



## **Working Paper: Researching and educating in the time of COVID: evidence from Bangladeshi, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan**

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### **Introduction**

Our project, *English as a school subject: learning effective practices from low level primary English language teachers*, began in March, 2021 (<https://ess.stir.ac.uk/>). It is a British Council funded project, and the project team is based in Bangladesh, England, Malawi, Mexico, Scotland and Uzbekistan. When we applied for funding and began the research, we were aware that COVID-19 was very much with us and that lockdowns, home working, illness, vaccinations and travel restrictions would all have a part to play in our work. We also knew that these elements would differently affect our team of researchers, coming as we do from very different geographical locations with different approaches to combatting the virus, many of which would be based on economic means. In this working paper, we outline how we have been researching and educating in the time of COVID-19 and the challenges of our work in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan.

### **The project**

The project aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. What classroom practices do teachers and children with low levels of English in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan engage in to support English learning?
2. What are the similarities and differences in classroom practices between Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan?
3. How do primary school children in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan engage with different language learning pedagogies?
4. Are there differences according to gender in how children perceive the value of English and the classroom practices they prefer?
5. In what ways does translanguaging support the learning of English in the primary school classroom in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan?

To do so, the project adopts a qualitative, inquiry-based design working with teachers and students in the four countries. In this working paper, we report on stage 1 of the project, which is near completion. Data collection tools were teacher interviews, children's focus groups and a survey conducted by children about English language learning and teaching.

## Conducting research in the time of COVID-19

Ten in-depth interviews in each country were conducted with teachers of English as a school subject in state primary schools<sup>1</sup> ( $n=40$ ). The purpose of the interviews was to elicit information about the teachers themselves, the strategies they use in class, their views on translanguaging pedagogies and the challenges they face in their role.

We thought it was particularly important to find out about how the teachers (and schools) had coped during the pandemic, particularly as the teachers are all working in countries which are classified as those qualifying for overseas development assistance (ODA) according to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Within this classification, Bangladesh and Malawi are both classified as ‘least developed countries’, Uzbekistan as a ‘lower middle income country’ and Mexico as an ‘upper middle income country’ for reporting in 2021.

As other researchers have suggested (e.g., Gray et al., 2020), colleagues conducting interviews via an online platform did not believe that the media negatively affected the interviews. Indeed, it had some advantages. As the interviews were conducted via Zoom, Spanish, Russian and English, transcripts of the interviews were automatically generated, which, although not perfect, reduced the amount of time that researchers needed to spend transcribing: unfortunately, automated transcripts are not available on this platform for two of the languages, Chichewa and Bangla. Furthermore, both the researcher and the teacher were able to take part in the interview in the comfort of their homes, and neither had to travel, saving time and money. While concerns have been raised that online interviews may reduce the number of words that interviewees speak (Shapka et al., 2016) and the richness of information (Johnson et al., 2019), it does not seem to be the case with our interviews, with some lasting up to 1.5 hours, and with the quality of information being detailed and rich (although we do need to conduct further analysis to contribute effectively to the discussion of online interviews).

When designing the project, we felt that interviews were a fairly safe starting point in terms of COVID-19 because they could be conducted online if face-to-face interviews were either not allowed because of local restrictions or considered to be too dangerous by the researchers. About half of the interviews were eventually conducted online via Zoom and half face-to-face. In the case of Mexico and Bangladesh, all of the interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to school closures. In Malawi and Uzbekistan, all the interviews were conducted face-to-face. In Malawi, the decision was informed by the unreliability and unavailability of the internet, making online interviews practically impossible. In Uzbekistan, the scheduling of interviews coincided with a slowing down in the spread of the virus, making face-to-face interviews possible.

The second element of stage 1 is focus group discussions with children, ages seven and above. Three of these have been or are in the process of being held in each country ( $n=12$ ), with one group having a mix of boys and girls, one group being boys only and one group girls only. The single-sex groups were introduced to ensure that girls were able to speak freely and voice their opinions. The purpose of the focus groups is to understand the children’s perspectives on learning English, what they like and do not like about English

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<sup>1</sup> In Bangladesh, of the 10 schools, 8 were public and 2 were private/NGO, which follow the same curriculum as state schools and cater to children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

classes, the benefits they think English brings, and how knowing English might help them to reach their personal goals. We also asked their views on translanguaging pedagogies, although this was presented in a child-friendly way. The single-sex groups supported our response to research question 4: are there differences according to gender in how children perceive the value of English?

