

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1.INTRODUCTION

This chapter is going to discuss the background of the study. First, it will discuss the evolution of e-learning and the integration of technology in education in general and higher education in Bangladesh in particular. Next, it will highlight the hurdles being faced by Bangladeshi educational institutions in implementing distance education. The current state of university enrolment and job scenario in Bangladesh will also be discussed to stress the point that blended education can be effective in removing these problems to a great extent. The problems being faced by Bangladeshi universities in offering face-to-face education and full online education will also be highlighted in this chapter. The objectives, research questions, and contribution of the study will be discussed too in this chapter.

1.2. Background of the Study

While discussing the background of the study, it is important to give a short description about the evolution of online education in the world, use of technology in education in Bangladesh because the research topic is closely related with the use application of technology in education.

Evolution of Online Education

The history of online education dates back over a century. In 1840, Isaac Pitman, the father of distance education, started the first distance education program, a correspondence course in shorthand (Kentnor, 2015). This mode of education continued as correspondence courses with more institutions joining the movement. These forms of distance education went on growing rapidly, and it was in the 1920s when technology started to develop and at that time distance education transformed from correspondence courses to radio and television-based ones (Kentoer, 2015). With new innovations in technology, other mediums were applied to advance distance education. By the 1980s, distance education was no longer a simple correspondence course based on only print, radio, or television and accessible only to a few. Distance education provided cheaper courses than on-campus courses and started to reach students not able to attend in-person classes (Kentnor, 2015). “Over the last 150 years, and through a variety of technological advances, distance education has continued to transform higher education.” (Bower & Hardy, 2004, p. 11). However, the Internet floated the idea of web-based instruction and different online learning.

Distance education is a method of teaching where the students and teachers are physically apart. It can use a merge of technologies, such as correspondence, audio, video, computer, and the Internet (Roffe, 2004). Today’s version of distance education is an online education, which uses computers and the Internet as the delivery method with at least 80% of the course materials given online (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005).

Online education is a form of distance education with computers and the Internet as the delivery mechanism (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). The use of computers in education started in the corporate field during the 1980s as companies used computer-dependent programs to train novice employees (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). In 1989 the University of Phoenix started using CompuServe, one of the first consumer online services (The University of Phoenix, n. d.). Shortly thereafter, in 1991, the World Wide Web (Web) was unveiled, with the University of Phoenix becoming one of the first to provide online education programs via the Internet.

The University of Phoenix's move toward online educational programs prompted many reputable institutions and not-for-profit colleges and universities to follow suit (Carlson & Carnevale, 2001). The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (Foundation), a reputable philanthropic, not-for-profit institution, initiated the Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) in 1992 to explore educational alternatives for those unable to attend in-person classes in the classroom (Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, n. d.). The vision and efficacy of this new medium of distance education were apparent, so within a short time experts entered the market. Universities and colleges began working on online courses in the early to mid-1990s. In October of 1998, New York University (NYU), already operating one of the largest continuing education schools in the country, was the first big non-profit university to start a for-profit online education subsidiary, named NYU Online. All of these attempts to use ICT in teaching and learning are now covered within the wider term e-learning (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

In the beginning, there was a huge conceptual disagreement regarding the differences between e-learning, online learning, and distance learning (Moore et al., 2011). Nichols (2003) sees e-learning as online learning which is completely facilitated by the internet, to be accessed by using technological and web-based and web capable tools with the application of IT and the internet in education to make it easier and more efficient (Pham & Huynh, 2017). On the other hand, Ellis (2004) gives an “extended concept of e-learning that includes offline methods of distributing learning contents through CD-ROM, audio and videotapes, satellite broadcast and even interactive television.” (Benson et al., 2002; Clark, 2002). Hence, from a broad perspective, any use of well-known and acceptable computer technologies in learning can be deemed as e-learning (Fallon & Brown, 2016). This inclusive approach covers the specialized subsets of e-learning such as mobile -learning with mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers (Shuler et al., 2013). Clark and Mayer (2016) say, “In fact, any instruction delivered on a digital device such as a desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet or smartphone which is intended to support learning, falls under the purview of e-learning.” There are various names for e-learning platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), course management systems, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), or even knowledge management systems (Khan, 2001; Nichols, 2003; Spector, 2007; Wilen-Daugenti, 2009).

Virtual Learning Environment is a forerunner of e-learning (Britain & Liber, 1999). It is a learning management system that enables interaction between students and teachers in a "closed environment" to support learning. Since its popularity has increased over the past few years, certain VLEs now allow for the integration of additional

institutional information platforms. Examples of VLEs include Moodle, an open-source learning platform developed in Australia, and Blackboard, a commercial learning platform with its origins in the United States of America (Britain & Liber, 2004). The introduction of these VLEs reflects the growth of e-learning as a platform for learning and teaching.

Many nations implemented national programs to include e-learning in education after realizing the importance of the technology (Asgarkhani, 2004). The UK Government established its strategy on e-learning for the nation and declared that there is potential for revolutionizing learning and teaching through e-learning in their consultation document "Towards a Unified e-learning Strategy" published in July 2003. Universities all across the world are adopting the online form of instruction in this approach to "grow their student intake, quality of education, and image" (Asgarkhani, 2004). According to a recent story in The Chronicle of Higher Education, online learning methods have proliferated in recent years at prestigious colleges, including numerous IVY League institutions in the US. They have been utilizing digital learning tools and methods more widely (ICEF Monitor, 2015).

