

Navigating communication challenges in the post-pandemic era: perspectives from teachers in a Philippine higher education institution

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Abstract - The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity for the education sector, particularly in higher education, to reconsider how they adapt to the post pandemic era. However, several challenges emerge, particularly regarding the communication between teachers and students. This study was undertaken to find out how teachers communicate with students and the communication challenges that they encountered in the post-pandemic period. A qualitative research approach was applied throughout the study, specifically the utilization of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The data gathered from nineteen (19) teachers was analyzed through thematic analysis. The coding cycle used was vivo coding, followed by eclectic coding and axial coding for refining codes. Responses revealed five specific challenges that was faced by the teachers: (1) pandemic impact on students' attitudes and learning (2) language and communication barriers, (3) technological challenges in education, (4) lack of infrastructures building gaps in classroom environment, and (5) teachers' preparedness and effectiveness. It is significant that teachers know how to apply different strategies in order to counter communication challenges that they may face. Few recommendations to improve the findings of the study are discussed at the end of this paper.

Keywords: teachers, students, post-pandemic, communication strategies, communication challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened education opportunities, specifically in higher education, to rethink strategies for coping with the new normal; however, there is a growing consensus that nothing is worse than returning to normal after a huge adjustment (Rapanta et al, 2020). Many personal, professional, and social activities were stopped because of the COVID-19 outbreak, which had an adverse influence on people's lives across the world. Universities and schools were compelled to quickly shift their programs online by adopting remote teaching and e-learning modalities, which had an unwanted effect on the education industry. A change in educational practices and academic procedures resulted from teachers and learners moving to online learning settings (Jimoyiannis et al, 2021).

Teachers unavoidably spend a good deal of time presenting materials and guiding students. However, speaking in front of a group results in anxiety. One of the factors in how teachers become effective is how they can communicate through speaking, writing, and body gestures. Comparatively, body language is an effective way to create a great learning atmosphere. In a classroom setting, communication occurs when the teacher (the source) organizes the content of the discussion (the message), and the students are the recipients, whose learning will be determined through feedback (Pal et al, 2016). This process occurs in different contexts. As such, the change in context from teaching virtually to the return to face-to-face classes causes challenges.

Moreover, in India, where 65% of the population still lives in remote areas, it took the government more time to develop the infrastructure that is essential for the implementation of online learning. Families from economically weaker sections and marginalized groups cannot afford smartphones or laptops, so it became a big question for the government. Since classroom pedagogies are a crucial intervening factor in face-to-face instruction, many different factors can influence both teachers and students when using online or e-learning pedagogy. Teachers employ various pedagogies to meet the needs of various types of students to reach each one of them (Yadav, 2023).

In the Philippines, the spread of the COVID-19 virus affected all spheres of life, including education. Aside from the travel ban, safety protocols, and social distancing, the virus heavily impacted the education sector, such as by closing schools and putting a stop to physical learning. Since then, the World Health Organization has encouraged the education administration to opt for alternative learning modalities that are foreign to most, especially in the Philippines. As such, challenges were faced by both teachers and students (Lapada et al, 2020). The education sector resorted to alternatives such as online and blended learning. This jump from physical learning to distance learning made it harder for the teachers to teach and for the students to cope with the major adjustments (Gerold, 2020). Up to date, the experiences from the alternative learning modalities could help bridge a gap and adapt to the challenges of returning to normality. Returning to the norms doesn't necessarily mean completely going back to the things of the past; instead, it should be viewed as an opportunity to engage in growth and development in education. The education sector can now use online learning, technological learning materials, and skills adopted during the pandemic to pursue growth in academics.

In the post-pandemic time, the Department of Education causes stress amongst public school teachers, as teachers outside the Millennial and Gen Z timeframes do not sit well with blended forms of learning (Robosa et al, 2021). These educators are not familiar with the things needed to propel a successful blended form of learning. A plethora of them do not know how to use digital tools such as Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. Even so, it is quite challenging for students to solely rely on the textual information without additional clarification, which causes communication challenges.

