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## Research Article

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# Bilingualism as an Effective Tool in Virtual Teaching to Face the Challenges of Covid-19: A Retrospective discussion on the Educational Purview of West Bengal

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## Abstract

Covid-19, also known as, SARS-CoV-2, is a new sort of virus that has created a worldwide tumult throughout all the classes and sectors of lives. Originally born in Wuhan city of China at the later quarter of 2019, this disease was spread like an epidemic in rapid growth and within a few months attacked most of the countries' population irrespective of gender and grandeur, class and caste. This disease, for more than two and a half year, has unsettled the basic growth of civilization, as due to its infectious mortification, all educational institutes were shut down with immediate effect. Naturally, offline, regular classroom teaching-learning process got shifted to virtual mode that needed a lot of practice, clarification from both ends and subtle use of preparing and utilising available e-resources. But due to this online teaching, learning and evaluation process, students are often seen to apply unfair means that created discrepancy between merit and their obtained scores. Another challenge that was inevitable due to this pandemic is that, virtual mode was quite difficult for those students belonging to rural and remote areas, where network connectivity is poor. While learning a second language like English, they often make mistakes in spelling, pronunciation and the complete understanding of a given passage; therefore, Bilingualism serves to be more effective for them than general Lecture or Discussion method in a virtual platform with so many technical challenges. In this paper, therefore, an in-depth analysis has been made to justify the use of Bilingualism in virtual teaching-learning practices with a critique on the responsibilities of teachers and their students in this digital platform.

## Keywords

Covid-19,  
mental stress,  
pandemic,  
quarantine,  
virtual interaction  
etc.

## Introduction

Wikipedia says, "A pandemic (from Greek  $\pi\acute{\alpha}$ , pan, "all" and  $\eta\mu\acute{o}$ , demos, "local people" the 'crowd') is an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents or worldwide, affecting a

substantial number of individuals". The year 2020 begins with a world-wide pandemic, which is not only detrimental to the society as a physical mortification, but it has also laid down the economic balance in the global purview. Neelesh Kumar Maurya in his article, "New Onset of Health Complications in Patient after COVID-19

Recovery” has rightly observed that, ‘Global pandemic coronavirus caused by COVID 19 appears to cause significant morbidity and mortality worldwide. Until now, acute respiratory problems, particularly in critically ill patients, have been the primary concern of clinical communication’. Taking cue from Google, it can be announced that more than 617,074,049 people have died so far from the COVID-19 outbreak and there are approximately 6,530,493 confirmed cases in 228 countries and territories till date [<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>; date: 18<sup>th</sup> Sep, 2022]. Shockingly, this disease does not differentiate between people of colour, class, caste and ages and for a third world country like India, the continuous sets of lockdowns have relegated its running economy to the lees where apart from the numerous deaths of people under this harrowing disease, we have also witnessed the continuous struggle of the middle, lower and backward classes for food, education and sound living. The first documented case of Covid 19 was found on 30<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2020; after that there are four pertinent waves have been passed taking a toll of millions of lives and a series of lock-unlock diaries. The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Smt. Mamata Banerjee has announced to shut the school, colleges, universities and all educational centres to be immediately suspended primarily from 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2020 pertaining to the contemporary Lockdown scenario; and suddenly it was decided to shift the entire infrastructure of offline classroom teaching to the online mode. At that time, West Bengal, like other states, was not at all prepared for this impending crisis. Both teachers and students were not that much technologically sound; and they struggled hard to cope with these pitfalls days and nights so that the standard of education remained maintained. In urban areas, where Internet connectivity is not a challenge, the schools started their medium of teaching in the online platform where Google-meet, Microsoft-teams, Zoom, and in some places, Skype were used to bring home the feel like offline classes. Here teachers and students could interact like live classes and it somehow kept up the quality teaching both ways. But the situation was worse in rural area. Mobile network was unstable in such places, therefore,

having smooth connectivity along with devices like smartphone, tablet, PC or laptop was something beyond the level of affordability. In the pre-primary and the upper primary sections, the children were too little to operate these devices, many of them even were first generation learners in rural area; and for them technology became an obstacle in education. It costed much higher than the previous mode of classroom teaching learning process and they learnt almost nothing in these two years. In an article, titled as “Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Students’ Perspective”, Claudiu Coman and others have said, ‘Technical issues are still the issues most difficult to solve, due to the capacity of the servers owned by universities. Surely, universities have made efforts in order to solve these problems and improve the way the E-learning platforms work. Still, students’ technical problems remain poor internet connections, signal loss, lack of adequate digital devices, especially for students living in rural areas or students from families with low incomes’. The situation was no better in the upper standard classes, because even if the parents afforded them to buy a smart device, they started exhausting internet for the purposes of games, watching moving or making short videos. The entire system of education thus faced a dire challenge because the infrastructure of online education was neither feasible nor possible in an under-growing state like West Bengal.

