign language primarily for academic purposes, and subsequently for employment purposes. The first introduction to the course *ENG 100* was in the real classroom where all the students were present. The first task was already uploaded on the Google Classroom platform. The first response from one of the students was posted two days after the lesson (see Snapshot 1):

The overall objective of this course was explained, and the purposes of learning the three English language skills with Google Classroom were highlighted. Students
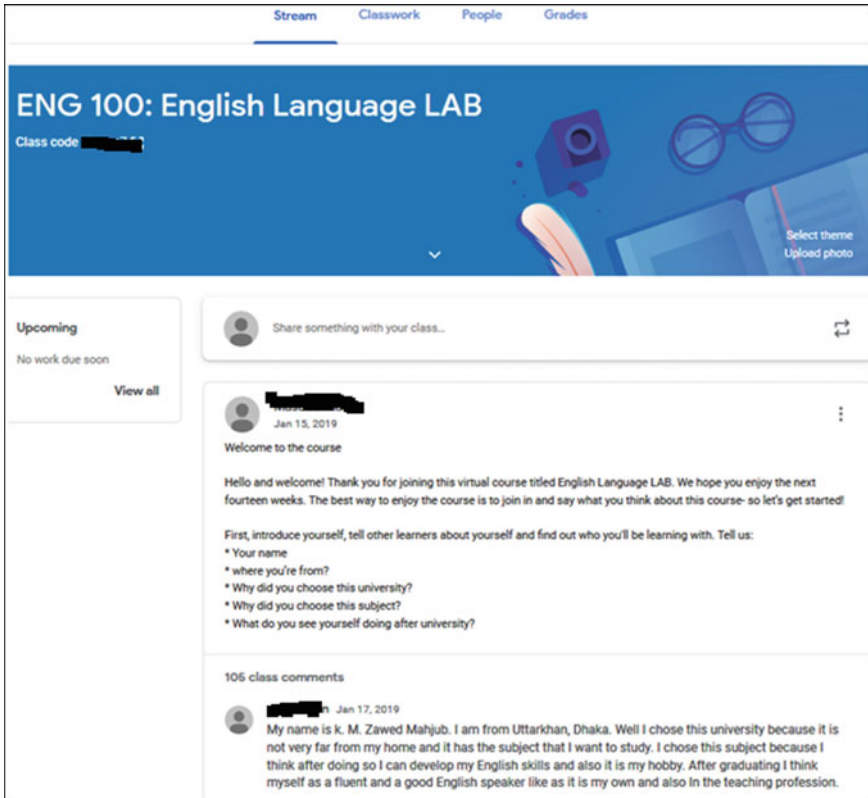
Snapshot 1   First response of the first task

were told that learning materials will comprise podcasts, YouTube video links, vocabulary.com, VOA (Voice of America) learning English website, IELTS listening and writing materials, and songs with clear audible lyrics. For instance, a task from IELTS writing module was posted on Google Classroom and the students were instructed to respond within 150 words (see Snapshot 2):

The golden rule of doing well in this course was to meet deadlines as specified in the instructions. The students who face problems have the option of meeting the instructor face-to-face or calling him. After the completion of each task, the face-to-face feedback was mostly given on the university premises.

Assessment is an indiscernible part of a course like this. To the individual tasks based on listening, speaking and writing skills, of the 29 participants, as well as the overall course, various types of rubrics were used. For assessing IELTS speaking, listening, and writing tasks, IELTS band descriptors (public version) were used. In general, for speaking/presentation, criteria like language (accuracy, appropriacy, vocabulary), paralanguage (gesture, posture, pronunciation, articulation, enunciation, voice projection, eye contact, etc.), content, honorifics, time management,

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Topic: In some countries young people are encouraged to work or travel for a year between finishing high school and starting university studies.

So many people have so many opinion about this very topic. Well, I do agree about encouraging young people to work or travel taking a year off to experince life. Because in this way they can learn more about life and they will get the idea about what is actually good for them. This will prepare the students for higher education. In the school students are no fully matured. Even some remain childish in thinking and behaviour. So to gain knowledge one should travel or do a job so that he/she can gain knowledge about the world and about people. Working at a office or small shop will teach the students to understand working pressure, cooperation with co-workers and complete the task in schedule. Travelling or doing a job will later on prove to be valuable experience in university level.