The pandemic is not preventing the focus groups being conducted in person in three countries: Bangladesh, Malawi and Uzbekistan (with children wearing masks in Uzbekistan during the discussions). However, in Oaxaca, Mexico, where children have not returned to school since March, 2020, the focus groups were conducted online. Some ingenuity was required to ensure the success of these, especially in the recruitment of participants. One teacher helped us recruit the children by sharing the information about the project with the parents and the children through the WhatsApp groups she had created for all her classes. Once the children had been recruited, finding a time that worked for all the children was a challenge, as they were all engaged in different activities online. The interview had to be conducted in the evening to accommodate everybody's schedule.

In the final research strand for this stage of the project, children have been given the opportunity to become co-researchers through designing and administering questionnaires of their own design about learning English (1 per country;  $n=4$ ) for their peers. In both Malawi and Uzbekistan, the survey was introduced and conducted in schools over three days. In Bangladesh, however, a lockdown of schools from December, 2020 to February, 2021 and some continuing restrictions once schools returned, meant that the survey element had to be condensed into one school visit, which limited the amount of time that could be spent on preparing the children. In Malawi, flooding meant that roads were impassable and so surveys had to be postponed until the spring. In Mexico, the survey was conducted via Zoom, with researchers preparing the children about survey and survey data, children designing and piloting questions, and finally the survey being advertised via class WhatsApp groups and taken online through Google forms.

### **Lessons learnt from researching in the time of COVID-19**

As can be seen from this description, the pandemic did not affect the original research design being carried out in Malawi or Uzbekistan. It is worth noting here that the number of COVID-19 cases in both countries have been relatively low and relatively stable, according to Our World in Data, which uses data from John Hopkins University (<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/malawi?country=MWI~BGD~UZB~MEX>). Nonetheless, it is also true that the number of cases, at least in Malawi, are likely to be a good deal higher than those the data reports, because testing is not readily available.

In contrast, Mexico and Bangladesh have both had a rocky relationship with COVID-19, with cases soaring at many points over the last two years, reaching a peak of nearly 40,000 cases a day in Mexico and 11,000 a day in Bangladesh in January, 2022 (compared to 106 in Malawi). It is not surprising, therefore, that Mexico and Bangladesh have both closed schools and sent children home to learn, meaning that all of the research in Mexico has been conducted online and the time available for focus groups in Bangladesh has been curtailed.

So, as researchers, what are we to learn from how conducting the project has been affected by the pandemic? One ethical issue for us is whether we should trust the figures. Colleagues in Malawi have continued to research face-to-face throughout most of the pandemic, based on local conditions and norms and government advice. But, given what we know about the

accuracy of reporting, should this have been discouraged? It is unlikely that the data could have been collected in either Malawi or Bangladesh through online platforms as most children and many teachers do not have access to the internet, and connections are often weak at the best of times (see below). Therefore, the research would have suffered, and the research assistants' jobs would have been lost. However, we are aware that there is an ethical question to be answered about research operating in difficult circumstances. Should we follow local guidance or take a more global view? Who should make the decisions about how research is conducted when it is funded in the Global North but carried out in the Global South?

In Mexico, where online methods have become normal for schooling, a different set of issues arises. Researchers have been ingenious at adapting the research design to the online world and have collected some fascinating data (which we will report in future papers). However, what is the cost to children? Were some excluded from taking part because they were not able to access the technology to attend the sessions? Was it reasonable to ask children to sit in front of a screen again after the normal school day? And did it mean that researching 'with' children was less effective than it was hoped because the technology meant that researchers had to control meeting times, meetings, and survey distribution?

