A STUDY ON EXPLORING STUDENTS' USE OF OFF-TASK TECHNOLOGY IN PAKISTANI POSTGRADUATE ESL ONLINE CLASSROOMS

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Original Article

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Abstract

This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how Pakistani postgraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) students use technology for non-academic purposes during online classes. The study investigated why students use technology off-task and its pros and cons. The data was collected through qualitative and quantitative methods while using an exploratory research design, with qualitative analysis conducted first, followed by the quantitative analysis. According to the findings, the majority of postgraduate ESL students used technology for entertainment purposes rather than for educational purposes, and this off-task technology use was found to be a significant distraction that hindered their ability to focus on online lectures. As a result, the study recommends that higher education institutions should take steps to provide professional development opportunities for online teaching to the respective teachers. Furthermore, the study suggests that the government of Pakistan should collaborate with organizations such as HEC to devise an all-encompassing strategy with the goal of encouraging the productive use of off-task technology.

Keywords: ESL classrooms, Online classes, Off-task technology use

Introduction and Study Background

Alakrash and Razak (2020) argue that automation has become a crucial element in all fields of life, helping to maximize efficiency and productivity. They suggest that technology has had a significant impact on transportation, production, management, communication, and education, contributing to the betterment of society and the nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has also enhanced the adoption of technology in education, with many institutions switching to virtual classrooms, even in developing countries like Pakistan. Dhawan (2020) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has made involuntary the education structure to move from old classrooms to online platforms, even for institutions that were resistant to change. This shift has highlighted the economic benefits of online teaching and learning, as it allows teachers to reach a large number of students from anywhere in the world.

Off-task use of technology, as defined by Gerow, Galluch, and Thatcher (2010), refers to errands or instructions that are not given directly by the teacher during class time, such as using social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Multitasking, as explained by Abaté (2008), involves interrupting one activity with another, such as reading an article and checking social media notifications. Neiterman and Zaza (2019) have emphasized the usefulness of educational technology in instructional classrooms, as it provides many learning opportunities for both students and teachers, making classrooms more efficient and engaging. However, Karalis and

Raikou (2020) note that the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting closure of universities created mixed feelings among students. While some students had no difficulty transitioning to online classes, others faced technical difficulties, lack of participation, communication, and social interaction. Students were observed joining online classes but not actively participating, preferring face-to-face learning as they find it easier to comprehend concepts. Further, Bolkan and Griffin (2017) conducted a survey on higher education students to investigate the motives for off-task technology usage in the classroom. They found that students' attitudes towards mobile phone use in class were influenced by their instructor's teaching style and their level of engagement with the subject matter. When lectures were perceived as boring or uninteresting, students were more likely to use their phones for off-task activities. Gupta and Irwin (2016) conducted a similar survey on university students and found that social media platforms like Facebook can also serve as distractions and decrease students' comprehension of lecture content.

Keeping the above mentioned pros and cons of off-task technology, the aim of the research is to explore the use of technology for purposes unrelated to learning in online classrooms by postgraduate students studying English as a second language (ESL) in Pakistan. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the factors that contribute to such off-task technology use and determine how it impacts students' theoretical accomplishment and inspiration in the online classroom. The study similarly intends to provide answers to mitigate the occurrence of off-task skill usage in online classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

There is an increasing body of works regarding usage of off-task technology in postgrad online English as a second language (ESL) classrooms. However, using off-task technology in Pakistani ESL postgraduate online classrooms is understudied. This study investigates off-task technology use by Pakistani ESL postgrad scholars in an online classroom to fill this research gap. The researchers aimed to study the postgraduate Pakistani ESL students' off-task technology use, distraction factors, and technology types. The findings would help the English as a second language (ESL) teachers understand postgraduate students' online classroom distractions and suggest them ways to lessen such distractions for the sake of improving their learning.