As the focus of this study shows, teachers play a big role in communicating with their students, particularly now that education is provided by default because of the COVID-19

pandemic. Due to the communication challenges encountered during the pandemic, teachers found a way to reach the students and adopted different strategies to resume and improve the education system. In the post-pandemic era, teachers continue to adjust and implement strategies to academically communicate with students. With the lack of study about the teachers' communication with students in the post-pandemic period, the researchers find it timely to further explore on how teachers communicate with learners and the communication challenges that they encountered. Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings in this study could potentially aid the teachers in finding a solution for the challenges they are experiencing, particularly in communication, during the post-pandemic era.

This study aimed to explore and contribute to the discussion of the challenges in communication between teachers and students, especially in the post-pandemic era. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How do teachers academically communicate with learners in post-pandemic time? (2) What are the communication challenges faced by teachers in the post-pandemic era?

II. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

The focus of this study is to navigate communication challenges in the post-pandemic era from the perspective of higher education teachers. A qualitative research design was applied throughout the study, specifically the utilization of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is carried out to explore at how people understand their most significant life events and examine experience on its own basis, as well as to guarantee the accuracy of the results (Smith et al, 2009).

2.2 Setting and Participants

The researchers focused on one of the Philippines' state universities. The research locale is entirely based on convenience and practicality for interviewing the participants. Participants of the study involved nineteen (19) licensed professional teachers specifically from different departments teaching in higher education institution. Through purposive-convenience sampling, the researchers interviewed nineteen (19) teachers from the six (6) departments. These six (6) colleges are, the College of Engineering (COE), College of Business and Entrepreneurship (COBE), College of Technology (COT), College of Arts and Science (CAS), College of Education (COED), and College of Architecture and Allied Discipline (CAAD).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Ethics agreements with the participants, such as the consent form, the right to withdraw, and the participant's anonymity, were established before the information and data for the study were gathered. Since the COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, the data collection was done face-to-face, and the participants were given the letter of consent in person. To verify the availability of the teachers, the researchers personally visited the faculty offices of various university departments. The interview lasted an average of 10 minutes. The researchers created a semi-structured interview guide with questions about the participants' actual experiences with communication challenges in the post-pandemic era. The prepared questions were checked to see if they would address the research questions. The participants were instructed to respond in the language of their choice. Mobile phones were used to record the participants' responses.

Moreover, the data gathered was analyzed through the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of six phases: (1) *familiarizing yourself with your data* refers to the fact that you must immerse yourself in the data you have collected until you are familiar with the depth and breadth of its contents. (2) *generating initial codes* involves the production and initialization of codes from the data. You can identify the codes first and then match them with data extracts that demonstrate that code, but it is critical in this phase to ensure that all actual data extracts are coded and then collated together within each code. (3) *searching for themes* means sorting different codes into different potential themes and assembling all relevant coded data

extracts within the identified themes. (4) *reviewing themes* helps to determine which candidate themes are not really themes, while others might collapse with each other or need to be broken down into separate themes. (5) *defining and naming themes* identifies the 'essence' of what each theme is about and what aspect of the data each theme captures. Conducting and writing a detailed analysis is needed for each individual theme, and by the end of this phase, you can clearly define what your themes are and what they are not. (6) *producing the report*, which provides the write-up of thematic analysis and the analytic narrative, must go beyond a simple description of the data, and present an argument in relation to your research question. Extracts must be incorporated into this narrative in a way that makes it clear how the story you are telling about your data is related to your data. The coding cycle used was by Saldaña (2016). In the first cycle, the researchers used in vivo coding to interpret the participants' responses or data into codes. Additionally, for the second cycle, the researchers applied eclectic coding in specifying choices in the first cycle and axial coding for refining codes from the eclectic coding which reorganized the data.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section summarizes the study's findings in relation to the research questions: how the teachers academically communicate with learners and the communication challenges the teachers faced in post-pandemic time. Interview excerpts are given in the quotations below, with teacher-participants assigned codes (T1, T2, T3, ...) to maintain anonymity.

3.1 Communication Strategies Used by Teachers in Post-Pandemic Time

The teacher-participants strategies when communicating with students in post-pandemic time can be categorized into four major themes: (1) applying the different modalities of teaching; (2) forging student connections through effective communication; (3) enhancing language diversity in teaching for a comprehensive approach; and (4) fostering classroom engagement and facilitating effective learning.

