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Article: **Exploring the Preferences and Attitudes of Undergraduates regarding the Online Classes of English Literature in Universities of Pakistan**

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Shafqat Hussain

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Exploring the Preferences and Attitudes of Undergraduates regarding the Online Classes of English Literature in Universities of Pakistan

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Abstract

COVID-19 has resulted in the digitalization of teaching and learning process in Pakistan. Online education has become a new need in the wake of the pandemic. Pakistani universities are teaching English literature through online classes. It is believed that online teaching causes difficulty in the development of critical understanding of literature in students. Learning through online classes about English literature can be a challenging task for students because literature demands an effective live discussion between the teachers and students. Researcher (1) is a student of English department, who has observed some issues related to online teaching of English literature. Students face challenges in understanding literature during online classrooms due to their digital illiteracy. The researchers are more prone to explore the attitudes and preferences of undergraduates because of such challenges. Moreover, they investigate and measure the challenges faced by students in online classes and provide them a way forward. The current study focuses on undergraduates' online classrooms of English literature of sixteen public sector universities in Pakistan. A 'quantitative survey method' along with a 'probability sampling technique' has been used to collect primary data for this research. In total, one hundred and fifty-one participants from sixteen Pakistani public sector universities have been participated in this piece of study. Among them sixty-five are male participants, and eighty-six are female participants. All participants are undergraduates of fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth semesters from the departments of English literature. The responses are collected from the participants which have been quantified in Microsoft Excel and displayed in figures in Microsoft Word. The quantified data revealed that most of the students required more discussion with teachers and other students, and engagement in online class activities regarding literature. Findings also demonstrated that students mostly supported interactive learning. Furthermore, they did not consider the use of digital

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tools effective in teaching drama and poetry in the online classes of English literature. However, online modes of teaching remained more preferable for teaching short stories and novels in the universities. The current study can help teachers, students, and policymakers in knowing about what students prefer and do not prefer in online classes, and how their preferences can be transformed into student-centered teaching in the digital domains.

Keywords: digital domains, English literature, online Classes, Pakistani public sector universities, pandemic

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the education process at all levels was put to the test, and all the institutions stopped taking face-to-face classes as they started adopting technology in the form of taking online classes (Daniel, [2020](#); Aristovnik et al., [2020](#)). When social separation became an unavoidable norm, considering health issues, many institutions shifted to online teaching to keep students engaged and motivated (Ferdeus & Shifat, [2020](#); Marinoni et al., [2020](#)).

In a literature classrooms, the relationship between students and teachers is essential, because literary material “represents authentic feelings of their authors and this produces a strong incentive in the learners” (Babae & Yahya, [2014](#), p. 82). Previous studies (Sultana & Khan, [Sultana](#); Van, [2009](#)) have disclosed that the sustainability of the latest trend of online classes relies on students' attitudes and their contentment level. Students who have a good attitude towards online classes can produce an effective teaching and learning environment, however, it is also worth noting that teachers face challenges in conduct of online instructional methods (Sultana & Khan, [2019](#)).

However, students of English Literature have an opportunity to study the variety of its genres, such as poetry, short story, novel, theatre, literary criticism, and others. It requires students' active participation during the lecture because such participation is an important element of learning and teaching process (Van, [2009](#)). Teaching these genres of English literature in an online class can be challenging for instructors because many genres necessitate a certain environment and lively engagement from the side of students (Islam, [2021](#)). For instance, reading William Shakespeare's (1564-1616), *Hamlet* (1905), Charles Dickens' (1812-1870), *Great*

Expectations (1861), Robert Frost's (1874-1963), poetry, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", or Francis Bacon's (1561-1626), essay, "Of Study", demands various engaging approaches from both the instructors and learners.

Although earlier studies (Ali, [2021](#); Shaikh, Chandio & Shaikh, [2021](#)), have addressed the complicated nature of teaching in both ways either online or physical in large classrooms. Shaikh et al. ([2021](#)) have investigated how a large classroom, with multiple students in Pakistan's context can be a challenge for teachers as it is too difficult to have an effective interaction between teachers and students in overcrowded classrooms. However, the current undertaken research study specifically deals with teaching English literature in online classrooms of Pakistani universities. Furthermore, it is critical to consider students' attitudes and preferences in English Literature classes in order to take appropriate steps to create an effective online classroom environment and humanize learning in the digital domains. The current study also investigates the preferences of students towards the particular genre of literature, which is about the genre they prefer in online and physical classrooms.