Methodology

To investigate the use of technology for non-educational purposes in online classrooms, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. By doing so, the researchers could directly communicate with participants to gather comprehensive information. Sofaer (1999) suggests that using qualitative methods allows participants to express themselves in their own words, which can help clarify the language, values, and meanings associated with different roles within a system.

Data Collection Tools/ Instruments

Interviews

One of the primary approaches of data collection for this study was through semi-structured interviews. The researchers conducted interviews with 10 participants at the beginning of the data collection process. To stay focused on the themes to be explored during the interviews, the researchers prepared a list of these themes in advance. Two methods were used to record the semi-structured interviews: tape-recording and note-taking. During the note-taking method, the

interviewers managed to write down important points while also recording the entire interview, which proved to be beneficial for taking notes after the interviews.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was the second tool used for collecting quantitative data. To prepare the survey on off-task technology usage in postgrad ESL online schoolrooms, an online digital podium (Google Forms) was used. This platform was chosen as it is freely available and dependable method of information collection. The target population for the questionnaire was 60-70 ESL postgrad scholars from four public sector institutions in Pakistan who had experienced online modules. Demographic data was first part of the quantitative form. Next section emphasized the motives behindhand off-task technology usage in online schoolrooms and aimed to gather the opinions of postgraduate ESL students on this topic. The questionnaire provided options such as Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The third section of the questionnaire focused on identifying the disturbing influences accountable for scholars' usage of off-task technology throughout online lessons. The primary aim of this part was to determine the most significant factor leading to off-task technology usage in online schoolrooms. Finally, the last section of the questionnaire focused on the compensations and drawbacks of off-task technology usage in an online classroom.

Data Collection Procedure

To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim of gaining a strong considerate of Pakistani ESL scholars' use of off-task technology in online schoolrooms. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the researcher recorded and transcribed them for later analysis. Prior to the interviews, a list of themes was prepared to guide the discussion. After conducting all of the interviews, the data was analyzed to draw conclusions. In addition to the qualitative data, the researcher also composed quantitative data using a survey (attached in appendix) to explore the phenomenon under study. Online questionnaire was distributed using WhatsApp to four public-sector university groups, and there was a deadline for completing it. A total of 68 participants from both campuses completed the survey.

Data Analysis/results

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was deemed to be the most appropriate method for analyzing the collected semi-structured interviews. To conduct this analysis, the transcripts of the interviews were carefully read three times, and preliminary notes were taken. These notes were then used to generate initial codes that remained open to different interpretations during the analysis. The codes were descriptive of the participants' experiences and thoughts regarding off-task technology usage in online schoolrooms. Once the coding was complete, the researcher identified themes founded on the four prearranged refrains associated to the study queries and purposes. Finally, the themes were developed based on the codes.

Qualitative Results

In the interviews, the first part focused on participants' understanding of "off-task technology usage in an online schoolroom." Results indicated that the majority of participants (nine out of 12) thought that off-task technology use during online classes was for entertainment purposes only, while only three respondents understood that it could be used for educational

purposes. The researcher identified two codes from the responses: "Doing responsibilities not associated to online education" and "usage of social applications to spare time."

The second part of the interview focused on participants' personal use of off-task technology. Many participants indicated that online method of learning was one of the primary explanations they used off-task technology for individual drives. Some participants were not interested in online classes due to their lack of interest in this mode of education. One participant mentioned that scholars practice off-task technology to interrelate and seek assistance from other scholars online. The researcher identified several themes from these responses, including "for assistance," "for contact," "online method of talks by instructors," "not attentive in an online speech," and "tedium during online lessons." Two sub-themes emerged under the applicant usage of off-task technology use theme: "minimum attention in online talks" and "recurrent usage." The researcher concluded that scholars' regular use of off-task technology during online lessons was due to remote mode of classes.