Presently, using VLEs for online education is the pinnacle of using technology to teach a larger group of people who live anywhere, at any time, and of any age. Despite the fact that online and blended learning are increasingly popular worldwide, Bangladesh is still trailing behind other nations in this area. Despite the enormous potential, there is a glaring lack of online, hybrid, or e-learning techniques in Bangladeshi colleges.

Use of Technology in Education of Bangladesh

The concept of using technology for distance and online education has drawn the attention of the policymakers and educationists of Bangladesh much later than in other countries. Like National University, Bangladesh Open University was established in 1992 to widen access to higher education. As the only distance education provider in Bangladesh, the Open University plays a significant role in providing educational opportunities for underserved populations in rural areas (Trines, 2019). The 46 public universities of Bangladesh are operating in a traditional system in brick-and-mortar campus. There are also 95 private universities in the country, but among them no universities offer distance and online education side-by-side classroom mode. None of them are able to hone on the blessing of ICTs at the maximum level to offer education to all classes of people across the country (Karim, 2014).

Though the primary and secondary education sectors are getting ICT support from the government, the higher education sectors are still not drawing the adequate attention of the authority. To survive in this competitive world, universities are trying to cope with ICT but the colleges are suffering still (Hossain et al., 2016). Many universities in Asia offer online courses in science, engineering, social sciences, business, economics, and contemporary subjects. Universities in Bangladesh except for Bangladesh Open University (BOU) and Bangabandhu Digital University (BDU) are yet to offer any distance and online programs (Hassan, 2020). Bangabondhu Digital University established in 2019 is the first-ever complete digital public university in Bangladesh to promote online, distance and virtual learning in Bangladesh. The university also has a MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses Platform). Through this platform, the university offers several online courses towards a large number of learners (Islam, 2019).

Except these two universities, some organizations supported by government and private organizations are working to spread online and distance education in informal way. For example, Muktopaath is a government project that provides distance learning opportunities. 10 Minute School is the largest Bangladeshi platform for online and distance learning, offering both academic and professional courses. VSDS, Shikhhok.com, and Shikhhok Batayan offer free courses in Bengali, but there is a lack of quality and management. VSDS offers 10 courses on ICT, tourism, electrical and construction, Shikhhok.com offers free courses in ICT, technology, and a number of academic and non-academic subjects, and Shikhhok Batayan offers free courses in education and teaching. But all these programs are non-formal and not recognized by the University Grants Commission. Most of the platforms that have been discussed above offer courses in Bengali. This is a good reason for their gaining wide popularity. However, the number of online platforms is not enough yet to meet the demand of the population. In addition, there is a lack of quality and management in the courses (Islam, 2019).

In addition to these initiatives, sporadic attempts have been there to make the use of technology popular at all levels of the Bangladeshi education sector. There are multimedia classrooms in 4,500 primary and 33,000 secondary and higher secondary level institutions and 20,000 computer labs have been set up in the educational institutions. 37,000 teachers have been given training in Information and Computer Technology in the year 2017-18. Computer subject has been made compulsory in secondary and higher secondary levels (Rashid, 2019). But the scenario of the use of technology in higher education is still not satisfactory.

Bangladesh can be considered a potential country for blended education in terms of the overall general use of computers. In a country of 161.4 million people, the number of internet users is 103.253 million, according to newly released data from the country's regulator, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). Of them, 95.16 million use it through mobile phone networks (Mingas, 2020). Access to Information (A 2 I), a program under the Prime Minister's Office in cooperation with the British Council has opened a portal named 'Teacher's Window' for sharing digital content among primary, high school and college level teachers. 1500 computer laboratories have been established in non-government colleges. Educational institutions have created their own websites. Web TV and Radio of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) run many Distance courses for the non- institutional students. So, it can be said that realizing the importance of using technology in education, some efforts are there to integrate technology with education (Rashid, 2019).

The Education Policy of 2010 focused on upholding the international standard in higher education, integration of technology to facilitate education, women's education, and vocational education (Dutta & Islam, 2017, p. 67). The reform of education is essential to make university graduates skilled for the 21st-century competitive job market. In the 21st century, our graduates need to be not only skilled in technology, but also to be capable of updating themselves with the changing technology. So, now the necessity of Up-skilling, Re-skilling, and Cross-skilling has been felt more than ever before. These skills are important not only for getting jobs but also retaining them (Habib, 2019). The integration of technology with teaching-learning is inevitable to improve the employability skills of the university graduates of Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world.

The use of technology imbues the learners with motivation, ensures learning achievement and satisfaction, and develops interpersonal and collaborative skills. The use of technology in online and blended learning method is deemed helpful to develop students' technological, social and analytical skills.

Since blended learning as a version of e-learning has become popular, it is relevant to discuss the evolution of e-learning or distance learning in Bangladesh with emphasis on the contribution of Bangladesh Open University (BOU), the only provider of distance higher education and one of the world's biggest universities having above 500,000 students. Bangladesh Open University provides remote learning opportunities through audio cassettes, radio and TV broadcasts, and the internet, and Master's, Bachelors, and certificate programs. All of BOU's courses will soon be delivered online. Bangladesh Open University, the sole institution in Bangladesh offering remote learning, is crucial in bringing education to previously underserved populations in rural areas (Trines, 2019). BOU provides tertiary education and vocational training in areas, like agriculture, business, education, arts, science, and technology. The BOU has 6 academic schools, 79 academic programs, 12 regional resource centers (RRCs), 80 local centers (LCs), and more than 1500 teaching centers (TCs) across the country. It also has 137 full-time teachers and 28916 adjunct teachers (BOU Website). BOU mainly relies on the correspondence model- hard copy-based delivery method. The non-print delivery technologies are used as a complementary to hard copy-based delivery (Al-Masum & Chowdhury, 2013). In spite of the drawbacks, BOU programs are gradually becoming popular.