Problem Statement

This current research, quantitatively investigates students' attitudes about online classes of English literature in Pakistan. Furthermore, it focuses on the preferences of students in both general and specific manners of literary genres in online literature classes of sixteen public sector universities of Pakistan. The goal of the study is to examine students' healthy opinion towards the online classes that have been started since the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the current study does not focus on the opinion of teachers from the selected universities' Besides, it also does not focus on the external elements, such as the internet connection and device that can impact students' attitudes regarding their online classes. Furthermore, this particular study does not examine the students' attitudes toward online evaluation methods.

The researchers carried out further four prime research questions in order to better understand the students' preferences and attitudes towards online classes of English literature. These research questions are given below:

Research Questions

1. What attitudes students show during their online classes of English literature in Pakistan?
2. How do students respond to the challenges they face during online classes of English literature in Pakistan?
3. Which genre of English literature do students prefer to learn in online classes in Pakistan?
4. Which genre of English literature do students prefer to learn in face-to-face classes in Pakistan?

Review of Related Literature

A number of earlier studies (Ali, [2021](#); Shaikh et al., [2021](#); Junejo & Shaikh, [2021](#); Talpur et al., [2021](#); Rehman et al., [2021](#); Butt et al., [2021](#); Noor et al., [2020](#); Abbasi et al., [2020](#); Jang, [2020](#); Shahzad et al., [2020](#); Otoui, [2019](#); Farooq et al., [2012](#)) have focused on teaching of language and literature in a range of contexts during the pandemic.

Recent studies reveal that the rapid growth of COVID-19 has caused institutions to shift their lecture deliverance methods to the online classes instead of conducting physical classes purely based on live discussion (Mpungose, [2020](#)). COVID-19 has brought significant changes to the educational sector and modes of teaching and learning. “This crisis threatened the education system around the world and required educators to transit to an online method of instruction overnight” (Dhawan, [2020](#), p. 5). After the proclamation of COVID-19 pandemic accomplished by the World Health Organization (WHO), in the month of March 2020, (Spinelli & Pellino, [2020](#)), many academic institutions which were previously hesitant to abandon their traditional teaching modes, had to opt the online methodologies of teaching and learning.

Challenges of Teaching/Learning in an Online Classroom

Dhawan ([2020](#)) asserts that students would struggle in comprehending the learning material because most online classes are conducted in a one-way manner, (teacher to student). Attentiveness can help to create a healthy

learning environment. Mondol & Mohiuddin (2020) have also discovered that numerous external factors influence the teaching-learning process in a virtual class. For example, “the teaching-learning process gets hampered, resulting in the motivation swing and less participation” (p. 242). It becomes a challenge for the students and teachers. Islam (2021) has quantitatively reached to a conclusion that online classrooms for Bangladeshi undergraduates are still a challenging environment. Moreover, this problem should be tackled through adopting the effective measures and strategies. In Pakistan, the pandemic-led lockdowns have shifted their teaching methods to online modes, which have disrupted the assessments and examinations (Mumtaz et al., 2021).

Moreover, Reading (1989) argues that interaction between students and instructors is very crucial in literature classrooms because the subject has further multiple sub-disciplines and features of inquiry. It is a field which has academic terrain and distinctive modes of exploration are shaped during the class through discussions with learners. Reading (1989) states that a literature syllabus contains a multitude of content material, which makes learning happen when “students actually are in terms of knowledge, skills, and motivation...and must seek genuine response and engagement from other students, leading to new knowledge and understanding”(p. 35). Students have often viewed online classes as passive classes, in which the “spontaneous exchange of ideas” between teachers and students does not occur at the moment (Shenoy et al., 2020). Berteau (2009) stresses the importance of effective interaction between teachers and students when holding classes virtually. In an online class, the “lack of human interaction” might lead to poor performance and deficient attitude. In such a class, students may also feel the lack of human connection (Berteau, 2009).

