

## Teacher Education | Full Research Article

# Challenges of Teaching Communication Skills in Online Classes at Indian Schools

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### Abstract

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 and the sudden transition from the offline to online classes, educators and teachers have encountered a number of challenges to adjust to the online mode of teaching. The present study aims at exploring the challenges encountered by teachers of oral communication skills online at Indian schools. A sample of 33 school teachers participated in the study. Data were collected from the participants through an open-ended survey. To analyze the gathered data, thematic analysis procedures were employed. Based on the thematic analysis, two themes were the most emergent challenges that teachers articulated. The first theme was related to using technology to teach oral communication skills, and the second theme was about the impact of teaching oral communication skills on school students. The findings of the study highlighted the most occurring issues that teachers have faced during their oral communication teaching in online classes. The study proposed several suggestions for further research. (verbal, non-verbal, and behavioral) were developed through pre-specified coding and theme and coding. Three experts tested the designed questionnaire for face and content validity to ensure that the items measure what they are supposed to measure. Then in the quantitative phase of the study, 200 EFL teachers from various context of teaching participated and filled out two questionnaires namely Teachers' Classroom Discipline Strategies Scale, designed by the researcher and Teachers' Professional Identity Scale, developed and validated by Jung Chi (2009). Validation of the designed questionnaire was performed through Rasch Model. Although theoretically three subscales had been envisaged for the Discipline Strategies Scale, Rasch model analysis demonstrated that, excluding two items, part A of the scale with 21 items is psychometrically unidimensional and a single score can be assigned to respondents. Results of Part B of the scale revealed eleven discipline factors. One-way ANOVA, independent sample t-test, and Pearson Correlation were used to evaluate research hypotheses. Results of Pearson correlation indicated that teachers' classroom discipline strategies are correlated positively and significantly with teachers' professional identity. Finally, results of the association between different demographic information (gender, work place, years of teaching experience) and classroom discipline exposed that there is no substantial difference between teachers' discipline use and their demographic information. These conclusions highlight the important role of teachers' discipline strategies use in teachers' professional development in identity. This research is consist of some implications for the teachers., learners, policy makers and researchers.

**Keywords:** oral communication skills, challenges, online classes.

## Introduction

“Like life-sustaining breath, communication is ever-present in our lives” (Mehl, 2017, p. 2). Any form of communication between two animates such as talking to friends, making a phone call, discussing or planning an event, interviewing, lecturing, or waving with a hand to a friend is considered to be communication. Because communication is essential in our day-to-day activities, people in all walks of life ought to learn how to master some communicative. Good communication skills are crucial to sustaining a healthy and friendly environment around us. Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between effective oral communication skills and psychological health, educational, and professional achievements (Hargie, 2019 & Mehl, 2017). In recent years, communication has become a popular social science discipline that a large number of students undertake every year. Therefore, studying this discipline has become mandatory in many professions (Hargie, 2019). There is a pressing need to equip learners with communication skills to prepare them for the 21st century as it is one of the key requirements for any profession (Ramalingam, et al. & Pazil & Razak, 2019).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, the world has witnessed a major transformation in education. The sudden shift from physical to online classes has caused tremendous stress and frustration to teachers teaching oral communication skills. The abrupt transition to online teaching did not bear the expected positive results that educators were hoping for (Dreamson, 2020). Many educators and teachers expressed their concerns regarding using online platforms to teach oral communications.

This study aimed to explore the challenges of ESL teachers of oral communication skills at various Indian schools during the Covid-19 period. Therefore, the study attempted to answer one main research question: (a) what are the main challenges encountered by ESL teachers to teach oral communication skills in online classes?

In order to answer the research question, this article commenced with an introduction to highlight the significance of oral communication skills. I adopted the survey methodology for collecting research data because this type of methodology can tap into the participants' attitudes and experiences towards the challenges they encounter during teaching communication skills online. The review of literature presented relevant studies to highlight numerous challenges pertinent to teaching oral communications at different contexts that educators encountered during the Covid-19 period. Through the thematic analysis of the responses collected from teachers of oral communication skills, insights into the challenges and difficulties faced by teachers of oral communication skills will be highlighted and discussed. Finally, the study concludes with discussion of the findings of the study along with suggestions for further research.

