Using Advertisements in the English Classroom: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore whether audio-visual advertisements can be used in English classrooms to facilitate online teaching-learning and make the process more engaging while fostering positivity in students during times of adversity. For this, a mixed-method, bottom-up, exploratory study was conducted in July, 2021 on 81 undergraduate students of two colleges from two different states (viz. Delhi and Rajasthan) to assess if exposing students to audio-visual materials with explicit messages of hope and resilience aids in better online learning. Data was collected through web-based surveys followed by personal interviews. The findings suggest that the majority of students experienced the monotony of learning online during the pandemic. However, after viewing some audio-visual advertisements based on COVID-19 with optimistic messages, students reported to have felt positive and more interested in the learning process. The study provides significant insights into the kind of classroom interventions that can be done by teachers/teacher educators to ensure that students at all levels of learning remain meaningfully involved in the learning process because even post-pandemic, online and/or hybrid teaching is here to stay. The paper gives a brief account of the impact of the pandemic on student's mental health, reviews related literature, presents a quantitative-cum-qualitative analysis of the data and discusses some significant findings. Finally, some suggestions for pre-service and in-service teachers, teacher educators and other stakeholders are offered.

Keywords : Audio-visual advertisements; Bottom-up; English classroom; Exploratory; In-service teachers; Mixed method; Pre-service teachers; Teaching-learning.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 disease brought the whole world to a standstill and transformed people's lives in myriad ways. The pandemic peri-

od, especially the lockdowns, took a toll on the psychological and mental health of people in general and students in particular (Horesh & Brown, 2020). Work/study-from-home became the norm and students were deprived of campus activities and face-to-face interaction with friends and faculty resulting in an increased sense of uncertainty leading to stress. With schools and higher education institutions closed in several parts of the world, teachers and students were compelled to shift to emergency remote teaching-learning in late 2020/early 2021 even as they struggled to come to terms with understanding and adopting the online mode of classes over Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet etc.

As we gradually started to adapt to virtual education, it was increasingly felt by teachers and students alike that most online English classes were boring, dry and less engrossing due to their lecture-driven nature ((Pawlak et al, 2021). Moreover, teachers found it quite challenging to gauge the attention of the students whose cameras were switched off most of the times and to ensure their full engagement. The changed scenario amidst the pandemic also simultaneously increased the screen time as students started spending more time on television, the internet and mobile (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021); also, further leading to increased advertisement-watching time. Based on this assumption, the researchers conceptualized this small-scale study to investigate whether using audio-visual ads set against the COVID-19 background containing positive messages as teaching tools would lead to increased levels of student participation and involvement in virtual classroom interactions. Most of the ads that were aired during the time of the pandemic had an emotional appeal because many corporates performed their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by coming up with initiates which promoted positivity, reflected optimism, courage and resilience.

The *National Education Policy, 2020* emphasizes that education must develop in students "not only cognitive capacities - both the 'foundational capacities 'of literacy and numeracy and 'higher-order' cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving – but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions" (p. 4). It also advocates extensive use of technology and adoption of pedagogy that makes learning "more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable" (p. 3). Using audio-visual aids such as ads in online teaching fulfills the above criteria. Moreover, research proves that "with this (advertising), a smart teacher invites students' participation and reenergizes the complete leaning experience" (Chauhan, 2008).

Instead of focusing on teachers' perceptions, experiences and coping strategies for online teaching, this study adopts a bottom-up approach in sharing students' responses to the use of audio-visual ads in online classrooms based on empirical data. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful in designing training modules for pre-service and in-service teachers as well as in dissemination of the usefulness of contextual, authentic audio-visual materials in English classrooms at all levels for not merely language gains but also for fostering students' emotional well-being thereby making teaching-learning more meaningful.

Research Objectives

The present study aimed at investigating the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1. What were the dominant emotions experienced by students during COVID-19?

RQ 2.   What were students' opinions about online teaching-learning during the pandemic?

RQ 3. Does exposing students to audio-visual ads with optimistic messages impact students' positively and make them more responsive in online classes?

RQ 4. Can audio-visual ads be used in English classrooms to make the virtual teaching-learning more engrossing?