Online Class as an Opportunity

Ali & David (2021), have used online techniques and methods for conducting effective research during the pandemic. They have argued that online platforms during the pandemic can be helpful in teaching and learning research. Moreover, the study by Ali (2022), about online English language learning in a Pakistani city, Larkana demonstrates how teaching and learning of reading skills can be digitalized. He argues that the use of digital material along with traditional methods of teaching L2 is primarily helpful for developing the reading skills for critical and integrated

understanding of written discourse. In their review study, Mumtaz et al. (2021), suggest that Pakistan needs to develop a cost-effective and secure online academic system to reap the full benefits of the opportunity. Discussing opportunities of online teaching in Pakistan, Abid et al. (2021), demonstrate that online teaching prepares Pakistani teachers for a ‘blended teaching approach’ and increase their awareness of teaching related to global and future challenges.

Moreover, an impression or liking of a person by which traits of a given element are appraised is referred to as attitude (Ramdhani et al., 2012). Sumarwan (2005), claims that a person's attitude may be quantified by using the cognitive (knowledge), emotive (emotional), and normative (behavioral inclinations) components. Berteau's (2009), evaluative study of students' attitudes shows that how enthusiasm and positive attitudes can help students in effective learning. Students with a positive attitude in a literature class, in the words of Ghazali et al. (2009), “will spend more effort to learn by using strategies such as asking questions, volunteering information, and responding inquiries” (p. 51). “The students felt upset when they did not get enough opportunity to share their views during the literature lessons” (p. 54). Teachers’ encouragement for students to have a conceptual debate on a given topic in a literature class is more important than having a passive lecture. Further, “teacher's explanation and notes were ranked as the fifth most important strategy in teaching literature, followed by using the audio-visual aids in literature classes” (p.55). Therefore, students should be provided with an opportunity in online classrooms to speak and share their views regarding the given topic.

Hence, the above literature review manifests that there is a range of studies on the subject of online teaching, such as language, literature, science, research, attitudes of students, and teachers toward different arenas of online education. All of them face the challenges and achieve the opportunities in online literature classrooms. However, no study has been conducted on how Pakistani undergraduates of English literature view at online teaching. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the preferences and attitudes of the Pakistani students about online teaching/learning. The upcoming section informs about the research methodology, participants, and tools.

Research Methodology

The current study uses the quantitative survey technique for research. It surveys on the attitudes and preferences of Pakistani undergraduates about online teaching of English literature. The collected data were 'primary'. The researchers used the 'probability sampling strategy' for data collection. The participants in this study belonged to sixteen public sector universities of Pakistan. The names of the universities were not mentioned in the study as per ethical considerations. The survey questions were developed by using the Google Forms. The collected responses were quantified in the mathematical form of percentage in Microsoft Excel and presented in the form of figures by using Microsoft Word.

Participants

Data were collected from the students in the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth semesters of English departments in sixteen public sector universities in Pakistan's major cities. 57% of the participants were females, and 43% of them were males. Among the total percentage of the participants, 17.1% were in the fourth semester, 16.1% in the fifth semester, 5.5% in the sixth semester, 19.2% in the seventh semester, and 38.4% were in the eighth semester. The questionnaire was forwarded to one hundred fifty-one, (151), participants and each of them responded timely. It is vital to note that the curriculum in Pakistani universities is designed and planned in a unique manner. This curriculum requires a candidate to complete his or her course of degree in the time period of four years, which is further based on 8 semesters in order to become a graduate. Participants in the current study were chosen from different groups that had the opportunity to take both in person and online classes of English literature.

Tools

The purpose of this study was to explore and measure students' attitudes and preferences about online literature classes by using a quantitative method of survey research. The primary data were gathered through the structured questionnaire which included close-ended questions. The order of questionnaire was taken into account to maintain the connection between the questions. The language of questions was kept in the simple and understandable English. Neither personal nor annoying questions were asked. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants through the internet sources, such as e-mail and WhatsApp because the researchers followed the social-distancing policy. The survey questionnaire was

developed by drawing insights from the previous research studies Lee (2008), Shorna et al. (2020), and Islam (2021).

Findings and Data Analysis

The current section includes findings and their analysis. The analysis is displayed using tables and figures. Additionally, each table and figure has been analyzed under its respective heading. **Figure 1** presents students' attitudes towards the interaction of online literature classrooms.