Reasons/factors Behind "Off-task Technology Use"

Only two respondents out of the total participants mentioned using off-task technology for instructive determinations. The majority of scholars stated that off-task technology use was because of boring and uninteresting online classes. The codes derived from their responses include "Dullness in online talks" and "Uninteresting online lessons." The codes associated with off-task technology use are "Practice of social applications," "Online modules," and "Tedium during online lessons." The responses strongly indicated that online talks themselves lead scholars to practice off-task technology for private determinations rather than for instructive resolutions. In the third phase of the interviews, the researcher explained the motives and issues behind scholars' practice of off-task technology, and most students reported using social media apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram during online classes. The comments suggested that the students were highly distracted by notifications from different applications during online classes, which led to their off-task technology usage.

Advantages/disadvantages of "Off-task Technology Use'

The researchers discovered that there are only limited benefits of using off-task technology for research studies in online classrooms. The codes emerged from the responses included "limited compensations," "more disadvantages," and "not helpful for study purposes." The biggest disadvantage reported by the participants was distraction, which affects their concentration and comprehension of lectures. The codes associated with this issue are "missing important points," "losing lecture comprehension," "using social media," and "being distracted." The themes that emerged from these codes are "few benefits of off-task technology for academic purposes," "many disadvantages, such as distraction and missing important information," and "disadvantages outweigh advantages." These themes indicate that using off-task technology in online classrooms has more drawbacks than benefits. Therefore, the researcher concluded that the theme of this section is "the disadvantages of consuming off-task technology outweigh the advantages in online schoolrooms."

Quantitative Data Analysis

The aim of the research was to examine how Pakistani postgrad ESL scholars use off-task technology in online schoolrooms. To achieve this, the researchers analyzed the responses gathered through a Google form questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on three main themes: the online format of classrooms, the practice of social media (specifically WhatsApp) in

promoting adverse off-task technology use, and the prevalence of disadvantages as opposed to advantages associated with off-task technology practice in online classrooms.

Quantitative Results

Online Mode of Classrooms

The second section of the research focuses on how the accessibility of technology and the online method of the classroom contribute to scholars' usage of off-task technology.

Table 1

I use off-task technology because internet is easily accessible in online classrooms.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	13.2	8.976
Disagree	5.8	3.944
Neutral	22.1	15.028
Agree	51.5	35.02
Strongly agree	7.4	5.032
	100	68

The researchers found that the internet availability during online classes is a significant reason for the use of off-task technology. The data from the questionnaire showed that 51.5% of respondents agreed with this statement, while 22.1% were neutral.

Table 2

I practice off-task technology because online classrooms are boring.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	10.2	6.936
Disagree	16.2	11.016
Neutral	16.2	11.016
Agree	41.2	28.016
Strongly agree	16.2	11.016
	100	68

Based on the information provided, 41.2% of the respondents admitted to using off-task technology during online classes due to boredom, while 16.2% strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 3

I use off-task technology because online lessons are boring.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	14.7	9.996
Disagree	25	17
Neutral	14.7	9.996
Agree	30.9	21.012
Strongly agree	14.7	9.996
	100	68

Based on the data, among all respondents to the question, 30.9% felt online classes were boring and it was one of the major reasons of off- task technology.

Table 4

I utilize off-task technology because instructors are unable to see me in an online classroom.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	13.2	8.976
Disagree	16.2	11.016
Neutral	19.2	13.056
Agree	33.8	22.984
Strongly agree	17.6	11.968
	100	68

Based on the data, among all respondents to the question, 33.8% admitted that they utilize off-task technology during online classes. Additionally, 17.6% strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 5

I practice off-task technology because I feel preoccupied by internet accessibility during an online classroom.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	10.3	7.004
Disagree	16.2	11.016
Neutral	13.2	8.976
Agree	39.7	26.996
Strongly agree	20.6	14.008
	100	68

Based on the data, among all respondents to the question, 39.7% agreed and 20.6% strongly agreed. Thus, a total of 54.4% experienced internet issues during remote classes and consequently resorted to off-task technology.