Literature Review

A large number of empirical studies have been conducted to investigate COVID -19 related perceptions and experiences of students. Son et al. (2020) conducted an interview survey of 195 students in the USA on the impact of COVID -19 on the mental health of students and reported that around 71% students exhibited increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression due to the fear of contagion, minimal social exchange and issues related to their academic performance. The researchers underlined the importance of urgent measures to ensure students' mental well-being. A large-scale study to explore the self-reported psychological effects of COVID -19 on students was conducted by Wathelet et al. (2020) who collected data online from around 70,000 students studying at undergraduate level in colleges in France. Their sample mainly comprised women (72.8%) and the findings revealed the prevalence of negative emotions in

students such as suicidal thoughts (11.4%); increased level of perceived stress (24.7%); depression (16.1%) and increased level of anxiety (27.5%). Recommendations based on the findings of this research include reinforcing preventive strategies, going in for more student involvement and making the class more engrossing. Sahu (2020), in his comprehensive review, highlights the disastrous effects of the pandemic on the mental health of university students and academic staff. He recommends urgent interventions such as extending counselling services, establishing task-forces in universities and introducing lectures that offer students strategies to mitigate their stress. It is important to note that the literature reviewed above reports of studies that were carried out earlier during the year 2020 when most countries were witnessing the first wave of COVID -19 outbreak. Fewer studies (Tari and Amonkar, 2021; Chaturvedi et al., 2021) have been conducted in the year 2021, particularly in countries such as India that witnessed a more deadly second wave in April-May 2021.

As far as language materials for English classrooms are concerned, according to Tomlinson (1998), language materials should expose the learners to rich and varied authentic use of target language. Thus, apart from using print material such as books, newspapers etc. it has become an established practice in teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) to use media and films in the classroom. Highlighting the advantages of exploiting advertisements as pedagogical tools in an EFL setting, Picken (1999) exhorts teachers to use them optimally by focusing on their richness in terms of language and visual elements. Several studies demonstrate how advertisements can be used beneficially to develop students' English language skills. Park's research study (2011) reports how newspaper articles can be used effectively in an EFL setting to develop students' critical reading skills. Similarly, Babocka (2016) exhibits using billboard advertisements to enrich learners' English vocabulary apart from developing their intercultural competence, reading and writing skills as well as creativity. However, most research deals with using advertisements primarily for English language enhancement. The present study argues that apart from language development, advertisements particularly the ones with a strong emotional appeal can be used to build students' foundational skills such as positivity and resilience that students require in difficult times such as the current pandemic.

Methodology and Research Tools

Online survey data was collected from 81 students using two questionnaires and subsequently 4 respondents, two undergraduate students each

from Delhi (Shri Ram College of Commerce- SRCC) and Rajasthan (R K Patni College, Kishangarh- RKPC) were interviewed to probe the research problems in detail.

Two questionnaires were prepared for the respondents: pre-viewing and post-viewing. In the beginning 08 questions were included in the pre-viewing questionnaire and 10 in the post-viewing one. But after getting the questions vetted from 3 objective reviewers, one each from the field of Psychology, Economics and English, the questions were reduced to 4 in the pre-viewing questionnaire comprising 3 MCQs and 1 Yes/ No type question (Appendix 1) and 4 in the post-viewing questionnaire comprising 2 MCQs and 2 Yes/ No type questions (Appendix 2) .

After the survey responses were received, 4 students were interviewed, based on an interview schedule (Appendix 3) comprising 5 questions. The questions were primarily designed to elicit detailed responses from students regarding their experiences during the pandemic and their opinions about the impact that the 4 ads (shortlisted out of 50; Appendix 4) had in mitigating the negative feelings of stress and anxiety in students, because of their emotional appeal and scope for conversation. The last question was specifically designed to investigate whether students perceived audio-visual ads with an emotional appeal as effective pedagogical tool to be used in the English classroom.

Study-sample

Purposive sampling technique was adopted to shortlist 100 participants from two institutions (40 students, in the age group of 18-20, pursuing their graduation in English from RKPC and 60 students, in the age group of 17-18, pursuing their graduation in Commerce stream from SRCC. However, 81 respondents (28 and 53 respectively) finally participated in the web-based survey through Google Form during the online session (through Google Meet, 30 minutes) conducted on 22 July 2021 as displayed in the Table below.

Table: Details of the sample of the study conducted in July 2021

University	Duration of shortlisting respondents	Description of respondents	Gender	Total
RK Patni College, Kishangarh, Ajmer	10 July 2021 - 12 July 2021	Undergraduate, Second year students in Department of English	Female- 16 Male- 12	28
Shri Ram College of Commerce (University of Delhi), Delhi	10 July 2021 - 15 July 2021	Undergraduate, Second Semester students in Department of Commerce with English as an ability enhancement compulsory course (AECC)	Female- 27 Male- 26	53
		Total students expected Total students appeared Response %	100 81 81%	

These students were considered a suitable sample for the study since the population comprised young adult learners representing socio-cultural as well as linguistic diversity. Both sets of students were studying courses wherein they had some exposure to advertisements through their teachers (researchers).