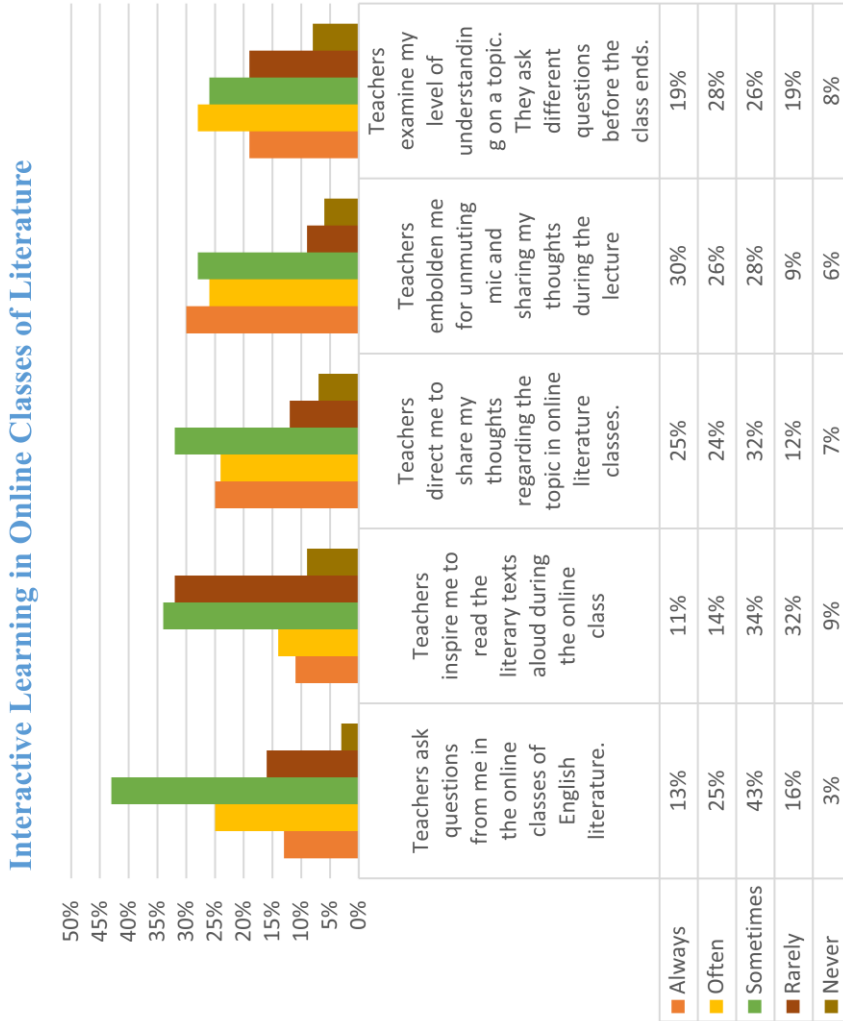


Figure 1: Interactive Learning in Online Classes of Literature

Interactive Teaching

The responses displayed in **Figure 1** show that 43% of the participants have responded that teachers use questions in their teaching strategy. 34% of the participants have answered that teachers ask them to read the text aloud in the classroom. Additionally, 32% of the students have responded that teachers sometimes ask them to share their opinions on a given topic of literature in the online classroom, and 30% of the students have responded that teachers allow them to share their opinions openly without any hesitation in the literature classroom. Lastly, 28% of the students claim that they are often asked questions at the end of their online class. This shows that majority of the students are not communicative in the online classes of English literature in Pakistani universities. Now, the researchers move towards analyzing the attitudes of the participants.

Attitudes towards Teaching/Learning Material

Figure 2 presents the attitudes of undergraduates Pakistani English literature towards the teaching/learning material presented in an online classroom. It shows that 54% of the respondents are not comfortable with e-books, whereas 34% of the respondents always like the classroom which is less dependent on digital tools of teaching. 30% of the students do not like the lectures based on slides. Such attitudes of respondents show that they do not like online classes of English literature. They preferred physical/face-to-face discussion during lectures deliverance of teachers. 54% of them want teachers to have discussion-based classes instead of the use of slides.