Since its establishment, students were rapidly increasing at BOU, which indicates the high demand for distance higher education and its acceptability in Bangladesh (Islam, 2012; Rahman, et al, 2005). Present enrollment at BOU is more than half a million. The total number of students admitted in 1992 was only 5,000. According to a survey by the University Grants Commission (UGC), BOU's education is superior to that of all other public universities in Bangladesh in terms of costs per student, male-female student and teacher-student ratios, and earnings from own sources (UGC, 2010, pp. 15–16, 44, 130).

Side by side, face-to-face teaching in the classroom allows more scope for interactions between learners and teachers in BOU. Therefore, it can be said that the scope for face-to-face teaching-learning at the regional tutorial centers at the weekends is a kind of boost for the BOU students because they have a feeling of connectedness with their teachers.

The passing out rate of BOU is also satisfactory. The average pass rate of students in both the traditional public universities and BOU is also the same (University Grants Commission, 2010). BOU students come from a variety of professions, from high-ranking government officials to lower-ranking workers, or unemployed young men and women or housewives. The number of students from the village is more than those of the urban areas. Two major demerits of BOU are the use of inflexible media of e-learning, and the exorbitant delay in publishing results within the academic calendar.

Despite the popularity of e-learning in promoting distance education in Bangladesh, there are some problems with its implementation at the tertiary level in Bangladesh (Kamal & Sultana, 2002; Mahmud, 2010). They are the following:

Inadequate faculty members who are experts in e-learning. A tendency toward the 'Conventionalization of the Distance Learning System' is noticed sometimes. Access to ICT and devices is very scanty in Bangladesh because of economic hardships. Delay in the design and creation of e-learning materials and their proper disbursement to the students is another important issue. Financial problems of parents; lack of infrastructure, such as power and internet in many places of the country, and the lack of funds and other logistics at universities to develop their computer laboratories are other significant factors. Good research and assessment activities are very poor in terms of quality e-learning for distance education at BOU in particular. The perception of many people about the quality of distance education provided by BOU is also not positive. The lack of Government sponsorship for BOU in comparison with other public universities is mentioned as a major reason for its slow progress too (Al-Masum & Chowdhury, 2013).

In spite of these drawbacks, online education still has a strong potential for the Bangladeshi higher education sector as an alternative mode of education to face-to-face method. Considering the immense popularity of distance education by the BOU and the present scenario of limited opportunity in its delivery of education, it can be said that there is similarly a good prospect for blended education in Bangladesh provided that it is formally recognized by the government.

Despite the lack of institutional attention and patronization from the government, the necessity of online education has been recognized recently more than ever before during the Covid-19 pandemic. Keeping this Covid-19 pandemic situation apart, Bangladesh should go for online education for a number of practical reasons. The need

for online education is much more in Bangladesh considering the following realities: high rent of urban households for rural students, intolerable traffic jams in the big cities, and social conservatism regarding women's education (Sohail, 2018). But there is a negative perception among people of all classes of society including the policy-makers regarding online education at all levels. The negative perception centers around issues like the quality of these degrees, and the lack of students' engagement with the teachers. The other challenges might be the limited scope of the curriculum, the unreliable system of testing, recognition of certificates, costs, and the lack of other logistic support (Sohail, 2018). Against the backdrop of these problems, blended learning is assumed to open opportunities for higher education and skill development for young people because there is the scope for face-to-face meetings with teachers in the blended learning mode.

University Enrolment and Job Scenario of Bangladesh

To see the prospects of blended and online education in the Bangladeshi higher education sector, it is pertinent to understand the scenario of university enrolment in Bangladesh. Bangladesh experienced a good rise in university admission over the last twenty years or so. Total enrolment at the tertiary level has increased nearly three times since 2000 and that was over two million students in 2012. The 2020 annual report of the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh mentions that 43,62,187 students were enrolled in higher education institutions in Bangladesh including public-private universities, the National University, Bangladesh Open University and madrasa (Islamic tertiary education institutions). Bangladesh Open University teaches 6,00,000 students

through distance mode (Ahmed, 2022). But side by side with that growth, the total admission percentage is quite low, that is, only 13.23% of higher secondary graduates were admitted into higher education in 2012, in comparison with 24.80% in India or 26.70% in China for that particular year. In spite of the overall rise in admission since 2000, indicates rapid rise in the demand for higher education (ICEF Monitor, 2015). The British Council predicts that Bangladesh including Nigeria, the Philippines, Turkey, and Ethiopia will see an increase in higher education enrolment by the next decade. National tertiary admission is predicted to rise by more than 700,000 students through 2022, culminating in the total number at three million by that point (ICEF Monitor, 2015). But this huge increase in the number of students cannot be accommodated by the existing number of higher education institutions. That demand may be partially fulfilled by the online and blended education.

Similarly, the job prospects for university graduates are not satisfactory because the unemployment rate of university graduates is higher than in many developing countries. In Bangladesh, nearly 2 million job-seekers join the job market every year. Though a huge number of students graduate from these universities and colleges, their quality is not up to the standard. Their soft skills, such as technological skills, and interpersonal skills, i.e., communication skills are underdeveloped. So, a huge number of graduates remain unemployed whereas a significant number of foreign people are engaged in the Bangladeshi job market. In 2019, a World Bank report showed that one in every three students is without employment after graduation and only 19 percent of college passed-out graduates are engaged in full-time or temporary jobs while the rest remains unemployed (Khan, 2020). The employers blame the local graduates for the lack

of the appropriate skills owing to the faulty higher education system and they must be equipped with skills to fill up the mismatch (Islam, & Uddin, 2019). A kind of structural imbalance exists in our domestic labor market; our people working abroad are also engaged in low-paid odd jobs. So, Islam (2007) says, “The education system is simply producing some types of graduates who are not needed by the labor market” (cited in Chisty et al., 2007).