## Review of Literature

### Understanding the Concept of Communication Skills

The definitions of communication vary and abound. However, many experts might have agreed on the fact that communication involves some type of exchange between two animates. There must be “expression and interpretation” to convey meaning (VanPatten, 2016).

Communication occurs when there are two sides; one is sending messages (could be verbal or non-verbal messages) and the other is interpreting these codes to formulate meaning.

Verderber (1988) defined communication as “the process of sharing information using symbols to send and receive messages” (p. 4). The word “symbols” can be referred to verbal and non-verbal messages. Mehl (2017) defined communication as “the process acting on information” (p. 5). In his definition he focused on four key components of the definition: (1) communication is about creating sense, (2) sharing sense, (3) formulating meaning, and (4) transferring verbal and nonverbal messages.

Samovar & Mills (1998) asserted that the term communication “includes all methods of conveying any kind of thought or feeling between people” (p. 9). They both enumerated several “ingredients of communication”, viz. source, symbols, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding, context, feedback, and competing stimuli. Although there is no one single definition of communication, all definitions seem to agree upon the fact that communication involves two animates; one is sending codes, and the other is decoding to formulate meaning.

#### Challenges Faced Teachers While Teaching Oral Communications Online

Several studies have conducted to explore the issues that teachers encountered while teaching communication skills. Chen and Goh (2011) conducted a study with 44 participants to explore the problems faced by teachers while teaching oral skills online in Chinese context. The study outlined some major challenges such as large classrooms, lack of teaching materials or resources, passiveness of learners, and class time constraint.

Similarly, Garcia (2012) reported in his qualitative study various issues that Mexican teachers encountered while teaching oral communication skills. The lack of environment for practicing oral communication skills and time constraints were the most emerged issues reported in this study. Abdallah and Mustafa (2015) explored the issues of teaching oral communication skills online by Iranian teachers. The study highlighted several problems related to technology such as lack of laboratories and efficient facilities. Other reported issues are lack of cooperation between students and teachers, lack of courses in oral communication.

Yanagi and Baker (2015) explored the challenges faced by Japanese learners while learning oral communication skills. The results collected from 33 college postgraduate students showed several challenges encountered by the students and teachers. The first challenge is the inadequacy of oral communication practice and lack of English use by Japanese teachers. In another context, Demir (2017) conducted a study to explore the challenges encounter by EFL teachers. Among the most emergent issues were teachers’ insufficient knowledge of pedagogy, lack of technical support from the institution, assessment and problems pertinent to curricular materials issues.

Generally, the sudden transition to online teaching of language has caused several issues such as psychological stress (Gross, 2020) and a lack of teachers’ interpersonal communication in the classroom (Alhabshneh, et al. (2020). Sahu (2020) found various challenges of online teaching articulated by teachers such as difficulty to monitor the learners while taking online tests, poor internet connectivity, and lack of resources.

When it comes to teaching oral communications online, MacIntyre et al. (2020) explored teachers’ coping strategies and the psychological effects on students during the pandemic period, and they concluded that students experienced a high level of stress, which affected their overall performance. In addition to the stress that students experienced, Ramalingam, et

al. (2022) conducted a survey and found that educators encountered several challenges in teaching oral communication skills including finding the appropriate platform to teach this discipline, poor internet connectivity, unfamiliarity with the technical tools, to name a few. In the same vein, Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) found that the Covid-19 period has negatively affected the learners' oral communication skills because more attention was given to writing rather than speaking.

Having explored the various challenges faced by different teachers from different places, the present study aims at determine whether Indian teachers teaching oral communication skills online during COVID-19 are facing similar challenges. Once such challenges are highlighted, it would be feasible to offer suggestions to overcome the challenges that hinder the process of teaching oral communication skills online.