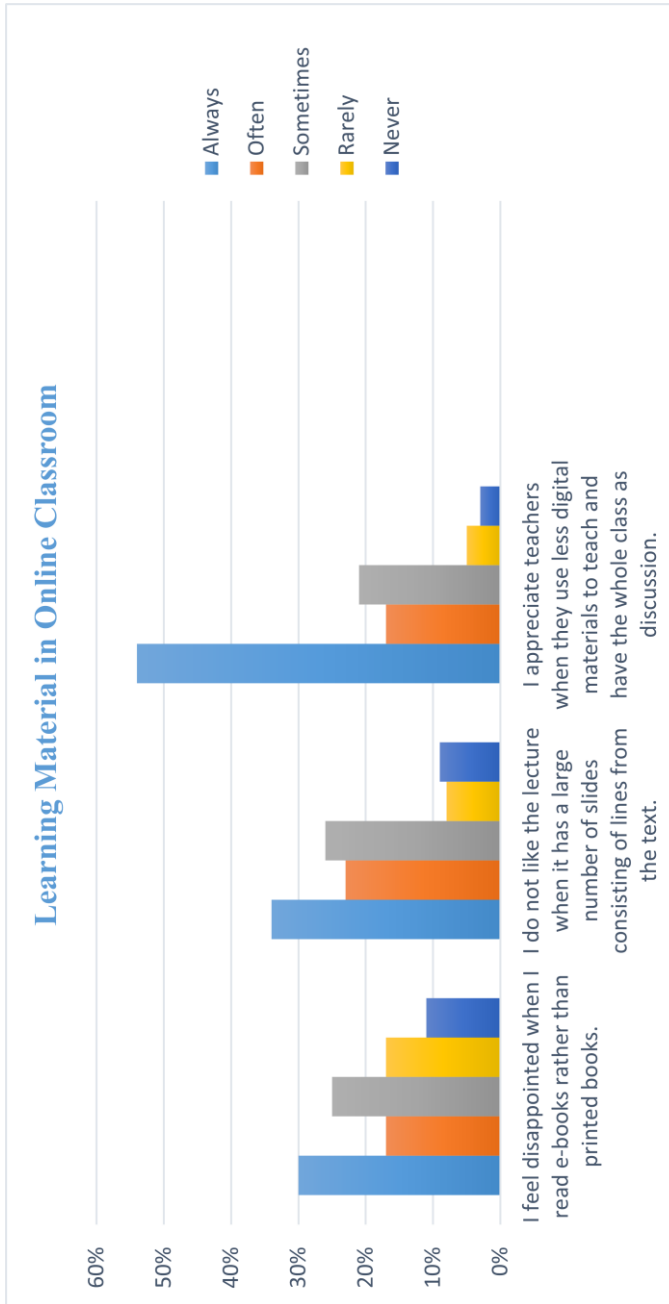


Figure 2: Learning Material in Online Classroom

Deliverance of Lectures

Figure 3 displays the attitudes of undergraduates of Pakistani English literature towards the online lecture deliverance of the teachers. 50% of the participants require more time for comprehending and presenting their views during the lecture. 45% of the participants respond neutrally in terms of understanding the comments of teachers, written with the mouse of a computer in an online class. 52% of the respondents show that they understand lines from the text only when teachers provide them with a little explanation in the footnotes of the slides.

