



BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING DURING LIVE ONLINE CLASSES ARE A HINDRANCE TO TEACHING LEARNING PROCESS ESPECIALLY IN RURAL WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Like many countries of the world, India too went into lockdown since 25th March 2020. In this emergency people were asked not only to stay home; regular classes at schools, colleges, and at university level were immediately suspended to prevent any community transmission of the deadly virus Covid-19. However, University Grants Commission (UGC) of India has issued a notice F. No. 1-14/2020 (website) asking every learner to utilize the lockdown period “productively by engaging in on-line learning” (Jain, 2020). Eventually, online courses and online classes in the form of webinars, web meetings became a major means of teaching learning process. But these e-learning or online classroom could not be much effective in rural villages of West Bengal (India) as village learners could hardly have proper opportunities to listen to the live lectures of the teachers online due to interrupted internet connectivity and lack of their adaptability towards this new normal trend. Listening as a language skill is not simply hearing, but is an active process of receiving aural and visual stimuli attentively, followed by its comprehension and retention of the message or intention of the speaker. But while village learners faced difficulties in receiving the aural and visual stimuli during these live online classes, how could teaching learning process be effectively accomplished? This study endeavours to find out how far classes through video conferences are successful while effective listening could not be possible in rural areas of Bengal due to several technical as well as psychological factors.

Key Words: Online Classes, Ineffective Listening, Inefficient Teaching-Learning process, Rural West Bengal.

1. Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 has aroused one common emotion among all, and that is “fear.” (Minding our minds during the COVID-19, n.d.) Viruses might have varying abilities to infect people. For COVID-19, each person with the virus can go on to infect around 2.5 people. COVID-19 is more infectious than other coronaviruses such as SARS or MERS-CoV. The “case fatality rate” (CFR), or risk of dying from the new coronavirus, is about 4.4%. COVID-19 is less deadly than previous epidemic threats, but its rapid spread so far has brought the world to a standstill as thousands of people with either no symptoms or very mild symptoms have been spreading the virus unaware that they were even infected. (How has the new Corona Virus spread across the world so fast?, n.d.)

A lockdown therefore is meant to prevent the spread of infection from one person to another. This means, not stepping out of the house except for utter necessities. Initially, the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi declared a three-week nationwide lockdown starting from 25th March 2020, explaining that it was the only way of breaking the Covid-19 infection cycle. (Minding our minds during the COVID-19, n.d.) However, even after 114 days of lockdown, India stands at the third position in number of coronavirus cases, with the U.S leading the table followed by Brazil. The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in India crossed the million mark on July 16. India passed the grim milestone on a day it crossed another equally grim one of more than 25,000 deaths from COVID-19. (Coronavirus India lockdown Day 114 updates | July 16, 2020, 2020)

The pandemic does not seem to end soon. Especially in a country like India where each day records are being broken in number of new coronavirus cases. In West Bengal, the first positive case of coronavirus was reported on 15 March when a student who returned from United Kingdom tested positive. (Singh, n.d.) Immediately the State has closed educational institutions, cinema halls and advised against major public gatherings. Now with the extension of the lockdown in West Bengal till the end of July to curb coronavirus cases in the state, the government also announced that all educational institutions in the state would be closed till July 31. Therefore, along with normal life, in education too we have to accept the new normal and continue our studies through teleconferences, web conferences and webinars.

On March 25, 2020, University Grants Commission (UGC) issued a notice F. No. 1-14/2020 (website) asking every learner to utilize the lockdown period “productively by engaging in on-line learning” (Jain, 2020). There were 10 point suggestions regarding e-learning through Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) on-line courses, UG/PG Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), e-PG Pathshala, e-Content courseware in UG subjects, SWAYAMPRAKASHA, CEC-UGC You Tube channel, National Digital Library, Shodhganga, e-Shodh Sindhu and Vidwan. The University Grants Commission wished that these information and communications technology (ICT) initiatives, which cover a broad range of subjects and courses and have been prepared by experts, will provide an excellent learning experience for the learners. (Jain, 2020)

But, apart from these standard or pre-recorded audio and video podcast, there are classes being taken in the form of webinars and web meetings or web conferences. Undoubtedly, downloadable audio and video podcast remained a major source and means of



teaching learning process during the lockdown, but many teachers found it far more convenient to teach students online through web meetings or web conferencing.