## Research Method

The main aim of the study is to explore the challenges that teachers and educators have encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic while teaching oral communication skills at Indian schools. To that end, the study employs a qualitative methodology to collect relevant data regarding challenges faced by ESL teachers while teaching oral communication skills. The main reason for option a qualitative method is to provide a broader picture of the phenomenon from the "insiders' perspectives": the teachers (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016, p. 10).

### Participants

33 ESL teachers of oral communication skills from different private schools in India participated in this study. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants before to the survey was administered. The link to the survey was shared with each participant, and responses were collected from the participants within a week. I had to contact each one to ensure that they would submit within a week. Out of the 33 participants, 17 were selected for the study because they submitted answers to all the given questions in the survey.

The participants of the study displayed various demographics concerning the level of the grade level, sex, education, and age groups. 6 participants were female teachers and 11 were male. They were all teaching oral communication skills at private schools in Hyderabad, India. However, the teaching experience was almost similar because I ensured that the teaching experience of online should be two years at minimum. All participants had at least two years of online teaching experience.

*Table 1*

*Participants' Gender, Age, and Teaching Experience*

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Year of teaching experience online
1	Male	29	Two years and three months
2	Male	27	Two years and one month
3	Female	30	Two years and three months
4	Male	33	Two years and four months
5	Female	31	Two years
6	Female	28	Two years and one month

7	Male	26	Two years and one month
8	Male	32	Two years
9	Male	34	Two years and five months
10	Female	29	Two years and two months
11	Female	27	Two years and one month
12	Male	30	Two years
13	Male	34	Two years and four months
14	Male	33	Two years
15	Male	29	Two years and three months
16	Female	27	Two years and two months
17	Male	26	Two years

### **Sampling Design Method**

In research, three common sampling research methods are: probability, non-probability, and convenience methods (Jain, S., 2019). However, the author used the convenience sampling in which the participants are selected according to the convenience of the researcher in terms of time, location, etc. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is also called “accidental or opportunity sampling” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 218).

The author used this sampling for two reasons. First of all, this type of sampling is accessible and easy to gather relevant data in a short period of time from the concerned participants. Distributing a questionnaire or a survey to a number of participants is sufficient to collect ample data for analysis. The second reason is that this type of sampling is less costly and less time-consuming. Since the study aims to gather responses, feelings, attitudes, and experiences of the teachers teaching online communication skills, this sample is the most suitable technique for choosing research participants.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

An open-ended survey was administered to the participants through Google Meet and Whatsapp. The purpose of using open-ended questions was to allow the participants to express their perceptions, experiences, and challenges freely pertinent to teaching oral communication skills.

The open-ended survey consisted of two sections. The first section covered questions regarding the participants’ demographic details including years of experience in online teaching and gender. The second section dealt with questions regarding the challenges encountered during teaching oral communications.

To support validating the open-ended questions of the survey, I consulted two colleagues who are PhD holders to examine the questions before administering them. After the two colleagues provided their feedback, a few changes were made accordingly.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the collected responses, I employed thematic analysis procedures. Thematic analysis (TA) is an effective strategy through which researchers attempt to find themes and

patterns (Glesne, 2016). The method of thematic analysis involves segregating data into categories. Then, finding patterns to “arrive at a more nuanced understanding of some social phenomenon through understanding the processes that tend to involve that phenomenon as well as the perceptions, values, beliefs of people toward it”. (p. 184).

All the open-ended questions of the survey were organized in (Atlas-18). Since the survey was administered through Google and Whatsapp there was no need for transcribing the responses. I had to copy the responses and organized them on a word document. Then, I segregated the data into codes. After having the initial codes, I formulated several themes pertinent to challenges and issues regarding teaching oral communication skills online and the teachers’ perceptions and experiences.