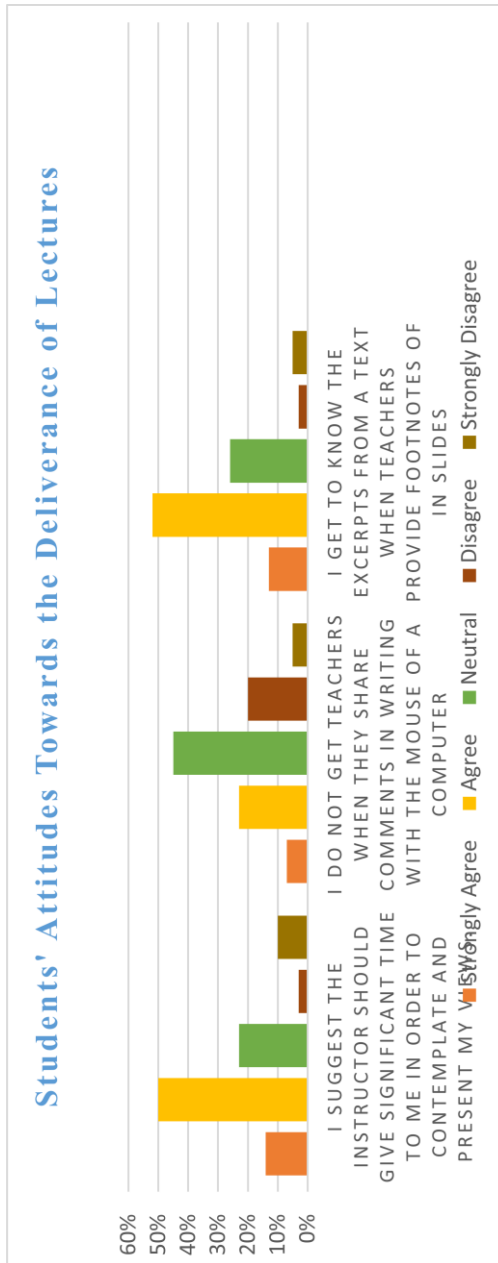


Figure 3: *Students' Attitudes Towards the Deliverance of Lectures*

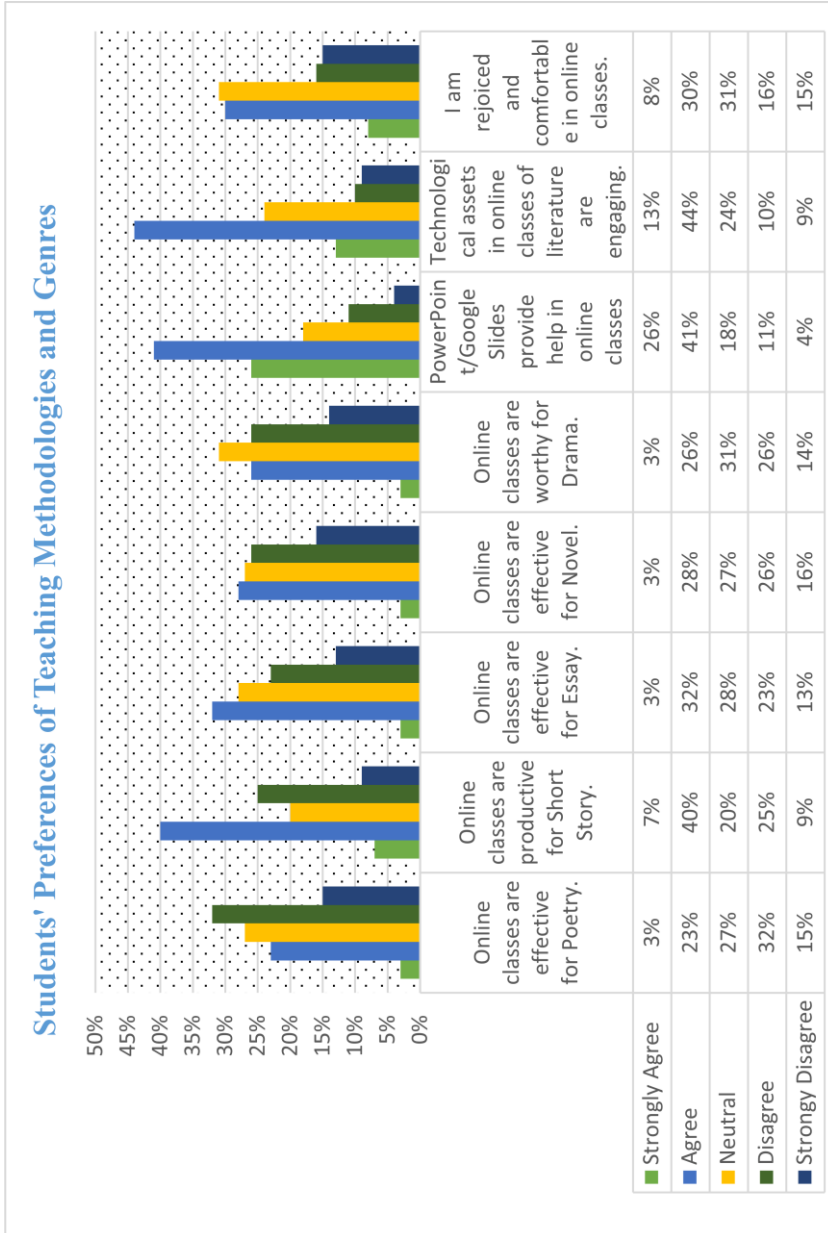


Figure 4: Students' Preferences of Teaching Methodologies and Genres

Effectiveness of Different Literature Genres

Figure 4 demonstrates that how the intelligent selection of teaching methods can be helpful in teaching a particular genre of literature. It shows that what genres of literature should be taught either online or offline. Findings show that 32% of the participants do not like the online classes of poetry, 40% of them like short story classes, and 32% of them are in favor of online classes for the essay subject. 26% of the participants are neutral for online classes of the drama subject. Moreover, 41% of the participants support the use of PowerPoint in online classes. 44% of them find the use of digital tools effective in online teaching. Overall, only 30% of the participants were comfortable in the online classroom of English literature in the Pakistani universities, and 31% of them did not answer it.