The situation is worse for the graduates of the National University, which is the biggest university in terms of student enrolment. A World Bank study has found that 46 percent of graduates from the National University remain unengaged up to at least three years after completing their graduation. This university is the controlling body for all the public and private colleges providing higher education. More than 1.8 million students consisting of 68 percent of the total students at higher education level, are currently admitted in these colleges, the study said, quoting Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) data. While interviewed, almost half of the 235 employers suggested that colleges should concentrate on developing problem-solving skills and collaborative skills to develop the all-rounded quality of these college graduates. They also suggest that colleges intensify training on ‘ICT, English language skills and communication skills’ (Habib, 2019). ‘National Education Policy 2010’ of Bangladesh also calls for up-gradation of curriculum and teaching and teachers’ skill enhancement where ICT will be an effective tool (Ministry of Education, National Education Policy, Bangladesh, 2010). The blended learning using technology for teaching learning is assumed to enhance the technological and other employment skills of the university graduates.

As said earlier, the perception of common people regarding online education is not positive. Online education has not been heartily accepted and welcome by policy-makers in the government as well. Up until recently, no other universities—public or private—had received permission from the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) to offer any online or hybrid courses in Bangladesh. It continues to be unwilling to permit any institution other than BOU to offer a portion of its degree programs online (Sohail, 2018). So, when neither the regulatory body of higher education, UGC nor the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh is supportive of online education, the negative perception among people about online education is sure to pervade. The negative perception of online education in Bangladesh accrues from a number of reasons, such as no direct contact with teachers, low quality of education, non-achievement of learning outcomes, cheating in examinations, and so on. However, face-to-face instruction is also limited in Bangladeshi universities by a number of logistical issues, including the lack of seats in public universities, the lack of classroom space and accommodations for students, the high cost of education in private universities, traffic congestion in major cities, and session backlogs as a result of political unrest.

In the backdrop of the problems associated with both full online and face-to-face education in Bangladeshi public and private universities, an alternative mode of education that has already gained popularity across the world as an effective method of education, can be a viable solution for higher education. There is also the negative perception of people in Bangladesh about the quality of online education, and the nation witnessed the failure of Bangladeshi public universities in providing online education during Coved-19. Hence, my study will try to investigate the prospects of blended learning as an alternative

method of education for universities in view of the structural problems prevailing in universities. It will also investigate the experiences of undergraduate students doing an English Writing Skill course in the blended method.

1.3. Problem Statements

This section will discuss the prospects of blended education in the Bangladeshi higher education sector. During the Covid-19, the usefulness and necessity of online education have been felt more than ever before in the Bangladeshi education sector. But there was an utter failure in operating online education by universities during the first couple of months into lockdown. Though a cognizable number of private universities could start online education by the first couple of months into lockdown, the public ones except a few failed to do it. There were a number of impediments like the digital divide, lack of infrastructural preparation on the part of public universities, teachers' lack of interest, and the absence of any kind of obligation on public universities from the Ministry of Education and University Grants Commission. These studies investigated the problems of switching to online education at that critical time. Teachers and students were unfamiliar with online learning platforms, and they needed to become familiar with developing technologies and meet the technical criteria for integrating those technologies into their teaching and learning environments (Ngao et al., 2022). The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic lockdown exposed educational system inequalities, including those between rural and urban students, public and private university students and teachers, males and females, and lab and field-based disciplines versus other disciplines (Shohel et

al., 2021). It also highlighted the particular effects of inequities on online teaching and learning. For instance, because of their socioeconomic circumstances, many students do not have access to the necessary resources to take online courses and access digital learning materials (Rouf, et al., 2022).

There was 'systematic' or 'structural' prejudice against students who chose not to take part in online learning activities. Due to their low socioeconomic circumstances, many students lack an adequate learning space or environment at home (Ahmed, 2021). Additionally, a sizeable portion of students live in rural areas without access to either power or the internet (Shohel, et al., 2021). Bangladesh responded to the Covid-19 pandemic-related emergency crisis more reluctantly than other regions of the world. (Babu, et al., 2022).

So, firstly, my research aims to discuss these problems of switching to online education during the recent Covid-19 pandemic in particular and the usefulness of blended learning as a solution to them and the efficacy of this method in the 21st century. Secondly, to investigate whether a blended learning can be an effective alternative to face-to-face and online education in the present education context of Bangladesh, a course in English Writing Skills was designed and conducted in a blended format to investigate the participants' experiences with the course. Thirdly, our public universities have been encumbered with a number of problems such as the crisis of seats and accommodation, session backlog, inflexible education and so on. Again, the tuition fees in private universities are much higher than the public ones. So, against the backdrop of this scenario, my assumption is that blended education may become an effective

alternative to online and in-person education for the universities of Bangladesh.

Considering this scenario, I have outlined three main problems for my investigation:

1. The effectiveness of blended learning as an effective learning method in the 21st Century.
2. The experiences of teachers and students with blended learning in an English Writing Course.
3. The prospects of blended learning to increase learning opportunities in Bangladeshi Universities.

The research problems have been shown through a diagram below.