### **Bilingualism: Its Introduction and lineage in India:**

India was colonized under the British rule for more than 200 years; during which it was the language of the ruling class which marked this foreign language as a distinguished and prestigious one in the global scenario. It was not only used for official and administrative purposes, but also was considered to be the medium of higher studies and Governmental or Commercial establishments. Therefore, there was the need for introducing English to the native Indians for the purpose of creating English-knowing clerks in offices to perform the duties of the master class

with sincere earnestness. We must mention that the advent of Indian English was pioneered by Thomas Babington Macaulay (25<sup>th</sup> October 1800 – 28<sup>th</sup> December 1859), the famous British historian and Whig politician as well, who in his well-known “Minute on Indian Education” (February 1835) had not only proposed to introduce English as the official medium of communication but also had suggested creating feasible clerks for the British Government for the benefits of East India company. His ulterior motive was to create:

. . . a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

[[http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00\\_generallinks/macaulay/txt\\_minute\\_education\\_1835.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00_generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html)]

But this colonising motif, in retrospect, was proven to be a boon for the Indians. With their workable knowledge, they started developing the areas of literature, viz. poems, short stories, essays and novels. The introduction of English in India can thus be called the beginning of ‘Renaissance’, hoping to see an independent, manacled free India. Indeed, within twenty-five years after Independence, English had become the official language in Higher Education. By the end of this decade, the novel, as a genre, has grown immense popularity among literary readers. But even after seventy-five years of Independence, English is still used as the language for higher official, academic and administrative purposes. India, being a multilingual country, has yet not self-sufficed itself with any particular language as a marker for universal solidarity. Therefore, despite being the standard official language for documentation in public and private sectors, proficiency in target language is still not in grip. Command over this foreign language is yet to be

proficiently achieved by the native Indians beginning from pre-primary to the University level learners. To encourage them more to learn, understand and reciprocate in English, the use of bilingualism in a multi-cultural country like India is an obvious tool in practice. Not only to understand a different lingo for communicative purposes, but also to appreciate the vast reservoir of English literature beginning from Beowulf to the latest composer like Gitanjali Shree, the lack of knowledge in English proposes as a loss of cognitive domain. Therefore, translation works are also encouraged along with bi-lingual learning. The target is not to achieve only a workable knowledge in English, but also to feel, sympathise, communicate and articulate in English with equal importance.

According to Thesaurus, ‘Bilingualism is the ability to speak or understand two languages or the regular use of two languages. The adjective bilingual is most commonly used to describe someone who can speak or understand two languages, especially with some level of fluency’. ‘Bilingual method’ as a way of teaching and learning the target language was proposed by C. J. Dodson of Wales, who applied this method to prove that bilingualism not only helps in learning the target language with much ease but also helps in the better understanding of the mother-tongue which was otherwise ignored in the Direct method or communicative approach. It can be called as a midway approach between Grammar Translation method and Direct Method because here the learner has to think in his/her first language and then translate his/her ideas into the target language; here though the use of the first language is allowed but it remains restricted for limited purposes. C. J. Dodson in his experiment found that this method establishes better rapport in the peer group discussion where they can freely communicate and interact without any language barrier. Here, mother tongue works as a stimulus that provides impetus to the learner that ultimately leads them towards independent learning and application of their second language.