Several web conferencing software or apps like Zoom, Google Meet, Skype etc. provided online audio and video conferencing solutions. These software or apps are mostly used during this lockdown period for webinars, toll-free calling, HD video meetings, training and teaching learning process. Using built-in cameras, speakers, and microphones or external devices, web conferencing allows for high-quality face-to-face video meetings or group phone calls over an internet connection. Web conferencing tools include the ability for free screen sharing and setting up virtual conference rooms for attendees to dial in and collaborate. (Grech, 2016)

But how far these initiatives of teaching and learning through web conferencing and webinars remained successful especially in rural areas of West Bengal, India?

Be it teaching through conference call or web conferencing; teaching learning process could only be successful if learners could listen and grasp the subject or topic taught over their mobile phone or laptop in their remote and rural villages of West Bengal, India.

Teleconferencing being limited to only five (5) participants per phone; most teachers preferred video conferencing through Zoom or Google Meet app to teach and interact with their students away at their respective homes. In each case learners need to get access to the live lectures of the teachers online, be attentive to whatever is taught, listen, comprehend and restore the information offered and then make an appropriate response to the teacher teaching from his or her own house somewhere far away from them.

Listening as a language skill is a vital yet neglected skill in and outside our classrooms. It is neglected primarily because listening is mostly taken for granted that learners automatically acquire this language skill as they could hear to the teachers' lecture in the classroom or to their other associates and family members during socialization outside the classroom. But being in the classroom or attending classes being far away through web video conferences may not prove that one is a better listener or have enough learning of the language skill – listening.

In this study we would try to understand how far effective listening actually affect teaching learning process; and to what extent learners living in the remote and rural Bengal could effectively utilize the new normal online live classes, where receiving the aural and visual stimuli over a mobile phone is never smooth as tele-connectivity and broadband connectivity is a major concern. The paper would also address the psychological factors that also are responsible for lack of adaptability of the learners to this new normal – online classes.

2. Scope of Study

The primary objective of the study is to find out how far e-learning or teaching learning process through web conferencing and webinars could be successfully accomplished during this long lockdown period.

Listening as a language skill is not simply hearing, but is an active process of receiving aural and visual stimuli attentively, followed by the comprehension and retention of the message or intention of the speaker received; and which in turn should be followed by appropriate reaction from the listener. Therefore, the research also aims at finding out how far learners especially at the remote villages of West Bengal, India, could attentively listen to their teachers teaching in an online mode; and what are the factors that are responsible for their ineffective or effective listening.

3. Methodology

The research paper is an outcome of empirical study conducted with 63 students living at three distinguished localities including village, suburb and town.

The participants are from six different undergraduate degree colleges – Dr. B. R. Ambedkar College, Karimpur Pannadevi College, Kanchrapara College, Haringhata Mahavidyalaya, Government General Degree Collage at Tehatta and Chapra Bangaljhi Mahavidyalaya. The learners are of the age group between 18 to 21 years; and 87.3 % of them are from remote villages, while 11.1 % are from town and the rest 1 % live in the suburb of West Bengal, India.

All the research participants were sent a google form to fill up online and submit. The form could be categorized into three following sections –

- 1st the participants profile comprising their educational qualification, Institute or College in which they are pursuing their undergraduate degree, their age and their residential location type.



- 2nd section of the form is to determine how many of them attended the online classes and through which mode; and to understand the advantages and disadvantages of attending the online classes.
- The 3rd section of the form is primarily a comparative study between regular classes and online classes. It is also to determine how far effective listening could be accomplished while attending the online classes.

Once the online google forms get submitted, a second experiment was conducted to determine the tele-connectivity and the broadband connectivity especially during the online classes.

4. Results

As already mentioned, the research has been conducted with 63 students living at three distinguished localities including village, suburb and town. They are from six different undergraduate degree colleges – Dr. B. R. Ambedkar College, KarimpurPannadevi College, Kanchrapara College, HaringhataMahavidyalaya, Government General Degree Collage at Tehatta and ChapraBangaljiMahavidhalaya; their age group is between 18 to 21 years; and 87.3 % of them are from remote villages, while 11.1 % are from town and the rest 1 % live in the suburb of West Bengal, India.

About 95.2% of the research participants i.e.60 participants out of the 63 research participants have attended live online classes during this lockdown. But there are 13 responses that came for this query. 25% of them (3 responses) were in favour of unavailability of the internet facilities at their locations.16.7% (2 responses each) mentioned –

- Bad video and audio transmission during online classes.
- Didn't have smart phone, so had to borrow one from relatives to do the classes. And
- Enjoy online classes but connectivity disturbs a lot.