Implementation of Blended Learning Method in Bangladeshi Higher Education Sector

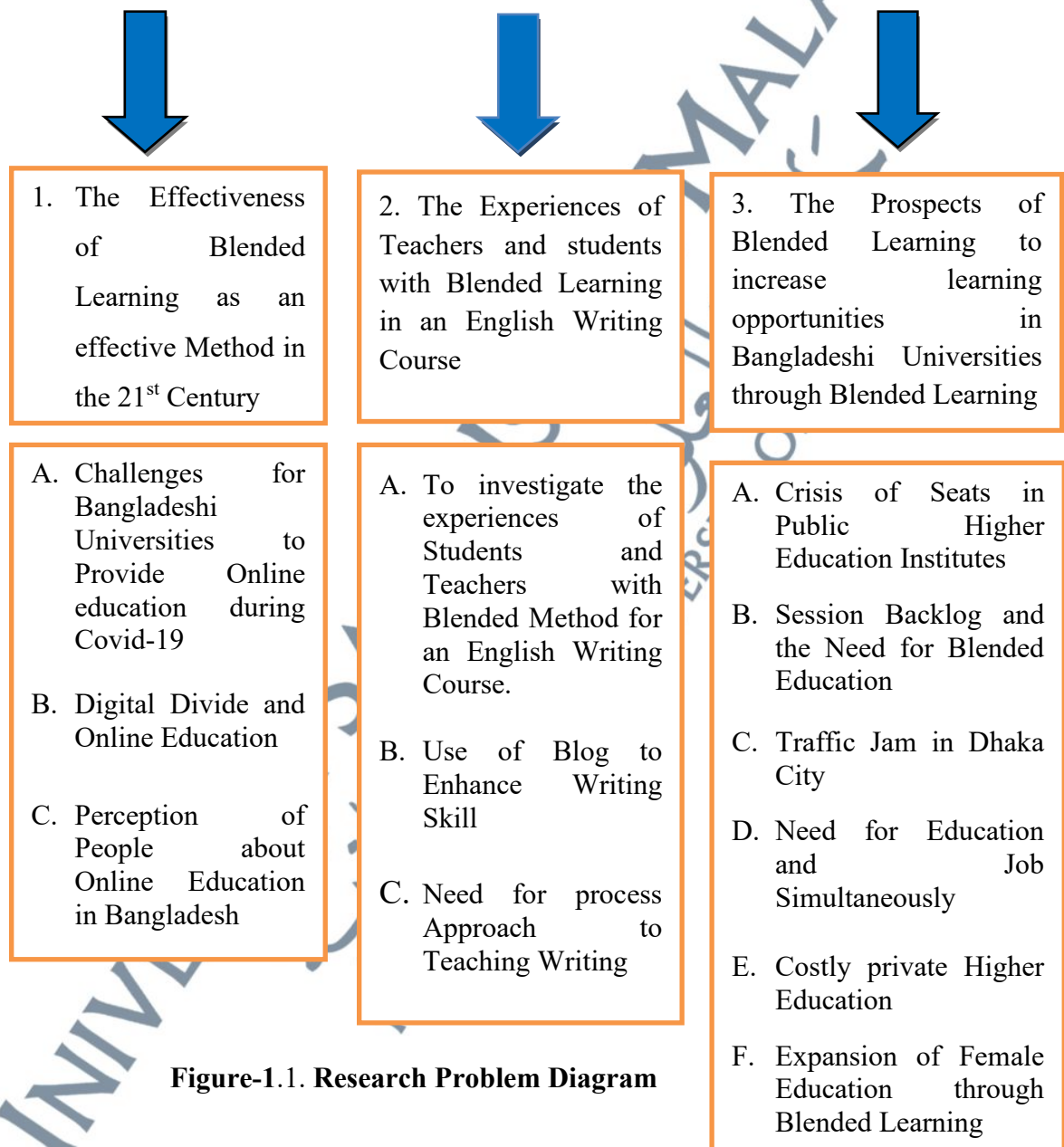


Figure-1.1. Research Problem Diagram

Research Problem-I

The first problem statement highlights the difficulties that online education has faced recently, specifically during the Covid-19. The discussion will focus on how Bangladeshi citizens and policymakers view online education, and it will conclude with a discussion of the country's current supportive technological infrastructure that can facilitate technology-based education, the blended method.

Though online education has gained popularity across the world in recent years and most importantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not without disadvantages. A number of studies Marciniak (2018); Yukselturk et al. (2014); Horvat et al. (2015) mention the weaknesses of online classes such as retention of students (Yukselturk, et al., 2014), learners' isolation and less social interaction with other students; reduced student-instructor interaction and cheating in the assessment (Horvat et al. (2015), lack of training for teachers, stress for students, limited teacher-student interaction, high dropout rate and digital divide in the developing and the underdeveloped countries. The same scenario is prevailing in Bangladesh too.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic starting in February 2020 in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world, Bangladesh also initially witnessed nine-month-long continual lockdowns of all kinds of educational institutions. More than 5,000 institutions of higher learning in Bangladesh, including public and private universities, affiliated colleges, and training facilities, were closed for nine months or longer, which deprived four million tertiary students (Ahmed, 2020). Only three public universities out of 46 were able to

offer online courses after the Covid-19 shutdown had been in place for the first couple of months (Abdullah, 2020).

Similarly, only about one-fourth out of a total of around 95 running private universities have started online teaching during the first couple of months of lockdown through platforms like Google Meet, Zoom or Discord (Ahmed, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the limitations of technology-based education capability and the critical technological divide in the country. The lack of online course materials, more interactivity and learning platforms is conspicuously prevailing in all institutions of higher learning (Ahmed, 2020).