Even though the questions regarding both ethics and exclusions may not be answered at this time, the current situation forced the researchers to look for other avenues, to explore other possibilities and collect different data sets based on what was available due to the COVID-19 restrictions. It could be argued that local adaptations to the research design will make it difficult to compare the data across the four contexts. However, it could also be argued that this stance buys into positivist approaches which are themselves ideological constructs. Instead, we take a more post-modern and de-colonizing view, recognising that all contexts are different, but that all share things in common – in our case, good practice in English language teaching. We also acknowledge how Indigenous research methodologies emerge from Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing, and thus our research findings will always be people- and place-specific (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015). In taking a decolonizing approach to co-create place-based research methodologies, each data set is rooted within the context within which the research is taking place, while sharing a common aim. Thus, common themes will be revealed, despite differences in how the data have been collected. Most importantly, things that we did not expect will arise now that place-based research methods have been enrolled.

### **Schooling during the time of COVID-19 in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan**

In this section, we report on how the practice of schooling has been affected by the pandemic. We will draw from the teachers' interviews in this section. As we explain above, we asked teachers a range of questions about English language learning and teaching in the interviews and we also asked specifically about COVID-19. Here are the questions:

- Did the school close during COVID-19? If yes, for how long?
- Did your school offer classes online? If yes, what? If not, why not? Can you describe the kind of activities you did?
- Did your school offer books or worksheets? What were the challenges of distributing these?
- Do students in your classes have access to smart phones/computers?
- What have the consequences of COVID-19 been for the students' English learning do you think?

- Do you think COVID-19 education restrictions have impacted more on girls or boys? Why?
- What challenges do you think you will face when the COVID-19 situation improves and children return to school? How will you cope with that?

### Findings from the interviews

When COVID-19 first took hold and countries around the world announced lockdown measures, a video went viral of a mother of four children ranting about home schooling: you can view it here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7\\_wvQHMG0I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7_wvQHMG0I)

Not only did the mother complain about not being able to support her children with the subject matter (e.g., mock equations), she also suggested that she did not have enough technology for home schooling, with only two computers in the house. Later in her rant, it transpired that her son's mental health was fine because he spent 'all day' having a lovely time 'on his phone'. For most of the children in our study, two computers and individual phones are luxuries few can imagine.

This reality has been somewhat forgotten in much of the literature published on learning during the pandemic. For example, a recent issue of the *ELT Journal* (January, 2022) focuses on emergency remote and online learning but does not tackle the issue of technology poverty in great detail (although, see Abdel Latif, 2022). In contrast, in all four countries in our study, it is highly unusual for children to have their own computers or phones. While phone ownership is rising amongst adults, smartphones, needed to access online learning, remain out of reach for most, particularly in Bangladesh and Malawi. Therefore, delivering education via the internet, which has been the default position in most Global North countries, has either not been viable or has had limited success: for example, in urban contexts in Bangladesh, teachers were more likely to teach online as more children were likely to have access to phones than those in rural contexts. In Uzbekistan, children had to borrow their parents' phones or laptops to upload activities to the school platform.

In Mexico, eight of ten teachers reported teaching solely asynchronously<sup>2</sup>, making videos and uploading them to a platform so that children could watch them when a phone became available; this is a practice also followed in Uzbekistan. However, sometimes the videos were too large to download because phone data is limited, meaning that children are not able to view the lessons.

To support the asynchronous learning, some teachers in Mexico sent accompanying worksheets to parents via WhatsApp, hoping they would then share them with their children. In Bangladesh, teachers reported going house-to-house, delivering worksheets to ensure children received them, while in other schools, parents were invited to the schools to collect worksheets. Although some teachers in Uzbekistan sent additional materials to children via the Telegram app, very few of the students completed them.

In Mexico, only two teachers said that they have done synchronous<sup>3</sup> teaching, usually limited to once a week. Some NGO schools in Bangladesh also provided teleconferencing with 4–5

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<sup>2</sup> Asynchronous teaching takes place when teaching and learning does not happen at the same time. Teachers post materials on a website which students can access when they are able.

<sup>3</sup> Synchronous teaching is when teaching and learning takes place at the same time, for example, in a traditional classroom or online.

children at a time, repeating the same lesson to groups of students using low-cost button phones. By June, 2020, urban and semi-urban schools started on-line classes, although internet connectivity was patchy in many areas. In Uzbekistan, too, synchronous classes were limited. In all three contexts, teachers had to learn how to use the technology, as online classes were unheard of before the pandemic.