Preferences

Figure 5 shows that 34% of the participants preferred the choice of teacher's teaching methodologies, which did not contain the use of digital tools. Furthermore, 40% of the participants strongly preferred that instructors should be provided with the brief summary of texts through which they could easily conduct their online classes. 29% of the participants liked the idea of having online classes in future.

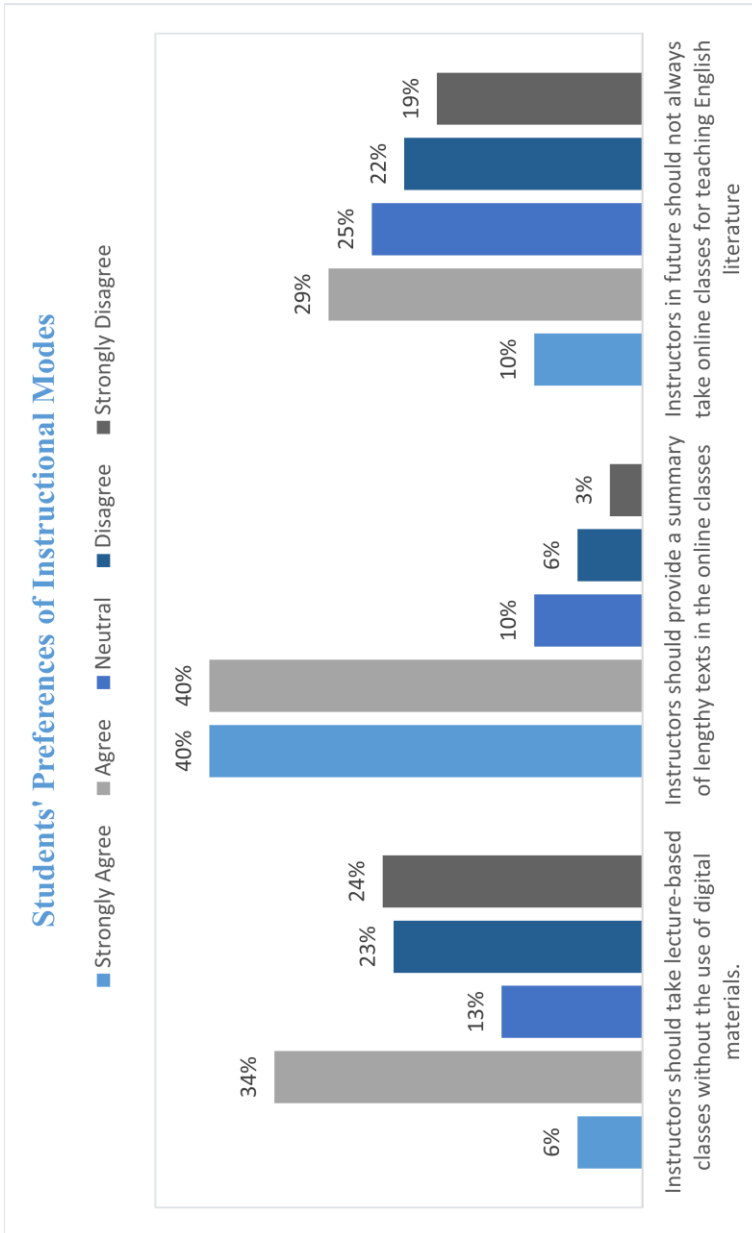


Figure 5: Students' Preferences of Instructional Modes

Discussion

Findings provided in figures and tables have shown that 29% of the participants were generally unsatisfied and did not like the digital methods of online teaching in the classes of English literature. 32% stayed against online classes for the subjects of poetry, and 27% of them also did not stand for poetry and drama, whereas 40% of the students were inclined towards the online classes for short story, and 28% for the subject of novel.