The public universities in Bangladesh completely failed at the transition due to a lack of institutional readiness and a national strategy from the UGC and the Ministry of Education to address this issue, even though the private universities were required to conduct instruction online (Mortuza, 2020). Regarding the introduction of online education during the corona epidemic, the UGC has demonstrated a lack of tenacity and consistency in decision-making.

Apart from the readiness of the universities and government, the digital divide prevailing in Bangladesh was a huge obstacle to the easy switch to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The biggest causes of the limited participation in online classes in rural and distant places, especially for those from low-income families, are a poor or no internet connection and expensive mobile data (Jashim & Sajid, 2020). In this scenario of the financial and digital divide, the blended method can be a suitable option for universities, and, therefore, the lack of these devices and internet facilities can be

minimized to a considerable degree because there is the scope for in-person classes in the blended method.

There is also a perception among people that online education does not ensure student satisfaction because in this mode students cannot acquire knowledge in the presence and with the guidance of their teachers. The lack of synchronous interaction in online learning affects learning and teaching, and hence, the quality of skills of the students (Arviso, 2019). Due to this negative perception, the majority of teachers of public universities in Bangladesh did not conduct online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic though they were provided with internet at a subsidized price (Chottogram bishwbidalaye mathro chobbish jon baro jibi internet babohar koreche, 2021, 18 Jan).

In addition to the unwillingness of teachers and students to do online classes during the Covid-19, the negative perception of the policymakers and higher authorities in universities, about online education is a strong impediment to introducing online education. In this context, as the blended learning mode keeps scope for a considerable portion of face-to-face teaching and learning, it can remove the long-held prejudice regarding distance and online education to a great extent. As a solution to that misconception, an alternative mode of education, i.e., the blended method, if implemented with efficiency and quality, can become a similarly effective method like the face-to-face method.

The participants of my study have a long time of experience with face-to-face education. They have also got experience with online education during the Covid 19 but they do not have any experience with the blended learning method. So, it is imperative to investigate the experiences of my samples with blended education. Therefore, a blended

course was offered to the participants of this study to investigate their experiences with the three modes of education, i.e., face-to-face, online and blended method, and also to investigate whether the blended method will ensure the same level of student achievement, satisfaction, and outcome for the students as the face-to-face method.

In contrast to the frustrating scenario regarding the failure to provide online education by universities during Covid-19, it can be said that in Bangladesh, there are some efforts to integrate technology into higher education. These provide a lot of potential for blended education. To enhance the use of ICT in higher education in Bangladesh, Government of Bangladesh has installed computers, LAN, and reliable high-speed internet lines in higher education institutions to produce efficient professionals competent to access the global knowledge resource (Chowdhury, et al., 2018). So, it is expedient to exploit the current expansion of the ICT infrastructure of Bangladesh to promote e-learning for online and blended education at the higher education level of Bangladesh. (Al-Masum & Chowdhury, 2013).

Research Problem II

Problem statement 2 will discuss the experiences of students and teachers with the blended method for an English writing course. It will also discuss whether a writing blog can become an effective platform to teach writing to tertiary-level students through the process approach instead of the traditional product approach.

Like face-to-face education, blended education is assumed to ensure the same level of achievement, satisfaction, and motivation among tertiary-level students (Osgerby, 2013), (Horvat, et al., 2015). So, my study has investigated the experiences of the

teachers and students of a university doing an English Writing Course in the blended method. To investigate the efficacy of the blended method, I operated a blog where the students could post their essays, give feedback, and correct their mistakes according to peer and teacher feedback. The essays received continuous feedback and guidance from peers and teachers before the final submission.

From my experiences of teaching English writing skills at the undergraduate level, I observed that many students are still keen on considering writing skills from the product approach perspective by following the traditional approach where the topics are provided by the teachers in the classroom and the students are required to write without any prewriting discussion. The students do not even get into reading and incorporating research while they try to produce their compositions. Later on the teachers assess the essays and put numerical scores with some comments for improvements, but these essays are never rechecked and reevaluated to find if any improvement did take place (Pervin, & Siraj (2023). When Bangladeshi students reach the more advanced stages of their education particularly in private universities, they face different challenges in their writing skills. So, the universities require them to do few composition courses to improve their writing skills to better equip them with their desired courses and degrees (Hasan & Akhand, 2011; Hasan, 2011). Though these institutions have a variety of approaches to teaching, they mostly follow product-oriented approach while teaching writing courses (Hasan & Akhand, 2011; Hasan, 2011; Munira, 2017).

Research shows that at tertiary level, using blog as a technology tool to teach process approach of writing skill positively helps students create, update and share their

ideas and thoughts frequently (Arslan, Sahin-Kizi, 2010). As a process approach, blogging is a forum where blog members are engaged in discussion in the blogosphere and they can edit, delete and publish their posts with utmost flexibility as a blog owner. In process approaches to writing, feedback plays an important role in empowering learner-autonomy and also actively involving them in the feedback activities (Mendoca & Johnson, 1994). Academics and researchers have been working for decades to include weblogs into their teaching methodologies in order to teach writing and to instill enthusiasm for writing in students (e.g., Lin et al., 2011; Richardson, 2009; Wang, 2014).

Ahmed's (2018) 14-week experiment with a group of university students in Bangladesh doing academic writing found that blog writing affected their attitudes toward writing and found similar efficacy like the face-to-face writing classes. So, with that objective in focus, I designed a blended course to investigate if it is possible to develop writing skills by using blogs like the face-to-face teaching-learning method. The use of blogs for teaching and learning occupies a significant place in the conduct of the whole blended course in my study. So, it is important to investigate the effectiveness and contribution of this platform to the writing skill development of the participants. After the completion of the three-month long blended course using blog as a writing platform, I investigated the experience of the participants with this platform of writing.