Finally, it gives the chance to improve communication skill. Communication skill is very important in job sector also in learning sector. And travelling broadens our mind and makes a person share views with others. Exchanging opinions enriches ones speaking ability.

So, it is clear that pre university jobs and travelling are vital experiences. These prepares us to face real life and also helps us to communicate better.

Snapshot 2 Task from IELTS writing module

were all part of the rubrics. For general listening tasks, the following features were included in the rubrics: vocabulary recognition (synonyms, antonyms), paraphrasing, predicting, activation of prior knowledge or schema, listening for main ideas, listening for details, and listening and making inferences. Finally, for assessing various writing tasks, language (accuracy, appropriacy, vocabulary), structure, punctuation, coherence, cohesion, clarity, topic, context, idea, originality, and so forth were included in the rubrics.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Our research questions particularly sought to explore students' and the course instructor's perceptions of English language learning through Google Classroom. Therefore, data from students was gathered throughout the semester, more specifically in three stages. At the very outset, their demographic information was gathered, as this would help to explain and elaborate their learning perception through technology. While students were doing the Google Classroom tasks, a record was kept of all the discussions with the course instructor. At the end of the semester, focus-group interviews were conducted to get more insight into the learning experiences of the students. The data to understand the teacher's perception was also gathered throughout the semester. He kept specific logs (audio and written) of all his interactions with individual students. He also kept notes of class discussions and in-class-pep-talks regarding the Google Classroom tasks that were given to students.

A personal journal was also maintained by the teacher to record his challenges of conducting a course like *ENG 100*, opinions regarding course contents, activities, advice that was or was not given to students, the obstacles that he had to overcome, and so forth.

Date analysis was a nitty-gritty affair. In order to systematize and analyze the basic data, a thematic analysis approach was used (Judger, 2016; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Based on this approach the following stages were conceptualized:

- Familiarizing ourselves with the students' and teacher's data
- Transcribing all the data
- Manual coding was employed
- Theme identification
- Theme recategorization
- Report production.

Among the themes that emerged, related to students' use of the Google Classroom to learn English were: motivation, technology challenged, poor economic condition, self-reflection, optimism, and learner autonomy. The pertinent themes that could be considered in order to understand the teacher's perception of conducting a blended course like *ENG 100* are as follows: motivation, autonomy, time-management skills, and coping with course overload. Based on the important themes connected with students' and teacher's perceptions that emerged, the connectivist learning theory was used to explain how learning takes place in ubiquitous settings/situations through a networked learning environment. In other words, how people learned independently through a blended learning platform. In this case, the ubiquitous settings/situations could be from anywhere where the students had access to Google Classroom.

2.4   Results

The section starts with data gathered from the focus-group interview discussions on Google Classroom and an online questionnaire regarding their demographics. Furthermore, the instructor's perceptions and opinions of learning and teaching *ENG 100* to 29 technopeasant participants through Google Classroom are also discussed.

During the focus-group interview discussions, participants' perception toward the use of Google Classroom was mostly positive, despite the fact this approach was new to them. Students mentioned that their experience of learning through this new technology was enjoyable, as it was user-friendly, and they had no problems navigating through the course content. This was the overall sentiment. One participant specifically mentioned that: *the instructional design of Google Classroom was similar to Facebook, and that is why it was not that difficult to follow and navigate the course contents on this platform* (St1). Furthermore, other reasons for enjoying this new approach was that they were connected with everyone through the virtual classroom, which transcended their physical classroom. This virtual platform enabled them to

complete tasks, assignments, and quizzes on the go from anywhere. Furthermore, if they encountered any learning difficulties, they were able to engage with their peers. The peer support and feedback from the instructor played a significant role in their learning process, and they were able to complete all of their tasks on time. This finding seems to support Iftakhar (2016), who claims that Google Classroom enhances interaction among the teachers and learners.