Table 6

I practice off-task technology because I frequently confronted connectivity problems in online classrooms.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	8.8	5.984
Disagree	17.6	11.968
Neutral	19.2	13.056
Agree	33.8	22.984
Strongly agree	20.6	14.008
	100	68

According to the percentages, 54.4% of the total respondents used off-task technology due to facing connectivity issues during online classes, as 33.8% agreed and 20.6% strongly agreed to the question.

Table 7
I practice off-task technology because instructors' instruction method is not fascinating in an online classroom

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	11.8	8.024
Disagree	29.4	19.992
Neutral	25	17
Agree	23.5	15.98
Strongly agree	10.3	7.004
	100	68

The answers to the question mentioned above are quite convincing, as the majority of students cited using off-task technology as a reason for online classroom use.

Table 8
I practice off-task technology because I feel lethargic during online lessons.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	7.4	5.032
Disagree	13.2	8.976
Neutral	25	17
Agree	45.6	31.008
Strongly agree	8.8	5.984
	100	68

Based on the data presented, 45.6% of all respondents agreed with the statement, while 8.8% strongly agreed.

Table 9

I practice off-task technology because I think online modules waste my time.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	10.3	7.004
Disagree	17.6	11.968
Neutral	7.4	5.032
Agree	50	34
Strongly agree	14.7	9.996
	100	68

The data indicates that 50% of all respondents believe that online classes are a complete waste of time and not as beneficial as in-person classes.

Table 10

I practice off-task technology because I feel online modules don't deliver suitable material

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	10.3	7.004
Disagree	14.7	9.996
Neutral	19.1	12.988
Agree	39.7	26.996
Strongly agree	16.2	11.016
	100	68

Of all respondents, 39.7% agreed with this idea, while 16.2% strongly agreed that this was the reason for their off-task technology use during online classes.

The usage of social media (particularly WhatsApp) increases the adverse usage of off-task technology

Table 1

I practice off-task technology in an online classroom by means of?

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	4.6	3.128
WhatsApp	50.7	34.476
Facebook	11.9	8.092
Instagram	17.9	12.172
Other	14.9	10.132
	100	68

Based on the data from the aforementioned question, 50.7% of respondents reported using WhatsApp as their off-task technology during online classes. This may be because WhatsApp is readily accessible to students in online classrooms.

Table 2

..... is frequently used by my friends during online lessons.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	6	4.08
WhatsApp	63.6	43.248
Facebook	13.6	9.248
Instagram	13.6	9.248
Taking Selfies	1.2	0.816
Google Classroom	2	1.36
	100	68

Based on the provided data, 63.6% of respondents reported that their friends use WhatsApp the most during online classes. In contrast, 13.6% of all respondents stated they used Facebook and Instagram.

Table 3

..... is easily accessible during online classes.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	5	3.4
WhatsApp	66.2	45.016
Facebook	10.8	7.344
Instagram	16.9	11.492
Nothing	1.1	0.748
	100	68

Based on the provided data, 66.2% of respondents indicated that WhatsApp is easily accessible during online classes.

Table 4

The practice of ———————— improved my off-task technology usage during online lessonsz

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	7.7	5.236
WhatsApp	49.2	33.456
Facebook	16.9	11.492
Instagram	20	13.6
Nothing	4	2.72
See	1.1	0.748
YouTube	1.1	0.748
	100	68

Based on the aforementioned data, 49.2% of respondents believe that WhatsApp has contributed to increased off-task technology during online classes. Additionally, 16.9% of respondents stated that Facebook is also a reason for their off-task technology usage. 20% of the total respondents use Instagram.

Table 5

---------- diverts me during online lessons.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	9.4	6.392
WhatsApp	57.8	39.304
Facebook	17.2	11.696
Instagram	14.1	9.588
Nothing	1.5	1.02
	100	68

Question five emphasizes that during online classes, WhatsApp is the most frequently utilized app as an off-task technology, which can divert the students' attention.