## Results

This section attempts to provide an answer to the main research question: what are the main challenges encountered by ESL teachers to teach oral communication skills in online classes? This section presents the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. After organizing the data and segregating them into codes, four common themes were highlighted. The first theme is related to using technology to teach communication skills online. The second main theme is the lack of interaction, enthusiasm, and interest in students. The third theme is the lack of real-life interaction among students and the fourth problem is pertinent to health due to using online mode to each communication skills. The following sections discuss each theme with some of the quoted responses from the participants.

### Theme 1: Using Technology to teach Oral Communication Skills Online

One of the most common issues that teachers encountered during teaching communication skills is adapting to technology to teach communication skills. The majority of the participants highlighted the difficulty in adapting to online teaching. Participant 12 stated that he was used to adopting group work for all his activities. With online classes, it was very difficult, especially with younger learners, to arrange for group or pair work. Participant 5 also stated the same: “Even though I am using Zoom which allows group work, and I’ve tried it many times, it is almost impossible to monitor how the activity is being implemented at all.” Participant 12. Participants 2, 7, and 16 asserted that choosing the right platform and adapting to it was the hardest challenge. They believed that technology and platforms might work for other subjects such as geography, history, or any scientific subjects. According to them, teaching oral communication skills requires physical group work and physical interaction with students.

#### Participant 16

Our colleagues who are teaching other scientific subjects may not face the same problem we do. First of all, oral communication requires interaction like real life. I feel these applications like Zoom or Google Meet are not as effective as when activities are conducted in person. Even though we received some training how to handle these new platforms, we are still struggling how to use them effectively.

Participant 7 explained further saying that he believed that teaching oral communication skills online could negatively affect the learners’ communicative skills in the long run. Another

issue pertinent to using technology to teach oral communication skills is the Internet connectivity. Participants 1, 4,5,7,12,17 expressed their dissatisfaction with the Internet connectivity. They stated that much time was wasted trying to make sure that students were connected.

#### **Participant 7**

The most frustrating, for me, was the internet connectivity. I have noticed that many of my students suddenly their cameras would go off and after a few minutes they would log in again and explain that their internet was disconnected. Such constant disruptions of internet connectivity cause me a lot of stress because I have to explain again some of the important concepts, which would be boring to others because they had already gone through those concepts.

Other challenges pertinent to technology that were articulated by the participants are (a) grouping students using the Zoom and Google Meet platforms and monitoring their interaction, (b) asking students to share their responses or answers using the whiteboard on Zoom or Google Meet, (c) and explaining technical issues to students when they come across them.

#### **Theme 2: Learners' Lack of Enthusiasm**

This is the second theme that emerged from the thematic analysis. The majority of the participants raised the concern that online teaching of oral communication skills had caused a lot of distraction to learners, especially young learners. Here are some of the responses that elaborated the concern of students being distracted during oral communication classes.

#### **Participant 2**

One of the biggest issues is motivating students. Because it is so easy for children to get distracted. This often makes us lose interest as well to see children distracted. I have noticed many children are muted and I feel they are watching something or fidgeting with some toys in their hands that we cannot see. We try to use some techniques to keep the students hooked, but still these are kids and they get distracted so fast, especially with the screen in front of them.

#### **Participant 3**

We sometimes realize that our students are distracted with something else on their laptop, but we can't do anything about it, unfortunately. We could tell from their eye balls that they are watching something on screen. Once we call their names, then they would unmute and shout "Yes, ma'am". We actually cannot do anything about it. Parents are preoccupied with their work or chores and can't sit with their children for hours to check if they are paying attention. I hope we just come back to our physical classes.

#### **Participant 5**

"I have noticed many times that our students open chat or watch something else while the class is going on."



### **Participant 6**

We cannot monitor and check if the students are paying attention to us or something else. Sometimes I am sure that some students are reading or watching something, but we can't say for sure. Another issue is copying. Whenever we ask our students to respond or discuss a concept, they would search and start reading information from Google. It is easy to tell when someone is reading, yet when asked, they just reply with: "No, sir, I'm not reading". It is disappointing!