Data-collection

Due to COVID- 19 protocol, it was not possible to get institutional approval, so approval was sought from the respective respondents. The response rate was 81% as the students were made to fill the Google Forms in the virtual session in the presence of the researchers. Instructions and background of the survey were first given through WhatsApp message and further detailing given during the virtual session. The male and female representation was almost at par (43 females and 38 males).

The session was of 30 minutes; 4-5 minutes initial instructions along with data confidentiality assurance were given. Thereafter, respondents were given 4-5 minutes for filling up the pre-viewing questionnaire, followed by 10-12 minutes for viewing the ads (each ad was played twice to ensure recall). Towards the end they were given 4-5 minutes for filling up the

post-viewing questionnaire. Finally, in the last 3-4 mins summing up was done followed by thanksgiving.

Subsequently, on the basis of the researchers' experience of teaching the respective students in their regular classes, 4 students were identified (2 each from RKPC and SRCC; 1 male and 1 female from each institution) and each pair of respondents was interviewed online (around 15 mins for each) by respective researchers based on an interview schedule (Appendix 3).

Quantitative Data: Analysis and Findings

The survey responses received by the students were analyzed statistically and the findings are presented below in relation to the research questions.

RQ 1. What were the dominant emotions experienced by students during COVID-19?

To address the above question, item 1 on the questionnaire required the respondents to choose the dominant emotion(s) they experienced during the COVID-19 outbreak from a list of 4 emotions (comprising negative as well as positive emotions). Figure 1. below graphically represents the self-reported varied emotions experienced by the students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
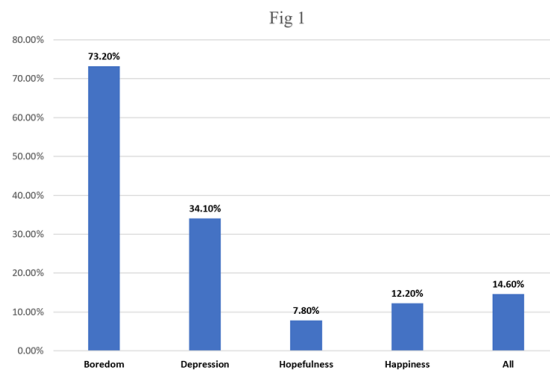

Figure 1: Dominant emotions experienced during COVID- 19

As is evident from the above figure, students experienced a variety of emotions during the pandemic ranging from the negative to the positive. Since the item allowed students to choose more than one option, several students reported having experienced mixed feelings. However, students seemed to have undergone predominantly negative emotions. Maximum number of students reported to have experienced boredom (73.2%) followed by depression (34.1%). Fewer respondents reported to have experienced positive emotions with happiness being experienced by some students (12.2%) and the least felt positive emotion was reported to be hopefulness (07.8%). A small number of respondents also reported to have experienced the entire gamut of emotions (14.6%).

RQ2 What were students' opinions about online teaching-learning during the pandemic?

As the figure below shows, on being asked about how the students felt about online education during the prolonged period of COVID-19 pandemic on a scale of zero ("Not at all boring") to four ("Extremely boring"), around 64% perceived their boredom levels to be ranging from severe to moderate. While 25.6% respondents reported being very bored, 32.9% claimed to have experienced moderate monotony. Another 32.9% reported being somewhat bored. It is worth noting that very few students reported either being extremely bored or not experiencing any monotony at all.
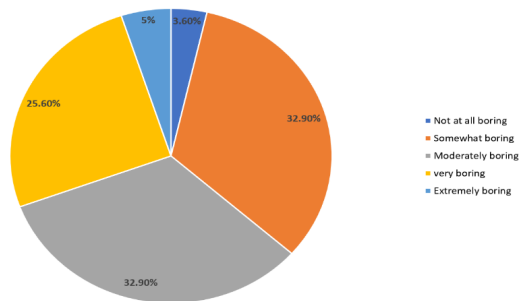

Figure 2: Students' opinion of online education during COVID- 19

RQ 3. Does exposing students to audio-visual advertisements with optimistic messages impact students' positivity and make them more responsive in online classes?