3.2 Applying the different modalities of teaching

Based on the responses of the teacher-participants, two prominent modalities of teaching that have gained significant traction are online and face-to-face learning. Online learning, is also known distance learning, refers to the delivery of educational content through digital platforms and tools. On the other hand, face-to-face learning involves in-person interaction between teachers and learners within a physical classroom setting. Each modality brings its own set of advantages and considerations, shaping the education of the students.

3.3 Teaching through the use of online platforms

Teachers acknowledge that online learning equips students with the necessary 21st-century skills, preparing them for the evolving demands of the modern world. With the advancement of technology and digital platforms, educators have embraced the potential of online learning as an important tool in the modern educational setting. These views are best captured in the following responses from T1 and T9, respectively:

"I utilized of course the technology, because it's a fact that we're already, not totally dependent but we're already highly influenced of technology. So, I utilize social media, uhm mobile phone, laptop in communicating, that's one. Because again as I've said were already in digital era and so we are highly influenced of this. So, without such we cannot directly communicate with them." [T1]

"...So that's why after pandemic, post-pandemic time, we have this, we communicated with students through Messenger and also in other cases, enrollment process through e-mails which is more convenient than before. Actually, communicating with students through online somehow is more convenient." [T9]

These two educators appeared to assume what the aforementioned observations that online learning seems to be an efficient way to academically communicate with students which was counterclaimed by Caratiquit et al (2022) revealing that there are three difficulties and issues faced in distance education by the teachers, including technical problems, inadequate school and learning resources, and delivering quality education. Even so, Ballena and Natividad (2021), revealed that despite the communication challenges, teachers could communicate with their students through group messages or group chats. Teachers were able to clearly clarify instructions step-by-step so that students would understand them. In view of this, teachers find online learning effective when communicating with students.

3.4 Teaching through face-to-face modality

One significant advantage is the immediate and direct interaction between students and teachers. In face-to-face classes, teachers can observe students' body language, facial expressions, and non-verbal cues, allowing them to gauge understanding and adjust their teaching accordingly. Students, in turn, can seek clarification or ask questions in real-time, fostering active engagement and personalized learning. These insights are reflected in the following responses.

“So, mostly, the most effective in communicating with students is personal meetups. Since, again, the restrictions are lifted, of course, there is still distance when it comes to communicating. So, personal meetings are more effective for me.” [T5]

“...Yeah, I call their attention during the inter-discussion, it's very important. I call them one by one if the student can get the discussion. Sometimes the student uh, I often see the student sleepy. I call him or her, for the attention of the discussion. So, during my inter-discussion, I go around, and I check one by one, especially in mathematics subject it's because of analytical thinking that's very important. So there are some students who can't understand, so I ask them. In the discussion, I need interaction about the topic being discussed.” [T19]

The above insights do not support the study of Bordeos et al (2022). In the present, findings showed that the adjustment period causes challenges in communication since hybrid learning caused limitations like a lack of communication with different people. However, delivering quality education suggests that teachers had problems delivering high-quality instruction via distance learning because they cannot teach physically and so they cannot properly assist the students like the traditional classrooms leading to poor academic performance and quality instruction (Caratiquit et al, 2022). So, it is apparent that face-to-face learning is also a great way to communicate effectively with students.

3.5 Forging student connections through effective communication

The responses from teacher-participants makes it clear that establishing and nurturing meaningful relationships between students becomes effective by employing communication techniques that are both impactful and productive. By prioritizing communication as a fundamental aspect of the learning environment, educators can contribute to a more inclusive, supportive, and engaging educational experience for all students. This is evident in T2 and T7's responses respectively.