All 29 participants mentioned that they preferred this blended learning format where they met their classmates and instructor twice a week in the physical classroom and spent the rest of the week in the virtual classroom. However, some participants encountered a few obstacles. One of the sentiments expressed by various students was that it was difficult and irritating for them to read materials on their smartphone while traveling. Since most students did not possess laptops or tablets, they felt that the small screen of their phones was difficult to read especially when traveling on busses over bumpy roads. One of the students particularly referred to this when she mentioned: "Reading course contents through mobile phone is sometimes frustrating, especially when I travel" (St5). Sometimes, a few of the participants did not comment on posts, as they felt insecure regarding their English language accuracy. Overall, the participants were able to learn the three English language skills (listening, speaking, writing), and complete the assigned tasks in ubiquitous situations, particularly the listening and speaking activities. The students who did not possess a laptop or tablet faced problems completing the writing tasks on their cell phones while traveling on buses. They had to do those tasks either at home or in the computer lab at the university. Sometimes, they also encountered difficulties due to slow or no internet coverage while traveling to and from the campus and their homes in the countryside. Furthermore, some said that they did not always receive timely reply/feedback from the course instructor. Due to course overload, the instructor admitted that sometimes he was late in replying to participants' queries or giving feedback. He lamented that in general, administrators in Bangladesh still do not have a comprehensive idea regarding the amount of work and time involved in conducting online and/or blended learning courses. If they knew, they would reduce the overall course load of online/blended learning course instructors. Furthermore, the instructor said that due to course overload, he was unable to plan appropriate activities for all the three skills that were taught through Google Classroom. Consequently, spoken English activities were not as effective as listening and writing activities.

The instructor's perception of how these 29 technopeasant students learnt the three English language skills taught in *ENG 100* through Google Classroom is quite significant. The greatest benefit for him is teacher autonomy. He can develop course content and upload them, check assignments, give his feedback, and monitor students in a more comprehensive manner either in his office or at home. Autonomy over teaching and or learning seems to be a major feature of Google Classroom and is a feature commonly referred to by both teachers and students.

Engagement in their learning was another feature noted by the teacher and students. As some of the students came from very conservative families they found it difficult to express themselves in face-to-face learning situations, shy students also found such communication difficult. However, on the Google Classroom platform

both groups (those from conservative families and shy students) seemed to lose their inhibition, became quite responsive, and participated actively with other students and the instructor. For instance, the teacher noted that one student who covers herself from head to toe, including gloves and netting to cover the eyes, hardly ever volunteers to answer questions in class. However, this same student became quite active on the Google Classroom platform. When asked, why she felt more liberated on the virtual platform, she replied: "I generally do not like to express my thoughts in public in my class, and only like to listen to other people. However, on Google Classroom I felt that no one looks at or stares at me. I do not feel shy. I can take my time to think and come up with a relevant response" (St9). This was a major benefit for the instructor. This student's experience was matched by other such female students who came from very conservative families. It is usually difficult for teachers to get these students to open up and respond to classroom questions or interactions.

Iftakhar's (2016) study in Bangladeshi institution of higher learning supports the fact that participants become more responsive on the virtual platforms: "Google Classroom features enable him and his learners to have better interaction" (p 15). On the downside, the online platform of Google Classroom proved to be a cultural shock for a few participants, as they were used to being taught through the traditional chalk and talk approach. However, over time they too adapted to the new virtual platform.

3 Pedagogical Principles

This case study endeavored to explore whether it is possible for university students, in a developing country like Bangladesh, who are characterized as technopeasants, to learn English language skills on the go through Google Classroom. Based on the case study the following pedagogical principles are suggested.

(a) *Participants' Background*: the participants of this case study cannot be generalized with students of public universities or other private universities. The demographics of these participants must be considered when offering a blended learning course. If participants are technopeasants, appropriate training should be provided before commencing a course.

(b) *Instructor's efficacy*: instructor's ability to foresee the outcome and anticipate impending untoward problems is significant. Based on the findings, it seems that the activities for speaking skill need to be fine-tuned in order for it to be taught through Google Classroom. Teaching course load for instructors offering blended learning courses should be reduced, as they need time at the institution for face-to-face teaching, as well as at home on the virtual platform for their learners.

In general, it may be said that participants of this case study felt that Google Classroom combined with face-to-face learning was a new concept for them, and took some time to adapt to; however, this blended learning format has potential for

teaching/learning English. The instructor feels that a blended learning approach has promise as it leads to learners' autonomy, and increases participation of conservative and shy students on the virtual platform; though it needs additional time management and training of staff, and the necessary resource facilities along with technical support should be made available.

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