Because of technology poverty amongst students, Bangladesh, Malawi and Uzbekistan addressed learning at home through government-made programmes delivered via the radio and television. Bangladesh managed to show its first programme within a month of the March, 2020 lockdown. The broadcasts took the form of a recorded lesson, albeit with no children present. In Mexico, the government also started broadcasting pre-recorded educational contents on a few channels within the first month of the lockdown: March, 2020. In August, 2020, the government launched the programme, “Learn at Home”, hiring some of the biggest broadcasting companies in the country (e.g., Televisa and TV Azteca). The government claimed this was the best solution, as 90% of Mexican families own a TV<sup>4</sup> (Usi, 2020).

The Ministry of Public Education of Uzbekistan, in cooperation with the National TV and Radio Company, broadcasted video lessons from March 30, for students in grades 1–4 via the Yoshlar channel, grades 5–8 via Oilaviy, and grades 9–11 via Madaniyat va marifat and Dunyo Builab. The schedule of video lessons and additional online resources were available on the website of the Ministry of Public Education of Uzbekistan. However, central broadcasting did not solve the problem. Many children, particularly in Bangladesh and Malawi, did not own televisions or radios and therefore could not access the programmes.

Although an online platform was also used in Uzbekistan, teachers in our study reported that children and their parents both lacked the technological skills to manage online learning effectively at the start of the pandemic. Teachers reported that asynchronous learning was more effective than synchronous learning, with boys in particular being reluctant to speak English online. Some teachers suggested that children in effect had had a ‘COVID vacation’ as they did not engage with schooling during the lockdown period.

All our researchers reported that teachers believed that the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns had affected schooling. This is not surprising when the amount of time children spent away from classes is considered, particularly when technology poverty is taken into consideration. Table 1 below provides details of how long schools were locked down in each of the four countries:

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<sup>4</sup> You can learn more about this program at <https://aprendeencasa.sep.gob.mx/site/index>.

Table 1: Duration of lockdown and school closures in each country

Country	Lockdown started	Lockdown ended	Months spent away from school	National broadcasts made?	Online learning available?
Bangladesh	18 Mar 2020 21 Jan 2022 <sup>5</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup> Sept 2021 2 Mar 2022	20 months	Yes, on TV	Limited and mostly in urban areas
Malawi	23 Mar 2020 15 Feb 2021	Oct 2020 15 Mar 2021	7 months in total	Yes, on the radio	No
Mexico (Oaxaca)	18 Mar 2020	Continuing	24 months and counting	Yes, on TV	Some, but mostly asynchronous rather than synchronous
Uzbekistan	16 Mar 2020 1 Aug 2021 11 Jan 2022	25 May 2020 30 Sept 2021 7 Feb 2022	5 months	Yes, on TV	Yes, mostly asynchronous but synchronous also available

As can be seen, children in Oaxaca, Mexico have not attended school for nearly 24 months. In Bangladesh, where technology poverty is rife, children have not attended for around 21 months or more. Malawi and Uzbekistan have been less affected by school closures. Uzbekistan's total of five months of closure is the shortest; however, this might have been due to the fact that the first school closure was followed by two months of school holiday, allowing a break of four months in total. In September, 2020, schools opened gradually over the month and parents were allowed to make the choice themselves whether to send their children to school.<sup>6</sup> Malawi, with fewer resources to supplement schooling and less reliable data on the spread of the virus than many countries, only closed for seven months altogether, which also included some programmed vacation time.

Teachers in both Bangladesh and Malawi report that children have dropped out of school during the pandemic, with no indication that they will return.

## Conclusion

This working paper has focused on two areas that have been of interest to us in this project: researching and educating in the time of COVID-19. Conducting research has highlighted the differences in approach taken to COVID-19 management in the four countries, but has also raised ethical issues for the project team around decision-making and responsibility. Investigating schooling has revealed how the different countries have made efforts to

<sup>5</sup> In between some schools opened intermittently with very short contact hours)

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[https://www.unicef.org/uzbekistan/media/3601/file/DL%20Rapid%20Assessment%20report%20Oct%206%202020\\_RUS.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uzbekistan/media/3601/file/DL%20Rapid%20Assessment%20report%20Oct%206%202020_RUS.pdf)

continue to educate children, but the real difficulties are presented by technology and poverty, particularly when compared to countries in the Global North.

As this is a working paper, we would welcome any feedback you have on our work and look forward to hearing from you.

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