## Covid 19: A Curse or a Boon:

To follow the observation of Ms. Toshika Pareek and Dr. Kiran Soni in their article, “A Comprehensive Study on Covid-19 Pandemic: An Impact on School Education in India”, we also should comply with them that, ‘The COVID-19 epidemic has told us that transition is imminent. It has acted as a catalyst to build and choose channels and strategies not seen before the education institutions. The education sector has struggled for a new solution due to the continuation of the crisis and has digitized to eradicate the pandemic threat’. It’s not that the pandemic has only devastated our normative teaching-learning system, it has also tried to compensate that loss with a vast repository of knowledge which was otherwise untrodden by the academicians and scholars. Pandemic gave us more scopes to organise various webinars, workshop and symposia in online modes, where the teachers along with the students had participated and learnt things at their expediency. MOOCS, MOODLE, e-PG Pathshala, Sodh-Ganga, Swayam-prabha and various other sites for downloading e-materials and e-books have provided them with those rare materials or books which were not easily available in bookshop or markets. You Tube lectures on various things beginning from subjective areas to the field of health, science, medicine, trauma and stress management have enriched us and made us recuperate the void emptying us from within. Various movies and shows on OTT platform, stand-up comedies, musical concerts have not only made us forget the terrible reality we are submerged within but also have channelized our boredom into creative art like painting, writing, stitching or cooking. In urban areas, where network connectivity is much better, the online classes through power point presentation, video lecture, educational clips and simulations through artificial intelligence thus made the students more active and attentive in classroom activities. Work from home for working professionals and study from home for the educators and the students alike saved much of their quality time that they spent with their own family. So, though we lost

many of our close relatives, acquaintances and near once in this uncontrolled battle against nature, at the same time, this mother nature has nourished us with its boundless possibilities. It’s irrefutable that, education has suffered a lot in the hands of the careless learners, but at the same time it has given us a vast digital platform where we can teach, learn, use and contribute study materials for the greater good of our future generations.

## Advantages and limitations of Bilingual Method in Virtual platform:

Bilingualism basically strengthens the use of two languages simultaneously without even the realisation of the learners. West Bengal, being a poor state, does not fulfil the basic necessities of food, enlightenment and settling places. Though it ensures free and compulsory education to all, but poverty, malnutrition, dropouts, early marriage, child labour and other social extortions often create hindrances in their study. Thus, though they can manage to read and write their mother tongue, often fail to understand the foreign language like English. Therefore, simultaneous teaching in Bilingual method, thus, not only removes their fear but also restores their confidence while speaking and writing. Here some benefits and limitations of Bilingual method have been pointed out to discuss the merits and demits of this technique in virtual teaching-learning scenario.

- **Ensures accuracy:** When the new words are told to the students firstly in their mother tongue and in English, the level of accuracy rate is found higher in Bilingual method. They learn to speak and write their second language correctly with the help of their native language.
- **Enhances Fluency:** Taught through Bilingual method increases the level of fluency in learners much more than Direct or communicative approaches because they learn two languages simultaneously without any barrier.
- **Less costly and saves time:** Bilingual method is equally appropriate for the students in rural as well as urban areas as it needs lesser number of illustrative materials for students; understanding

and application. Teachers make their classes interesting with the help of ample examples quoting from their first language which they understand better; and in-between motivates them to creatively use the second language with rich vocabulary and sound images.

➤ **Translation and rigorous practice:** Bilingualism aspire for an overall interpretation of summarization of the targeted work in first language. Therefore, immense practice is needed in the first step of understanding. Later on, when the student gradually achieves proficiency in the second language, the use of mother tongue can be dropped altogether.

But this method, though much effective for the young learners, often fails to meet the demands of sophisticated standards, as smaller number of books are available in Native languages and all the questions for higher and competitive exams are found to be set in English. Some limitations of this method are:

➤ **Confusion incurring:** Simultaneous knowledge and understanding in two languages at a time may create confusion among the students, especially learning the rules of grammar and translation.

➤ **Over-dependency on mother-tongue and translation method:** This method generally allows the usage of native language and translation method only to give impetus to the learner, but if misused, the students may prone to become over dependent on translation method in a denigrated way.

➤ **Impractical at higher level:** Bilingual approach is suitable for students in the lower grades, but at the senior secondary or much higher level, this method is insufficient to provide students the ample reservoir of vocabulary words.

## Conclusion

Thus, though this method seems enticing for the acquisition of new language with the medium of a known one, the limitations and lesser scope of this method cannot enslave the higher objectives set for the second language learners. Apart from the ability and capacity of the students, this method also depends a lot on practical teaching aids and

adequate number of students in class, which in India, where a vast number of pupils occupies a single classroom along with the scarcity of teachers cannot be effective in real life scenario. This method is equally challenging because, often in rural or poverty-stricken areas, students are found sharing a single device by a large number in count. That hinders the scope of individual learning in such a chaotic ambience. Basically, no single method or approach can make a revolutionary change in real or virtual teaching-learning process; the two-way traffic of sincerity, mutual respect and passion for the unknown can only stimulate the operative domain of the academic excellence.

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