Table 6

..... diverts me least during the online schoolroom.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	26.2	17.816
WhatsApp	27.7	18.836
Facebook	23.1	15.708
Instagram	20	13.6
Nothing	1.2	0.816
Teacher's lecture	1.8	1.224
	100	68

The data presented above yielded intriguing findings, as 27.7% of respondents reported that WhatsApp is the least distracting off-task technology for them.

Table 7

..... is my desired app to practice during online lessons.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	6	4.08
WhatsApp	80.6	54.808
Facebook	9	6.12
Instagram	4.4	2.992
	100	68

The data indicates that 80.6% of all respondents selected "WhatsApp," suggesting that students who attend online classes frequently use their phones and utilize WhatsApp.

Table 8

When I practice ....., I frequently neglect what the instructor is delivering in an online lesson.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	9	6.12
WhatsApp	44.8	30.464
Facebook	23.9	16.252
Instagram	17.9	12.172
Nothing P	3	2.04
Nothing B	1.4	0.952
	100	68

Question eight's results indicated that a significant number of students (44.8%) tend to ignore the lesson being taught during online classes when they use WhatsApp. Additionally, 23.9% of the respondents reported the same distraction while using Facebook.

Table 9

..... wastes more time during online classes.

	Percentage	Frequency
Mobile games	10.4	7.072
WhatsApp	38.8	26.384
Facebook	25.4	17.272
Instagram	22.4	15.232
Nothing P	1.4	0.952
Nothing B	1.6	1.088
	100	68

Based on the findings of the aforementioned question, 38.8% of all respondents indicated that WhatsApp is the application that wastes the most time for students during online classes. Alternatively, 25.4% of respondents selected "Facebook" as the app that garners the most attention and wastes the most time.

Table 10

..... acts as a disruption and decreases my comprehension in an online classroom.

	Percentage	**Frequency**
Mobile games	11.9	8.092
WhatsApp	46.3	31.484
Facebook	20.9	14.212
Instagram	20.9	14.212
	100	68

As per the data presented above, 46.3% of all respondents reported that using WhatsApp during online classes serves as a distraction and hinders their ability to comprehend what the teacher is teaching.

Table 1

There are more shortcomings than compensations of off-task technology usage in online schoolrooms.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	11.9	8.092
Disagree	22.4	15.232
Neutral	23.9	16.252
Agree	28.4	19.312
Strongly agree	13.4	9.112
	100	68

Question one indicates that 28.4% of all respondents believe that using off-task technology in online classrooms has more merits than demerits, as they selected "agree." Furthermore, 13.4% of respondents strongly agree with this statement. However, 23.9% of respondents remained neutral on the topic.

Table 2

I never practice off-task technology for education purposes.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	10.4	7.072
Disagree	25.5	17.34
Neutral	19.4	13.192
Agree	32.8	22.304
Strongly agree	11.9	8.092
	100	68

As per this statement, the findings suggest that a considerable number of students use off-task technology for different purposes other than education. Specifically, 32.8% of all respondents agreed with this assertion.

Table 3

I make use of off-task technology only to browse things unrelated to lectures in an online classroom.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	11.8	8.024
Disagree	25.4	17.272
Neutral	28.4	19.312
Agree	28.4	19.312
Strongly agree	6	4.08
	100	68

The results indicate that 28.4% of all respondents agree with the notion that they use off-task technology to browse content unrelated to the topics being taught during online classes. Additionally, 6% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 4

Off-task technology usage never benefits me to improve my classroom communication.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	6	4.08
Disagree	17.9	12.172
Neutral	23.9	16.252
Agree	35.8	24.344
Strongly agree	16.4	11.152
	100	68

Approximately 35.8% of all respondents reported that they utilize off-task technology exclusively to improve their interaction with teachers and class fellows during online classes.

