

English as a School Subject – Briefing Paper 1

Project Findings relating to COVID-19 and teaching English around the world

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The English as a School Subject project is working with teachers and students in the primary school sector in four countries – Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan. This paper gives a brief background of the teaching of English in each country and current findings on issues relating to COVID-19, obtained through teacher interviews. Ten primary school teachers from urban, semi-urban and rural schools were interviewed ($n=40$) from May to October 2021, and again in February to March 2022. Due to the pandemic and school closures, all interviews in Bangladesh and Mexico were done online. Researchers in Malawi and Uzbekistan were able to conduct face-to-face interviews. Follow-up interviews were undertaken on phones. Although different aspects were discussed in the interviews, we report here on the data relating to the COVID-19 phenomenon.

Bangladesh: English is a compulsory subject in school. Although marginalised by nationalist zeal after independence in 1971, pragmatic considerations soon gave English more space in the curriculum, increasing the years for English learning. In 1986, English was made mandatory from grades one to 12, but it is not the medium of instruction. State primary schools are free. Children with 75% school attendance and a pass in all subjects receive a government tri-monthly stipend, an incentive to prevent dropouts. In terms of implementation and practices, English teaching-learning is affected by socio-cultural-economic-geographical realities, teachers' linguistic and pedagogic abilities, and the assessment system.

Malawi: English is taught as a subject from grade 1. However, it is used as a medium of instruction from grade 5. Problems of large classes, inadequate textbooks, communication gaps, high absenteeism and repetition rates have been some of the stumbling blocks in the effective teaching and learning of English in Malawi.

Mexico: Due to recent national school reforms, English is now part of the Mexican national curriculum in elementary schools and kindergartens through PRONI (Programa Nacional de Inglés / National English Program). The inclusion of English in public elementary schools has created a great demand for English teachers equipped to teach young learners, who can adapt the curriculum developed at the federal level and the textbooks designed by different publishers to their local realities.

Uzbekistan: Through the educational reform in 2013, English has become a compulsory subject for all 11 years of school education. English being the medium of instruction does not restrict the use of the native languages, Uzbek and Russian. Teaching foreign languages is one of the priority areas of education reform in Uzbekistan since 2021, and that has set the goal of higher standards in foreign language learning in the country, including English.

School closures relating to COVID-19 restrictions

- Bangladesh: 18 March 2020 – 12th September 2021; 21 Jan 2022 – 1 March 2022
- Malawi: 23 March 2020 – October 2020; 15 February 2021 – 15 March 2021
- Mexico: 18 March 2020 – Continuing
- Uzbekistan: 16 March 2020 – May 25, 2020 (June–August school vacation period) – 30 September 2020; 11 January 2022 – 7 February 2022

Findings relating to COVID-19

Bangladesh

- Schools started online/mobile phone classes within one-to-three months, but most students did not have android phones, or the parents who did have android phones took them along to their workplace.
- Government started providing recorded lessons on state TV channel and short 20-minute radio lessons. Although these lessons were delivered by teachers, they were one-way and did not engage learners, thus not well-received.
- All schools distributed state-produced worksheets, either by going to students' homes or asking parents to come to school on specific days to collect learning materials, maintaining health and safety measures. These were assessed and returned. Teachers were aware that, in working at home, students probably got help with their worksheets.
- Most students from urban schools were able to join online classes due to better network connectivity and having android devices, while only a few from rural and semi-urban schools could, due to lack of access to online connectivity and not having appropriate devices. Teachers sometimes gave auditory lessons to groups of 3–4 using a single button phone.
- It is feared that, when schools re-open post pandemic, there may be dropouts, especially of boys in the rural schools, as some have joined the informal labour market due to family economic hardship.
- Year-end exams were carried out through continuous assessment of worksheets (though not very reliable) in 2020 and 2021.

Malawi

- Malawi organised distance learning mainly through radio programmes for primary school learners.
- Many students and their households do not have access to enabling gadgets such as smartphones and radios for remote learning.
- The official age for primary education is 6–13 years. There are many above the expected age range due to delayed entry and grade repetition.
- COVID-19 has affected girls more than boys, with some girls dropping out of school because of early marriages and pregnancies.
- Currently, the country is struggling to catch up with the lost learning.

Mexico

- Some schools started communicating with students between March and August 2020, through WhatsApp groups to distribute worksheets, activities based on videos, or PowerPoint presentations that they prepared.
- In state schools, only a few teachers met with students through Zoom once a week.
- Not all students have internet access, so it was difficult for them to access online classes. Moreover, almost all students do not have their own cell phone or computers, so they use their parents' cell phones.
- Teachers think that COVID-19 has impacted both girls and boys in the same way.

Uzbekistan:

- Children were taught via pre-recorded video lessons broadcast by national TV channels and a state school online platform.
- Teachers, students and their parents communicated mostly via Telegram Messenger.
- Children continued to use free textbooks while most parents rejected using supplementary materials.
- School authorities cancelled final exams in 2020.
- Not all students have internet access, especially students in rural schools.
- Most students do not have their own cell phone or computer, so they use their parents' cell phones.
- Parents could assist their kids with other subjects but not with English.
- The COVID-19 situation enabled students to develop digital skills
- Boys seemed to lack engagement, while girls were expected to carry out household chores.

Implications

Although most schools swung into action within a month of the pandemic outbreak and introduced some form of emergency remote learning through digital or other means, the four countries' schooling has been drastically affected by prolonged school closures and the inadequate learning opportunities that were set up. Teachers feel there will be a huge learning gap, especially in English. Learning will probably have to re-start from the pre-COVID-19 level for many students, and students in grade 5 will be most affected. Teachers feel their greatest challenge will be to deal with this learning gap. They would like more parent support and cooperation. Adapting to schools' new health and safety measures may be an added burden. Children who have become used to the COVID-19 'vacation' mood, may have problems settling down to normal in-class etiquette, especially as their language proficiency has declined. Teachers are very keen to do their best but are also anxious about the situation and are worried about extra workload and the kind of support they will get in terms of a well-planned course of action.