In addition to the distraction that learners go through, the issue of motivation was a common theme. Participants 1,2,4,6,7,9,10,11,13,14,17 all mentioned that students are less active and less motivated when taught oral communication skills online. Participant 1 provided an instance where learners were reluctant to participate in the debate and group discussion. Participant 2 expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of motivation that learners showed during the online classes. Participants 4, 13, and 17 explained that this lack of motivation could be attributed to the fact that learners had not had sufficient in-person interaction with their peers. Staying inside a home for a long time could make them lose interest and be unwilling to take part in oral activities.

### **Participant 13**

One of the most frustrating issues when we observe that our students are demotivated. We actually have attempted to use some techniques to keep them motivated. However, it seems with the online mode our students feel a bit bored away from their peers. Inside a class, we can ask them to do some physical activities, but at home it seems hard to control. We have compromised a lot.

## **Theme 3: Lack of Real-life Interaction**

In addition to the previous two problems, namely technical support and lack of learners' enthusiasm while learning oral communication skills online, a third emergent issue was lack of real-life interaction. Participants 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 17 disfavored and expressed their experiences negatively of teaching oral communication online due to the lack of real-life interaction. According to the respondent 4, oral communication skills include topics such as debate, public speaking, convincing, etc. Such skills require real-life interaction to conduct role plays and interact in a many that at least resembles real-life situations.

### **Participant 4**

Whenever I tried to ask learners to conduct debate or discuss something to prepare for their debate, it would be impossible to create group work at an online. Teaching oral communication requires a lot of group and pair works, which is very difficult to do online. We sometimes try to make students work in pairs, but again it's hard to monitor all groups.

### **Participant 9**

The platforms we use do not have the group work option. I feel it is essential to make learners work in groups to share ideas and experiences. The whole point of oral communication is to provide a friendly environment to students to interact with their peers and listen to them. Being online makes our students feel isolated from their peers.



## **Theme 4: Health**

Majority of **participants** mentioned a number of health issues that they experienced during the online classrooms. Respondents 2, 5, 6, 10, and 15 discussed that sitting for hours teaching children and then preparing lessons after classes caused backache for them.

### **Participant 5**

We sit for hours on a chair teaching kids. Sometimes we become so indulged in teaching that we forget ourselves. Then, at night we start feeling the lower back pain. It's not only teaching, even after classes, we sit to prepare for the other lessons or provide evaluation. Even we need some time to browse the Internet or reply to messages. Therefore, we almost sit the whole day and this has affected our health and our performance as well.

In the same vein, respondents 3, 4, and 16 expressed their concern regarding the negative effect on their sight. According to them, staring at the screen and attempting to evaluate students' written assignments could cause them to strain their eyes and make their eyes subject to sight issues. Here are some of the quoted responses from the participants:

### **Participant 3**

At the end of the day, I feel my eyes are burning and I observe some redness in them because of sitting in front of the screen for a long time. We basically sit for hours teaching, preparing for lessons, evaluation, browsing the Internet, and chatting with friends and family members. Imagine we almost sit throughout the day just staring at the screen. I'm just afraid this will affect my sight.

### **Participant 4**

"I strain my eyes when I keep looking at the screen for a while; I feel they are itchy and I can't concentrate for a long time".

The following figure below summarizes the number of themes occurred in the participants' responses.

As it is evident from the above figure, the most emergent issue that teachers encountered during teaching oral communication skills was pertinent to technology and the use of online platforms to teach oral communications. This theme was mentioned 15 times by the respondents expressing their concern and dissatisfaction of using technology and online platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom. The second issue was pertinent to students' motivation while learning oral communication skills. This issue was expressed 12 times by teachers and how students did show sufficient interest when taught online. As for the third issue, lack of real-life interaction, 11 of the participants felt and expressed their experiences negatively regarding interacting with students during communication classes online. The last challenge is related to health. 9 participants explained that during their online classes, they face some health problems, such as sight and back pain. Other issues that were mentioned once or twice are related to training, teaching methods, and skills in using platforms properly.