“Also, they got their new languages that older people don't know, like me haha maybe I'm old enough not to understand those, I don't know what kind of language, the teenage language that the students have. But I think the most effective way is to communicate in their level.” [T2]

“And with regards to the strategies that I use to communicate with my students, first thing is, you have to build connection or rapport. So, meaning to say, you have to get the attention of your students.” [T7]

The above findings match what was observed in the study of Jackaria (2022), affirming that the teachers must make some adjustments to be on the same level as the student, however, because of this, they cannot continue to teach what is in the curriculum that was supposed to be their lesson. In spite of that, Sword (2023), confirms that since teaching itself entails communication, it is crucial to have this ability when interacting with students. Teaching requires an instructor to understand and deconstruct difficult knowledge and conveying this deconstructed information to learners in a way that keeps their attention (both vocally and through written resources) or in other words, communicating in students' level of comprehension. Hence, teachers ensure that they facilitate student connections by means of efficient communication in a way that they communicate at the students' level.

3.6 Enhancing language diversity in teaching for a comprehensive approach

Based from the responses, it points out that it is essential to create an inclusive learning environment where students' diverse languages are acknowledged, respected, and integrated into the educational experience. This approach encourages students to maintain and develop their native languages while also fostering proficiency in the language of instruction. T7 and T13 shared their insights relevant to this perspective.

“Right now, I am teaching humanities and literature. So, in humanities, basically, because it's not an English subject, they can, we can use whatever language as long as we'll be able to understand each other and, you know, have effective communication. So, one strategy that I do is to translate it to a language that the students will be able to directly grasp the knowledge behind the thought, or the concept.” [T7]

“It also can be what is it, mixed language, English, can be Filipino, can be tagalog, can be bisaya, or waray and so forth.” [T13]

The above responses from T7 and T13 correlates to the study of Gardner (2022), students' unique understanding of their own language is enhanced by the process of translation. They will acquire important insight into the complex ways that many languages differ from one another. Mixed language usage is viewed by formal education systems as a barrier to students' academic performance because it is thought that it slows down the process of learning academic material. Numerous researches, however, have contradicted this. Contrary to widespread belief, a research by Pot et al (2018) demonstrates that multilingual behaviors have no negative impact on pupils' academic performance. It has been shown that implementing a bilingual approach in the classroom is crucial for improving student academic performance.

3.7 Fostering classroom engagement and facilitating effective learning

Based on the above insights, these two teachers seemed to assume that facilitating effective learning is important. Effective learning involves providing students with the necessary tools, resources, and guidance to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and achieve learning objectives. Using interactive teaching methods, such as group work, hands-on activities, and multimedia resources, can help capture students' interest and actively involve them in the learning process.

“We did uhm the usual uh activities and techniques uh during the uh even before the pandemic started no, we do a graded recitation, we do reporting. We also did uhm, journal critiquing, I also give a journal critiquing.” [T15]

“...So, we are not only preparing our student to pass the board exam, but we are preparing them to be industry ready...” [T14]

Based on the above responses of the participants, the use of different approach and learning materials is an effective strategy to make the students grasp the lesson more, this is supported by the study of CopyPress (2023) that infographics employ imagery to highlight,

clarify, or enhance text-based content, they frequently show to be extremely effective in educational settings. They draw the interest of many students, deliver information, and promote data retention. Because of this, infographics might be the best tool for explaining the fundamentals of challenging procedures or simplifying complex information for students. In addition, the study of Ajoke (2017) also states that the use of different learning materials promotes effective communication in a way that it makes the learning process more interactive through the incorporation of technology and teachers' own strategies. It helps students grasp complex topics through the enactment of the concepts and stimulating learners' imaginations. Additionally, educational resources reduce the teacher-centeredness of teaching while saving teachers' energy and promoting active engagement in the learning process. Thus, using learning materials and reporting, and at the same time applying actual practices in the classroom facilitates an effective learning to students.

3.8 Communication Challenges Faced by Teachers in Post-Pandemic Time

The teacher-participants were asked to narrate the challenges they encountered in post-pandemic time. Responses indicated five specific challenges that was faced by the teachers: (1) pandemic impact on students' attitudes and learning (2) language and communication barriers, (3) technological challenges in education, (4) lack of infrastructures building gaps in classroom environment, and (5) teachers' preparedness and effectiveness.