This research discloses that the Pakistani undergraduates of English literature mostly do not like the digital methods of teaching. Their attitude towards digital teaching material is not positive. 34% participants do not like slides and e-book-based lectures in the classroom. They sometimes like the slide-based lecture only when the instructors can provide some short footnotes. 50% of the participants want to take some time to think about the question and the topic in order to develop proper understanding. As addition to the findings of earlier studies (Berteau, [2009](#); Mondol & Mohiuddin, [2020](#); Aristovnik et al., [2020](#)), which resulted in the need of specific consideration of teacher-student interaction in the classroom. The current research similarly demonstrates that these online teaching methods require particular consideration from teachers in terms of the classroom dialogue and interactive teaching. Even the virtual classrooms can achieve the equilibrium of a passionate literary class if students contribute and the instructor actively engage students in the debate (Dixson, [2010](#)).

32% of the attendees have been reported to remain silent in the virtual class in the hopes of receiving encouragement from their teachers to voice their thoughts on the topic. 18% of the students have shown a neutral attitude towards the usage of technological material (that is, e-books, PDF materials), and 23% of them retain a bad view about online lectures of poetry and drama.

Unlike Islam's findings ([2021](#)), which manifested that participants did not consider drama and poetry online classes of Bangladesh effective. This study in Pakistani context demonstrated that 28% students found novel and 40% of them found short story lectures received through digital platforms more productive. As a result, educators should work on how to achieve the interest of students in virtual classes and should improve their conduct of poetry and drama classes to restore their efficacy. The efficacy of a virtual class would be determined mainly by comparing that how eagerly

learners share their experience and ideas now as compare to the way they used do in their traditional physical classrooms.

Findings also demonstrate that 40% of the respondents are attracted towards online classes, when they are taught short stories. 28% of them are attracted towards online classes of novels. It is because they are story-based narrations and can also be watched in the movies. While the online classes for the subjects of poetry and drama are not deemed effective for them in contrast to Islam's findings (2021), in which the participants like poetry and drama classes only. However, as shown in the Reading's (1989), participants of the current study believe that instructors' excessive usage of digital teaching material in online literature classrooms should be discouraged. Previous studies (Mpungose 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020), have shown that in the time of COVID-19, teachers used many audio-visual devices in their distance learning classes. In contrast, this study emphasizes that each genre of literature has its own unique nature and only an intelligent selection of teaching methodologies can help effective teaching and learning.

The idea that the instructor should bring digital teaching material into use during their lectures of English literature was rejected by 34% of participants. Anyhow, they shown more interest in establishing online debates and discussions. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should make an appropriate choice of teaching methodologies, when they are teaching a particular genre of literature. The teaching genres, such as novels and short fictions determine teachers' urge to use online material.

Conclusion

The educational institutions in Pakistan had taken a shift from physical classes to online classes during COVID-19 for the purpose of safety measures. The current study aimed to determine the students' attitudes and preferences regarding their online classes of English literature. Findings of this study demonstrated that students were keen to attend the physical classes of English literature back in their universities. The students also preferred 'interactive learning and teaching' instead of the unintelligent use of digital tools of teaching. The maximum usage of digital and online teaching material have been noticed especially in the case of teaching narrative genres, such as short story and novel of English Literature. On the other hand, drama and poetry required face-to-face/interactive teaching

methodologies. Therefore, the concerned authorities must design a plan to encourage teachers to make appropriate choice of teaching methodologies bearing in mind the different genres of literature. It is hoped that this particular research will pave the way for researchers to research on teachers' attitudes and preferences of teaching methodologies in relation to different genres of literature.

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