Table 5

Using off-task technology serves as a problem in online classrooms.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	5	3.4
Disagree	7	4.76
Neutral	32.8	22.304
Agree	41.8	28.424
Strongly agree	13.4	9.112
	100	68

Around 50% of all respondents expressed a positive view on the topic, with 41.8% selecting "Agree" and 13.4% choosing "strongly agree." However, 32.8% of respondents opted to remain neutral on the statement.

Table 6

Usage of off-task technology serves as a distraction in the online classroom.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	7.5	5.1
Disagree	16.4	11.152
Neutral	22.4	15.232
Agree	37.3	25.364
Strongly agree	16.4	11.152
	100	68

Based on the data presented above, more than half of all respondents agreed that using off-task technology acts as a source of distraction during online classes. Specifically, 37.3% of all respondents selected "agree."

Table 7

Off-task technology lessens my lecture understanding during an online lesson.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	7.5	5.1
Disagree	16.4	11.152
Neutral	22.4	15.232
Agree	37.3	25.364
Strongly agree	16.4	11.152
	100	68

As per the data presented above, 37.3% of all respondents agreed, and 16.4% strongly agreed that using off-task technology diminishes students' understanding of lectures during online classes. This suggests that the use of off-task technology has a negative impact on students' comprehension during online classes.

Table 8

Off-task technology usage wastes my time during online lessons.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	4.4	2.992
Disagree	15.2	10.336
Neutral	28.8	19.584
Agree	36.4	24.752
Strongly agree	15.2	10.336
	100	68

Question number eight reveals that the majority of students believe off-task technology is a waste of time. Specifically, 36.4% of respondents agreed with this statement, while 15.2% strongly agreed, indicating that most students perceive more drawbacks than benefits to off-task technology use.

Table 9
Off-task technology usage diminishes my attention in an online talk

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	1.5	1.02
Disagree	9	6.12
Neutral	26.9	18.292
Agree	52.2	35.496
Strongly agree	10.4	7.072
	100	68

Based on my analysis of the data, over half of all respondents stated that off-task technology reduces their engagement in online lectures. Specifically, 52.2% of all respondents selected "agree," and 10.4% indicated "strongly agree." These respondents believe that off-task technology use is one of the factors that contribute to wasting time during online classes.

Table 10
Off-task technology usage is more an interruption than a consecration in an online lesson.

	Percentage	Frequency
Strongly disagree	4.5	3.06
Disagree	17.9	12.172
Neutral	25.4	17.272
Agree	37.3	25.364
Strongly agree	14.9	10.132
	100	68

The results indicate that over 50% of the respondents opted to go in the favor of the statement, with 37.3% marking "agree" and 14.9% marking "strongly agree."

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the use of off-task technology by Pakistani ESL graduate scholars in online classrooms, with qualitative findings forming the basis for a quantitative analysis of Google Forms responses. The results highlighted the prevalence of off-task technology use in online schoolrooms, particularly due to the online method of teaching and the usage of social

media applications like WhatsApp. Moreover, the study found that the disadvantages of off-task technology use outweighed any advantages, with distraction, loss of concentration, and missed important points being common issues. Social media apps were found to be the primary source of distraction, with WhatsApp being the most commonly used. Further, the study also explored the factors that led to off-task technology use and how it impacted students' academic achievement and motivation in the online classroom. The limitations of the study include its focus on Pakistani ESL postgraduate students from public sector universities and the potential for further research to be conducted across different educational levels and fields of study, including private sector universities. The previous research indicates that the world chose the use of off-task technology objectively during online classes for ESL postgraduate students. On the contrary, Pakistan chose it only in the need of hour when the COVID-19 was at its peak. One of the recommendations is that the government of Pakistan needs to collaborate with HEC and other stake holders to develop a comprehensive plan for implementation of the positive use of off-task technology during online classes at different levels. Further, the government and educational institutes should facilitate students about its positive and healthy use towards academics for which seminars should be arranged to create awareness regarding the constructive use of technology.

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