Research Problem III

Research problem 3 has been discussed from the perspective of problems that prevail in Bangladeshi universities and the potential that the blended method could open for the tertiary level education of Bangladesh by solving these problems. The problems are seat crises, session backlog, and traffic jams in big cities, lack of flexibility in education, high tuition fees in private universities and the need for more women's education.

The number of students who pass the Higher Secondary Examinations (HSC) each year exceeds the capacity of Bangladesh's public universities. In Bangladesh, the majority of students and parents still prefer public universities to private universities. In 2015, 32 public universities were unable to admit over 95% of students with Higher Secondary Certifications (HSC) and equivalent certificates due to a seat shortage. In the 32 public universities, excluding the National University and the Bangladesh Open University, little more than 17 applicants competed for each available seat (Trines, 2019). Online programs give the opportunity to acquire a degree to those people who might not otherwise be able to do so owing to their financial situation, a lack of available seats, or the university's inadequate infrastructure.

Classroom accommodations and residential amenities in all Bangladeshi public university dorms are crucial problems. Online education could be a solution to this problem. But the problem is that e-learning and full online education are not well-supported by the government. Government sponsorship is much lower in BOU than in any other public university in Bangladesh (Al-Masum & Chowdhury, 2013). So, in the backdrop of limited resources and fund allocation for e-learning and online learning, the demand for quality higher education could be well fulfilled by the blended mode of

education. If online or blended methods were introduced, more students could access these scarce resources (Noor, 2020).

A serious issue in Bangladesh's public universities is the backlog of sessions happening as a result of on-campus political turmoil and delays in the results announcement. With a session backlog, it takes public university students seven or eight years to finish their four-year graduate degree (Wadud, 2013). The backlog in session scheduling has severe financial repercussions. In order for a student to complete graduation and post-graduate, a significant amount of additional money is spent by both the government and the parents due to session backlog, according to Sarkar and Hossain (2016). According to their estimates, engineering universities had the highest session backlog-related additional cost per student (BDT 230,801), followed by agriculture universities (BDT 211,846), general universities (BDT 209,794), and science and technology universities (BDT 209,793). (BDT 179,293) (Sarkar & Hossain, 2016). So, blended learning is assumed to play an important role in alleviating this problem because it facilitates a considerable portion of education through distance mode which allows 30-50% of classes to be held online which would reduce pressure on time, space, and resources. So, in case the educational institutions cannot be made fully capable of offering online education and cannot run face-to-face education, they can at least work to continue education with proper rationing of online and offline delivery, i.e. blended method during any emergency and pandemic. It would help to remove the problem of a complete shutdown of educational institutions in the event of natural emergencies, pandemics and other precarious situations as was seen during the recent Covid-19.

In addition, Bangladeshi city-dwellers are plagued by the persistent threat of traffic bottlenecks. According to MCCI & CMILT (2010), traffic jams caused people to lose 8.15 million working hours, of which 40% are business hours. Another study by the World Bank and the Accident Research Institute of the Bangladesh University of Technology (BU ET) reveals that the average speed in Dhaka city in 2007 was 21 kilometers per hour. In 2022, this has reduced to 4.8 kilometers. The financial loss of this road congestion is 50 thousand crores (one crore equals 10 million) tk. (Dhaka sohere traffic jam somadhan: sorkar vul othe hache, 2022, April 06).

Dhaka is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, with a density of 23,234 people per square kilometer within a total area of 300 square kilometers. Its population is growing at a rate of about 4.2% annually. (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/dhaka-population>). From among the 151 universities (public and private), almost 50 % are located in Dhaka city and they are attracting a huge number of tertiary students to the already crowded Dhaka city. So, if people get employment, health and education facilities in their own area, the movement of people to Dhaka will dramatically reduce (Chakraborty, 2016). By doing a blended course, students will attend classes on 1/2 day in a week, and on the remaining days, they will attend classes online. As a result, migration to big cities will significantly reduce.

In Bangladesh, tuition fees in private universities are exorbitant for aspiring youths. The scope of education loans for students either from public or private sources is also scarce. As a result, many aspiring youths cannot pursue their higher education because they cannot pay their tuition fees. So, it is assumed that if the blended course

were there in the universities, they would be able to pursue higher education and job simultaneously.

In Bangladesh, the female dropout rate in tertiary-level education is also very high for factors like early marriage, early childbirth, insecurity, and conservatism regarding female education in the country. Islam and Pavel's (2014) study found that out of 18 female dropouts, 14 have dropped out due to marriage. So, it is assumed that blended learning would reduce this female dropout in tertiary education because more women would be able to continue their higher education through the blended method than the face-to-face method even after marriage.

1.4. Research Questions

On the basis of the above-mentioned assumptions and problems, the following research questions have been formulated.

1. What is the effectiveness of blended learning in the Bangladeshi higher education sector in the 21st-century?
2. How do teachers and students experience English Writing courses at the undergraduate level through the blended method?
3. How can the blended method increase learning opportunities in Bangladeshi universities?

1.5. Objectives of the Research

The blended classroom model uses a learner-centered approach highlighting many changes to the learning environment and pedagogical methods. While this transition to an active learning model offers many benefits, there is a lack of empirical research and supportive literature for understanding this phenomenon in a Bangladeshi higher education context. The information gathered by conducting this case study will provide a basis for understanding the experience of those who will have transitioned to this model and its contributions to enhancing the learning experience of 21st-century students.