The generation Z respondents were asked if audio-visual advertisements had a soothing effect and instilled positivity in them. As Figure 3 below demonstrates, an overwhelming majority of students (93.9%) responded in the affirmative.
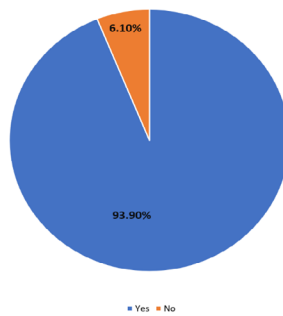
Figure 3: Impact of audio-visual advertisements in instilling positivity

This has been further reconfirmed by the responses received in the post-viewing questionnaire, in which 91.7% respondents confirmed that the 4 ads shown to them have been successful in establishing a connect with them as graphically presented below.
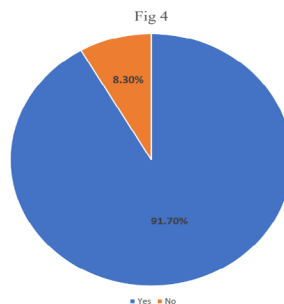
Figure 4: Whether ads shown had been successful in establishing a connect with viewers

The concluding item 4 in the pre-viewing questionnaire required respondents to specify which aspects of an audio-visual advertisement, in their

opinion, appeal to them the most. Students' responses are depicted in Figure 5 below.
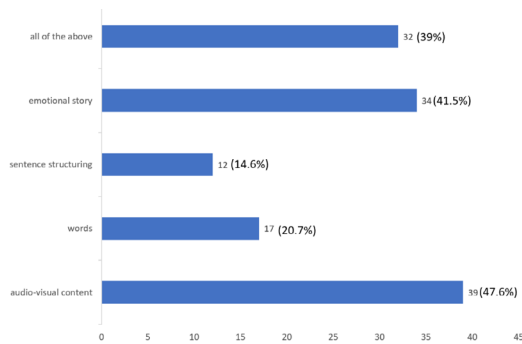

Figure 5: Aspects which appeal in an audio-visual advertisement

While 47.6% respondents felt that the audio-visual content of an advertisement appealed the most to them, around 41.5% were of the opinion that an emotional story makes a lasting impression on the audience. Only 20.7% students believed that words used in an advertisement have an appeal while 14.6% were of the opinion that sentence patterns leave an impact on the viewers. Around 39% respondents felt that it was an amalgamation of all the above discussed factors that enhance the appeal of an advertisement. As a follow-up, in the post-viewing questionnaire when the respondents were asked the reason of their liking the ads shown to them, a large majority (81.54%) of them chose all the factors (repetition, emotional connect, appealing structures and audio-visual content).
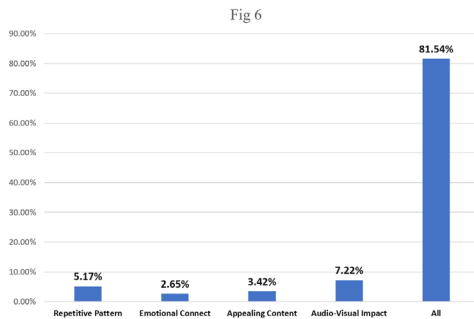

Figure 6: Factors in an advertisement that appeal to viewers

These responses received from both pre-viewing and post-viewing questionnaires show that overall it is the cumulative impact of the audio-visual ad which appeals to students.

Items 2 and 3 in the post-viewing questionnaire further reconfirm the responses received above. 80.45% respondents said that all the four ads shown impacted them positively.
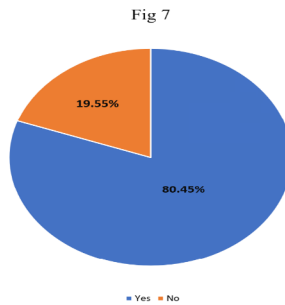
Fig 7

19.55%

80.45%

■ Yes ■ No

Figure 7: Positive impact of the 4 ads viewed by students

85.55% respondents were of the view that the four ads shown can be used in the classroom to make online teaching more engrossing.
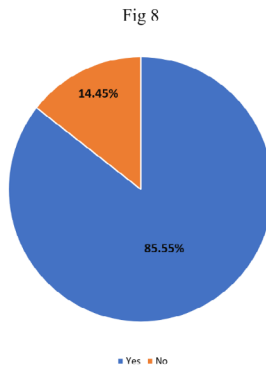
Fig 8

14.45%

85.55%

■ Yes ■ No

Figure 8: Whether ads should be used for teaching-learning in the English classroom

Thus, from the responses received, it could be concluded that primarily advertisements can have an alleviating impact on the viewers/ students and in online teaching, these can be very effective because of their dual effect (audio as well as visual).

Qualitative Data: Analysis and Findings

In order to explore students' responses in detail, it was pertinent to follow-up the survey with personal interviews where students could express their views at length. As mentioned in the data collection procedure, 4 respondents were identified, intimated about the shortlisting and their consent was sought to participate in the interview. The data collected through interviews was later transcribed and finally during the analysis only the relevant data was extracted.