8.3% of them (1 response each) came for the following –

- My phone is not compatible to apps like Zoom and Google Meet those teachers used for online classes
- Never liked online classes
- There is a physical damage of the phone display.
- Cannot enjoy online classes as regular classroom.

Thus, it is likely that those who have attended the online classes also discontinued it at a certain point of time due to the above reasons.

When given an option of number of classes attended per week, 54% of the class attending research population claimed of attending 3 online classes per week, while 15.9% attended 2 online classes per week and 12.7% has done 4 online classes; 9.5% attended 5 online classes and 7.9% of them attended 1 online classes per week.

However, all of the participants have attended live online classes in the form of webinar or web conferences rather than tele conferencing.

85.7% has attended online classes through web conferences with the help of Google Meet App; while 12.7% has attended online classes through Zoom.

Regarding preferences for live online classes through web conferences or webinars over regular classes in a classroom through chalk and talk mode, only 6.34% or 4 participants strongly preferred online classes; while 53.96% (34 participants) of the research population remained neutral in their opinion about their preference of live online classes; and 39.68% (25 participants) of them strongly disagreed to prefer online classes over regular off line classes in a regular classroom.

However, while coming to effective listening during live online classes, 14.28% (9 participants) claim to have listened better during the live online classes through web conferences or webinars compared to regular off line classes through chalk and talk mode; while 58.73% (37 participants) of the total research population claim to have average experience, while 3.1% (2 participants) could not determine whether they are listening better during live online classes or during regular off line classes; 20.63% (13 participants) said that they could hardly listen to live online classes; and the rest 3.1% (2 participants) said their listening primarily depended on internet connectivity.

When examined in isolation the 5 features required for an effective listening skill like attentiveness, reception of aural and visual stimuli, comprehension, restoration and response, the research participants gave away the following responses.



Attentiveness:

61.90% (39 participants) of the research participants claimed that they could not listen better during live online classes compared to regular classes in a classroom; while 20.63% (13 participants) said that they could listen better during the online classes; but the remaining 17.46% (11 participants) could not determine whether they could listen better or not during the online classes compared to the regular off line classes done in a classroom.

Receiving the aural and visual stimuli:

52.38% (33 participants) of the research participants claimed that they could not receive the aural as well as visual stimuli better during live online classes compared to regular classes in a classroom; while 23.80% (15 participants) said that they could listen better during the online classes; but 22.22% (14 participants) could not determine whether they could receive the aural as well as visual stimuli better or not during the online classes compared to the regular off line classes done in a classroom. Only 1.58% (1 participant) said that the reception of aural and the visual stimuli is better if there is no network problem.

Comprehension of the information and the intention received:

49.20% (31 participants) of the research participants claimed that they failed to comprehend the information and the intention of the teacher extended during live online classes compared to regular classes in a classroom; while 26.98% (17 participants) said that they could appropriately comprehend the information and the intention of the teacher during the online classes; but 17.46% (11 participants) could not determine whether they could appropriately comprehend the information and the intention of the teacher during the online classes compared to the regular off line classes done in a classroom. Only 3.17% (2 participants) said that they could appropriately comprehend the information and the intention of the teacher if only the internet connectivity is strong enough at their location. And the other 3.17% (2 participants) of the research population said that their comprehension of the information and the intention of the teacher during the online classes could be better only if they be attentive to the lecture.

Restoration of the information and the intention comprehended:

52.38% (33 participants) of the research participants claimed that they failed to restore the information and the intention of the teacher they comprehended during live online classes compared to regular classes in a classroom; while 20.63% (13 participants) said that they could restore for a longer time the information and the intention of the teacher they comprehended during the online classes; but 25.39% (16 participants) could not determine whether they could restore the information and the intention of the teacher they comprehended during the online classes compared to the regular off line classes done in a classroom. Only 1.58% (1 participant) said that restoration of the comprehend information and the intention of the teacher is long if only the information is cultured later after the online classes are over.