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Explore the effectiveness of using the blended learning method for Bangladeshi higher education in the 21st century.
2. Investigate the experiences of teachers and students with an English Writing Course in the blended method.
3. Find out the prospects of blended learning to increase learning opportunities in Bangladeshi universities.

1.6. Rationale of the Study

Given the difficulties in implementing full online education, such as the inability of Bangladeshi universities to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, public disapproval of online education, the digital divide, as well as the opportunities, such as connectivity with the Information Super Highway and the expansion of information and computer

technology in Bangladesh, it can be assumed that blended learning offers many opportunities for Bangladeshi higher education. As a result, my research will have a big impact on efforts to find a new teaching method for Bangladesh's higher education system.

The utilization of blended learning at the program level has never widely happened in Bangladeshi universities. The most popular kind of education is face-to-face education. In terms of student learning outcomes and satisfaction, blended learning is assumed to open up new opportunities for Bangladeshi universities. The age-old perception that face-to-face education is the only effective method of education needs to be reviewed and critiqued now. Research shows that the blended method, if properly and effectively implemented, can also be similarly effective as the face-to-face method in terms of achievement of higher-order learning outcomes, such as creativity, analytical skill, problem-solving skill, quality of learning, and student satisfaction. So, to test the assumptions, an EFL writing course was taught through blended learning mode to a group of university students that investigates their experiences with the course.

Then, having considered these big problems of Bangladeshi higher education, such as the crisis of seats and session backlog in public universities, traffic jams in big cities and the need for doing job and education at the same time by a huge number of young people, cost of private higher education and the need for the expansion of women education, blended learning is assumed to be a potential solution to higher education of Bangladesh. In order for a developing nation like Bangladesh to advance, it is expected that all citizens, not just a select group of wealthy individuals, should have access to

higher education. It should be available to everyone who wants to pursue it rather than just those who can afford to do so full-time. Therefore, blended learning might be a good choice to make higher education accessible to those who work part-time, and attend classes part-time. By advocating blended learning as an effective alternative for higher education, it can be argued that this study will have a positive impact on the delivery of higher education in Bangladesh. By advocating blended learning as a realistic alternative for those who would otherwise be unable to pursue higher education for their own benefit, it can be argued that this study will have a positive impact on the delivery of higher education in Bangladesh.

The current study is timely because it may give more light on how teachers and students view blended learning. As a result, policymakers, educators, and students will have a better grasp of how to incorporate blended learning into the curriculum. As a new and similarly efficacious mode of education as full online and face-to-face education, this mode of education will help to address the problems linked to these two modes of education. Thus, this study will have significant impacts not only on higher education delivery but also on the education sector of Bangladesh in general. It will also inform the academicians and teachers whether CoI, and I2 Flex Model can be applied together to increase the acceptance of blended learning, and hence, employment skills of university graduates. The study will be impactful upon the policy-makers and decision-makers in education by feeding them into decision-making processes as to how the blended learning method can solve a number of socio-economic and educational problems in Bangladeshi universities.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

This study has employed a qualitative research method especially, a case study involving a prolonged investigation. So, it is an impactful study in the area of blended learning at the higher education level of Bangladesh. A limitation might be that only 15 university students and the two instructors of the blended course were chosen as study participants. The study is based on the experiences of a group of brand-new learners taking a blended course and brand-new instructors who had no prior training or expertise in this kind of instruction. The current study does not include the respondents or another researcher in analyzing the data.

1.8. Operational Definition of Title Terms

Implementation -the execution of any plan, project and activity.

Blended Learning Approach- The two definitions of blended learning that are most frequently used in the literature are given by Graham (2006) and Garrison and Kanuka (2004). The definition of blended learning given by Graham (2006) is as follows: "Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction" (p. 5). Blended learning is described as "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) (p. 96).

Teaching- the profession of those who give instruction, especially in an elementary school or a secondary school or in a university(
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/teaching>).

English Writing Course- it is such a course through which learners develop their writing skills in English through extensive practice in vocabulary, mechanics, pragmatics, organization of ideas and finally producing a meaningful, correct write-up.

1.9. Conclusion

The background of the study discussed the evolution of online education, distance education and e-learning in general. Then it discussed the history of the integration of technology in education in Bangladesh, especially, the role of BOU in spreading distance education including its limitations. Then it discussed in brief, the scenario of unemployment among Bangladeshi university graduates as a result of the lack of graduate skills. So, it is assumed that blended learning where technology and constructivist educational philosophy are applied in teaching-learning, can play a positive role in developing graduate skills of Bangladeshi students. Problem statements discussed the roles of public and private universities in conducting online classes during the lockdown, UGC's role at that time, people's perception of online education in general, the prospects of blended learning, the experiential blended course for my study and finally the problems of higher education institutions in offering face-to-face education and the need for blended education as a solution to these problems.

The next chapter is the Literature Review section which will discuss the theoretical framework of this research, i.e., the Community of Inquiry, i2flex model, and their relation with blended learning. I have used research databases, such as ProQuest, and Google Scholar for a comprehensive literature search for this study. I have also used

keywords such as blended learning, online learning, e-learning, and English Writing Course used to find current literature and studies. The following topics: conceptual framework for blended learning environment, i2flex model of blended learning, definition and position of blended learning and its types, evolution of blended learning, previous literature on the blended learning in general and English language teaching in particular, use of blended learning method by universities around the world, challenges disadvantages of blended and online education, and the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing employment skills of the 21st century.