## Discussion & Conclusions

Among the many issues shown in the responses to the open-ended survey questions, using technology and platforms while teaching oral communications skills, the learners' motivation and enthusiasm, lack of real-life interaction, and health were the most four emergent themes in the present study. However, the findings of this study came slightly different from the findings of other studies that proved that teaching oral communication skills online to bear positive educational outcomes for learners (Setiyani et al., 2019). The reason that some previous studies indicated that teaching oral communication skills online could bear positive outcomes can be attributed to the different use of materials or tasks that enhanced the learners' motivation. The findings of the present study are similar to studies conducted in different contexts. Garcia (2012) proved that the lack of environment for practicing oral communication and time constraints were the most emerged challenges for teachers in the context of Mexico.

Several studies (Abdullah and Mustafa, 2015; Demir, 2017; Gross, 2020; Sahu, 2020; and Ramalingam, et al., 2022) highlighted the issue of using technology and platforms to conduct online communication skills classes.

Abdullah and Mustafa (2015) reported that Iranian teachers faced several problems pertinent to technology and efficient facilities. Similarly, Demir (2017) found challenges such as technical support and assessment and materials encountered by EFL teachers. Gross (2020) reported issues related to lack of teachers' interpersonal communication in the classroom. Sahu (2020) found that internet connectivity and lack of resources are the major challenges faced by teachers. Ramalingam, et al. (2022) reported several challenges faced by teachers in teaching oral communication skills including finding the appropriate platform to teach this discipline, poor internet connectivity, unfamiliarity with the technical tools, to name a few.

The present study came in line with the above-mentioned studies that educators encounter more issues pertinent to technology and platforms when teaching communication skills online. The study contributed to the field of research through highlighting the most common challenges that teachers encounter while teaching oral communication skills. Once the challenges are identified, solutions can be offered to tackle such challenges to ensure more effective online learning for students. To ensure effective online teaching of oral communication skills, the above-mentioned challenges can be rectified. The concerned institutions should provide good and stable internet service for educators.

In addition to that, training educators is vital to minimize the level of boredom and stress that students are undergoing and maximize their level of engagement among them. Institutions can train teachers how to use some techniques effectively to maintain the attention of children and keep them engaged throughout the classes. Teachers can include some games, vary their activities, and make use of learner-centered ways of teaching.

Real-life situations can be compensated through providing interesting materials that suit the interest of the learners, such as authentic materials, videos, debate about interesting topics, and the like. Real-life can be replicated, and more interaction, though online, can happen among students to promote better and more effective communication. It is also recommended that teachers to take short breaks to do some physical exercises to prevent any physical pain from sitting for long periods of time. They can also go through some training on

the correct posture of sitting, how to support their backs while sitting, and the like. Despite of the benefits of online education that some research has proven, teaching oral communication skills appear to trigger several challenges for teachers. The findings of the current study, namely challenges related to technology and platforms, lack of motivation among students, lack of real-life interaction, and health issues while teaching oral communication skills were compatible with the previous studies that found several issues pertinent to teaching oral communication skills online. However, teachers can overcome such challenges if the institution ensured proper internet connectivity for both students and teachers. Moreover, teachers can receive proper training on how to engage learners and keep them motivated through implementing authentic materials, multimedia, and other materials that can trigger their motivation. Furthermore, teachers can learn how to set up their environment and use the right techniques to prevent any health issues, such as sight problems, back pain, and the like.

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## About the Author

**Abdulaziz Saif** is a PhD holder in English Language Education, CELTA certified teacher with grade b, IELTS teacher, communication skills trainer, content creator, and researcher. For more than a decade, Mr. Saif has immersed himself in teaching, researching, and training students and teachers in the field of English Language Education in different countries including Yemen, India, and Nepal. He has taught IELTS in India and Nepal, held international webinars to teach undergraduate students from Indonesia, and conducted several workshops to improve students' language skills.

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