Content Analysis of Interviews

Regarding learning experience during the pandemic, all the four respondents said that initially they were quite excited about attending online classes but gradually these long classes with mostly one-sided communication via lectures became dry. The respondents recalled the ads used as aids in their classes in the past by R1 and R2 and said that those ads infused a sense of positivity in them.

The first respondent (RRM1) mentioned that it is just not the ads they viewed that contribute to classroom interaction but there are many other ads that can be used to promote "critical discussions." The second respondent (RRF1) cited the ad of a jewellery brand which showed "acceptance for the transsexual, and the transgender community." She felt that "this sense of inclusiveness brought a kind of positivity." Similarly, she talked about "a post that came up on BBC Instagram page which said that it's okay, it's okay to be not okay, and it's also, okay that your cup is empty, if you are completely drained out. So it gives a positive feeling that it's not just you who are feeling uneasy, there are people around you as well who are feeling the same." Apart from this the creative use of language also draws one attention. The third respondent (DRM1) was of the view that ads with a positive message gave the viewers an "opportunity to think deeply … and further improve upon our lives." The fourth respondent (DRF1) was reminded of a trending line during the peak time of pandemic, "this too shall pass" which made her hopeful.

Further R1 and R2 asked the respondents about the impact of these ads in

driving away the monotony in the classroom. The first respondent (RRM1) said that ads which trigger the embedded emotions help in driving away the monotony. The second respondent (RRF1) was of the view that those ads which have a shock element are able to drive away the monotony. In this regard she was reminded of the Bima Jewellery ad. The third respondent (DRM1) said that "when we are in a state of hopelessness and despair" some ads do provide us relief, instil feelings of positivity and help us get rid of online dryness. The fourth respondent (DRF1) observed that the punch lines of ads have a recall value and have the ability to impact the viewers' minds considerably.

All the respondents were of the opinion that ads should be used as teaching material in the English classroom. Each one of them agreed that ads could be used in both language and literature classes. RRM1 was of the view that "these ads can be used to discuss about contemporary time or … discuss about the culture." RRF1 was of the view that ads have a lasting recall value. She said that "There are times when most of the ads you watched during school time come to your head [sic.] more easily than anything else." Connecting it to her literature class, she realized that ads use literary devices very often and this is where they have a pedagogical connect. For the teacher these can come as handy tools to make the students comprehend the use of literary devices. DRM1 also felt that the language of the ads, especially the punch lines, is crisp and meaningful and it "broadens one's horizons [sic.] of thinking." The respondent felt that even the simple messages given through ads "can be discussed and debated in the classroom." DRF1 said that the advertisers are "very selective and choosy about the words that they particularly use in their advertisements" because they have a lasting impression on the targeted viewer. She regretted that these ads were not being used as teaching tools in a major way. Finally, she said that "repetition creates a pattern in one's mind …"

So, from the responses received it can be concluded that ads are still underutilized tools in an English language/ literature classroom and should be used more often. Students at all levels connect with these ads immediately because they are familiar with them due to repeated exposure.

Limitations of the Study

The survey for the present study was administered online thereby limiting the possibility of participation of those students who did not have internet access. Moreover, the purposive sampling technique that was adopted for this study to select a small sample size of students from two

colleges in two states in India limited the generalizability of the findings. Last, the exploratory nature of the study did not permit the researchers/ teachers to study the long-lasting impact of advertisements on students' learning psyche.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of undergraduate students when online teaching was at its peak. The online surveys and interviews conducted in the course of the study found students to be positive, engaged and engrossed. Even the researchers observed a tremendous change in the students' attitude in the virtual classes after viewing the ads. They started participating more actively in the classroom activities. Some of the themes highlighted in the ads such as showing kindness and concern for fellow human-beings (Cadbury's); breaking gender stereotypes (Dove); exhibiting resilience (Clear) and feeling optimistic (Coca-Cola) inspired the students to discuss and write about their own COVID-19 experiences.

Students self-reported that viewing the advertisements drove away the monotony. The study fills an important research gap around several empirical studies that have suggested urgent interventions to ensure psychological balance of students and also ensure effectiveness of online teaching. The present study recommends the use of audio-visual advertisements in the English classroom to facilitate a more interactive approach in English classrooms with a view to develop students' "emotional capacities." In accordance with the end goal of the *New Education Policy (NEP) 2020*, training modules may be developed and training programmes for pre-service and in-service teachers teaching in schools and colleges may be designed on integrating technology to foster learners' engagement in both online and offline classes.

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