3.9 Pandemic impact on students' attitudes and learning

The participants were inclined to believe that the primary impact of pandemic on students' attitudes has been the disruption of their regular routines and social interactions. The abrupt transition to online learning has led to feelings of isolation and limited socialization opportunities, affecting students' motivation, mental well-being, and overall engagement with education. The following extracts denotes this view:

"Let's say you entered first year during pandemic that is online, so you know that even I don't say it your group chats during exam, group chat so, lazy to memorize because it is like open notes, imagine having an exam and I think they studied so. Compared before, ten years ago in our time that we always memorize. So, the challenges are uh it became a routine, for me the habit became the routine." [T14]

"Sometimes, some students can't catch up with the discussion. Unlike in face-to-face discussions, you will really know if the student can understand the topic. The way of delivering the topic is very important. One of the challenges is when the lesson is difficult, it's hard for the students to understand especially mathematics in engineering difficult." [T19]

It can be inferred from T14 and T19's responses that the pandemic has greatly impacted students' learning, attitude, and academic progress. This is supported by the study of Salarvand et al (2023), that two themes of communication challenges arose in online classrooms that relate to the COVID-19 pandemic: lack of student socialization and communication-related concerns. Moreover, in the study of Zagkos et al (2022), it becomes apparent that the unstable environment that the pandemic outbreak created in the academic setting increased learning and social challenges. Some students could fall behind due to a sense of pressure in the classroom that pushes them to keep up with changes.

3.10 Language and communication barriers

Language and communication barriers are the challenges that arise due to differences in language proficiency, communication styles, or cultural backgrounds, affecting the effectiveness of educational interactions. Another challenge can also occur when there are misunderstandings from perspective differences between teachers and students. These views can be gleaned from these responses.

“...Of course, language variation is one factor post-pandemic era, even before, it becomes a challenge because if for example, in humanities the subject, art appreciation, they will have to make their own lyrics of a certain song and then I allowed them to either use Waray-Waray, Bisaya, Filipino, or English.” [T7]

“And also, when it comes to being open-minded, you are too open. Me personally, I might think that sometimes I’m being close-minded in those issues or topics or problems that you have, that I could not understand sometimes, so I think that’s the challenge.” [T2]

Reflected in the above extracts is the assumption that language diversity is one of the challenges between teachers and students, it was then counterclaimed by Rasman (2021), as it claims that building and maintaining a rapport between teachers and pupils is made easier by multilingualism. Teachers and students can employ a variety of tactics while communicating and interacting with one another when through multilingualism (Rasman, 2021). Even so according to the study of Gardner (2022), multilingual discussion prevents learners from developing their ability to think in the language to be used. Students who translate their sentences into their native language too frequently may develop the negative habit of doing so whenever they talk.

3.11 Technological challenges in education

Although teachers have prior knowledge how to use technology even before the pandemic, limited technological proficiency among teachers still became one of the obstacles during online classes. Weak internet connectivity poses a significant challenge, particularly in regions with limited infrastructure or remote areas, this inadequate internet access prevents students and teachers from fully utilizing online resources. These insights are reflected in the following responses.

“So first, signal. Especially when I am conducting online classes since online classes is still ongoing because of lack of classrooms. Because here in EVSU the internet is very weak. So that's the first one. Signal.” [T4]

“...I think uhh, we are not really familiar with the technologies that you are using especially when it comes to communication. Many, there are too many because some teachers, I think uhh, we are not really familiar with the technologies that you are using especially when it comes to communication.” [T2]

The above findings match what was observed in Legarde’s (2022) study that revealed that some of the issues that teachers encountered during the implementation of flexible learning were that they did not know how to teach online, that student collaboration was lacking, and that access to the internet was a problem for both students and teachers. Furthermore, technical problems like weak internet connection, despite the country’s continuous advancement in internet connectivity over the last ten years, internet connection speed is the most significant barrier to using an online virtual platform (Caratiquit et al, 2022). Hence, factors such as the limited technological proficiency of teachers and the weak internet connection became the technological challenges that the education faced.

3.12 Lack of infrastructures building gaps in classroom environment

The lack of infrastructure in the classroom environment is a significant challenge that hampers the quality of education and the overall learning experience. When these elements are insufficient or in poor condition, it creates a gap in the learning environment that affects students and educators alike. These views are best captured in the following responses from T8 and T1, respectively.