Appropriate reaction or interaction with the teacher:

50.79% (32 participants) of the research participants claimed that there is no such opportunity for appropriate reaction or interaction with the teacher during live online classes compared to regular classes in a classroom; while 31.74% (20 participants) said that there is enough opportunity for appropriate reaction or interaction with the teacher during the online classes; but the remaining 17.46% (11 participants) could not determine whether they could give away appropriate reaction or had interaction with the teacher during the online classes compared to the regular off line classes done in a classroom.

Now to understand further the possibility of classroom interaction during the online classes, the research population was asked about the available opportunity of question-answer sessions during online classes and whether they could speak to the teacher teaching online for a longer period of time during or after the online lecture of the teacher.

47.61% (30 participants) of the research participants claimed that there is no such opportunity for question-answer session during live online classes compared to regular classes in a classroom; while 30.15% (19 participants) said that there is enough opportunity for question-answer session during the online classes; but the remaining 22.22% (14 participants) could not determine whether question-answer session during the online classes is at all possible compared to the regular off line classes done in a classroom.

58.73% (37 participants) of the research participants further claimed that there is no such opportunity to speak to the teacher teaching online compared to the teacher teaching in a regular classroom; while 25.39% (16 participants) said that there is enough opportunity during the online classes to speak to the teacher; however 14.28% (9 participants) could not determine whether there could be any opportunity to speak to teacher teaching online. Only 1.58% (1 participant) said that speaking and listening to the teacher teaching online could only be possible only if internet connectivity is adequate.



5. Discussion

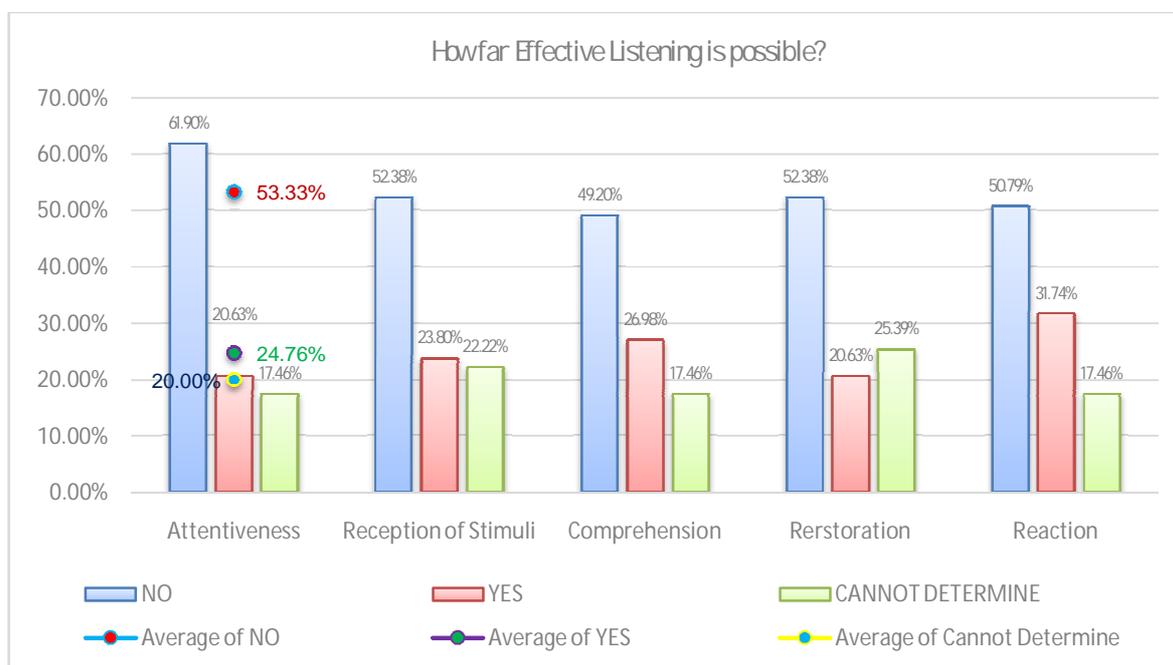
5.1. Listening as Language Skill and Live Online Classes:

Raymond L Fischer remarked that hearing and listening are not necessarily the same. Hearing involves the process by which sound waves enter the ears. Listening is more than just hearing. It is the comprehension of what is said, and should result in mental reaction(Fischer, 1972). In other words, although people hear sounds during all of their waking hours, it is how these sounds affect their minds that are important. While hearing may be defined as auditory perception of sounds, listening is actually the interpretation of the sounds that are heard. It is the conscious and voluntary mental process of perceiving the stimulus or a set of related stimuli and analysis of the sensory information for its intended meaning.