“Then in face-to-face, the distraction for us here at EVSU, when we conduct classes is that no one can hold several classes in the absence of facilities, room to use, space to use, that's it.” [T8]

“...One of the challenges is the impression of a person towards you because we’re talking about teachers dealing with students because of that impression that they heard from other students. And because of that impression that they have that would also affect their interest to attend your classes, that would also affect their way, their confidence.” [T1]

These two educators appeared to assume that insufficient infrastructure really builds gaps in the classroom setting. These claims were confirmed by Andrews (2019). Lack of educational facilities is another issue that arises, and it has two separate effects on students. First off, a lack of facilities limits a student's ability to take part in extracurricular activities and other educational possibilities. Lack of facilities also has a negative impact on a teacher's desire to educate, which negatively impacts their job contentment. Therefore, having adequate facilities helps the institution provide better education (Andrews, 2019). Additionally, overcrowding is a significant problem in many schools. Lack of proper infrastructure, especially in the classrooms, which are primarily government-provided, is one among the causes why schools are overcrowded. The lack of classrooms in overcrowded educational institutions limits the quantity and quality of interactions between teachers and students as well as the efficiency of instruction and learning. This is one of the factors contributing to the efficiency problems in education. Additionally, the Philippines cannot anticipate a successful outcome from its educational system given the lack of classrooms (Apolinar, 2021).

3.13 Teachers’ preparedness and effectiveness

Based on the responses of the teacher-participants, preparedness and effectiveness are crucial factors in ensuring quality education and student success. Effective teachers employ various instructional strategies to ensure that the students are actively involved in the learning process. This necessitates teachers to have a solid grasp of the subject matter they are teaching. Teachers' effectiveness also relies on their ability to build strong relationships with their students and create a supportive learning community. These insights are reflected in the following responses.

“Hmm, challenges of course is how to uhm how to make my student understand the topic no, sometimes uhm it's not that I'm not trying my best, I am doing my best but sometimes I feel that you know I don't know if it's in my part or the part of the student.” [T15]

“Since I'm having my class face-to-face there aren't a lot of factors. Another factor is if I'm prepared to teach if I was able to study my lesson.” [T17]

It's crucial to prepare before teaching classes so that teachers can provide students effective, engaging lectures and make the most of time and resources. It can be difficult to simplify complicated subjects to students, though. As a result, effective communication is a fundamental teaching skill. Most subjects can be divided into manageable chunks, and if they are presented in a straightforward order, it can help reduce the strain of having to take in a lot of information at once. Making the most of every second of a class can also be accomplished with the aid of preparation (Indeed, 2023). Lack of preparation follows as a result. Students' academic performance may suffer long-term consequences when teachers don't address their needs. As a result of poor instruction, students may become unmotivated, develop poor study habits, and receive subpar marks. There is a chance that students would lose interest in their studies and form unfavorable opinions about education. students may struggle academically and have less prospects in the future as a result (Dekho, 2023).

IV. CONCLUSION

The research findings emphasized the significance of adopting a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. This includes incorporating diverse teaching modalities, establishing

effective communication channels with students, embracing language diversity, and fostering active engagement in the classroom. By implementing these strategies, educators can create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that supports student growth, fosters positive relationships, and promotes effective learning outcomes. However, the findings also navigated the several challenges related to the communication between teachers and students in the post pandemic era. COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on various aspects of education, which evidently affected the process of switching to the post-pandemic time. Addressing the challenges related to students' attitudes and learning, language and communication barriers, technological infrastructure, classroom environment, and teacher preparedness is crucial for ensuring equitable access to quality education in both in-person and remote learning environments. The findings emphasized the importance of thorough improvements, greater resources, and collaborative efforts from participants to create flexible and adaptable education systems capable of dealing with future crises. As regards to the conduct of future similar studies, the researchers recommend to also include students as part of the participants, this way, their perspectives about the challenges they faced in the post-pandemic time could also be viewed. Including both the teacher and students in the study can help assess the correlation between their experiences regarding the communication challenges that they encountered in the post-pandemic era.

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