Listening, therefore, is not limited to the reception of words and sentences but includes all auditory and visual signals – noise as well as words; unintentional as well as intentional sounds, the tone and intonation of the speech; the deliberate pauses used and the silence; the eye and facial expressions; the body languages and appearance of the speaker. And once this aural as well as visual stimulus is received with attention, efforts are taken to perceive the information and intention of the speaker through various skills, schemata and comprehension processing. And before acknowledging the reception through a verbal reply or a non-verbal action or expression, the message or intention should be restored long in memory.

But from the above results it is quite clear that on an average 53.33% of the total research population could not be attentive while receiving the aural as well as the visual stimuli, thus could not comprehend the information delivered during online teaching nor could perceive the intension of the teacher teaching. Eventually therestoration of the information and the intension of the speaker could not be possible and thus neither could ask questions or respond to the questions of the teacher asked online after the teaching gets over. On an average only 24.76% of the total research population said in affirmative to effective listening skills.The rest average 20% of the research population could not determine whether they could listen effectively during online classes or at the regular classes in a classroom.

Therefore, one thing is clear that teaching learning process through live online classes during this lockdown period could not be much successful especially at remote rural locations of West Bengal, India.



5.2. Comprehension Process and Live Online Classes:

According to the cognitive psychologists, comprehension is nothing but information processing. And the guiding structures in the comprehension process are none other than schemata – language, knowledge and interactive schemata –which is evoked within every listener soon he or she listens to some content or intentions. In general, the activation of these abstract cognitive guiding



structures, its use and modification are generally navigated through three fundamental modes of information processing techniques - bottom-up, top-down and parallel processing.

While listening, both the segmental and supra-segmental features of language initially pass into the cognitive system through bottom-level schemata, where sound is decoded in a series of progression from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to complete texts. Since schemata are hierarchically formed, from the most specific at the bottom to the most general at the top. So, at the bottom level, the phonemic units are first decoded and allied together to form words; words are connected together to form phrases; these phrases are further coupled together to frame an utterance and finally the utterances are interconnected together to construct a complete, meaningful text (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). This process is an input or stimulus-driven process and is closely associated with the listener's linguistic knowledge or language schemata.

Though language schema forms the basis for all listening comprehension, it is primarily used during bottom-up processing. Language schema generally refers to the phonological, lexical, syntactic and grammatical knowledge that learners have already grasped. No satisfactory comprehension of the listened content (message and or intentions) could be achieved without proper storage of these four basic language schemata – phonological, lexical, syntactic and grammatical knowledge (Widdowson, 1978).

Top-down processing makes use of 'previous knowledge and experience (schema) of the listener to predict, filter, analyze and interpret the information received' (Ya-jun, 2007). It is a knowledge and concept driven facet of listening which involves the listener's ability to bring prior information or background knowledge (schemata) to bear on the task of understanding the heard language. This internal resource includes a bank of prior knowledge and global expectations about language and the world. It is used by the listener to make predictions about what the 'incoming message is expected to be at any point, and how the pieces fit into the whole of communication content' (Morley, 2001).

For top-down processing, a listener often uses knowledge schemata, which refer to any fact or information known and accumulated by the learners typically from daily life situations. It is generally believed that every typical situation that any listener come across leave a kind of trace in his or her life in the form of language or experience. Learners learning and listening to English as second language tend to use these knowledge schemata more while listening.

And there are occasions when both top-down and bottom-up processing occur at the same time to facilitate effective comprehension of a message or intention. M. W. Eysenck called this as 'parallel processing' (Eysenck, 2001). Comprehension of any message and intention become far easier when a listener listen and try to understand the content using his or her background knowledge (schemata) and the linguistic information (schemata) in combination as in parallel processing listening schemata or interactive schemata.

Interactive schemata actually starts to take shape when learners learning and listening to English as second language had enough practice in listening for which they get an opportunity to accumulate enough vocabulary or the linguistic schemata and could be able to identify the context (familiar or unfamiliar) of listening and associate it to his or her own past experience or world view (knowledge schemata). At this stage, learners could successfully identify phoneme, lexis, syntax of a sentence and even its grammatical structure using their knowledge schemata at the same time.

Now, when asked whether the research participants could have listened better to the shorter words or long sentences better during the live online classes, 55.55% (35 participants) of the total research population said that they have listened and comprehended the shorter words better during their online classes; while only 26.98% (17 participants) of them claimed to have understood the longer sentences spoken by the teacher teaching online.

Thus, it is obvious that learners listening to online classes had difficulties in listening and comprehending longer sentences compared to shorter words in isolation. Eventually then, these learners have mostly depended on the bottom-up processing technique to comprehend the information and intensions of the teacher teaching online than top-down or parallel processing technique.

5.3. Factors Affecting Listening during Live Online Classes:

There are several factors or situational thoughts and action barriers that at times interfere with effective listening. These barriers can be personal, physiological, psychological or environmental (such as noise or other distractions) (Barriers to Effective Listening, n.d.), or even technical as mostly observed during the live online classes.

At the very personal level it is the experience of the learners; their listening practice in target language through the use of electronic media like mobile phone, cinema, TV, radio; their general intelligence and background knowledge of the world affects listening comprehension. To be more specific the learners' knowledge of target language especially in language aspects like phonology, lexis, syntax and cohesion; power to analyzing any subject or topic and his or her memory power (both short term and



long term memory) affect listening comprehension(Boyle, 1984). The major problem with learners listening to English as second language is that none has an English-speaking environment at home or at colleges. Their ears are not adapted to English nor do they make effort to listen to English using electronic media. Thus, they had difficulties to adapt to this new normal – teaching learning through live online classes using mobile phones.

Since listening as a skill demands a slow and concentrated reception of words, and at the same time an appropriate comprehension of the meaning and intention of the speaker, so, effective listening may be affected if there is any difference between listening and thinking speed. Every transmitted signal - verbal or non-verbal or both, can be a product of multiple intentions. So, one basic problem in communication is that the meaning which is actually received and perceived by the listener may not be exactly intended by the speaker. The obvious result therefore is a wrong assumption, misunderstanding, confusion and even mistrust. While only 26.98% (17 participants) of them claimed to have understood the longer sentences spoken by the teacher teaching online, it is obvious that most of the learners had problems in coping with the speed of communication and intensions of the teacher teaching online.

Joseph P. Boyle in his paper 'Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension' listed some speaker factors that also affect listening comprehension. To him, the language ability of the speaker (native or non-native speaker); his or her pronunciation, accent, variation, voice, etc. along with speed of delivery, prestige and personality may not match with that of the listener's language orientation(Boyle, 1984). Now pronunciation might not be a major problem for the learners here, but many research participants had complained of poor internet connectivity which in turn prevented them to listen, to comprehend, to restore and to react.

To understand how far network connectivity had affected the teaching learning process especially during live online classes, most learners especially from remote rural locations of Nadia district of West Bengal, India, are asked to keep note of their internet connectivity speed while listening to their teacher teaching online.

The average internet connectivity during online classes at various remote villages of Nadia district of West Bengal, India, remained to be 69.1 kb/s. While the highest speed recorded was 121 kb/s the lowest was as low as 1.82 kb/s. soon the internet connectivity speed fell below 21 kb/s, learners complained of paused video and no voice sounds. Teachers on the other hand experienced repeated leaving and joining of online classes by the learners.

6. Conclusion

During this Covid situation, where learners had no other choice but to adapt to this new normal of doing live online classes, we fear teaching and learning might not have gone effectively especially at various remote villages of West Bengal, India.

For an effective accomplishment of teaching learning process, efficient listening is a must for the learners listening to teachers teaching online. But the study showed that majority of the total research population could not be attentive while receiving the aural as well as the visual stimuli, thus could not comprehend the information delivered during online teaching nor could perceive the intension of the teacher teaching. Eventually the restoration of the information and the intension of the speaker could not be possible and thus neither could ask questions or respond to the questions of the teacher asked online after the teaching gets over. And only few of them claimed to have effectively listened to the teacher teaching online.

At the very personal level learners faced difficulties in adapting themselves to this new normal – attaining live online classes using mobile phones; they often experienced gap between their listening and thinking speed and hardly could understand longer sentences spoken by the teacher teaching online.

Last, but not the least, majority of the learners located at the remote villages of Nadia district of West Bengal, India, faced problems of poor internet connectivity which in turn prevented them to listen, to comprehend, to restore and to react. For the low internet connectivity speed, while learners complained of paused video and no voice sounds, teachers on the other hand experienced repeated leaving and joining of online classes by the learners.

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