

EFL Students Online Learning Experience During Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Indonesian government made a policy to carry out online learning because of COVID-19 pandemic. The shift from mostly face to face learning to online learning give different learning experience to the students. The present study is aimed at exploring how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students experience online learning. The data were drawn from essays written by 28 EFL students at a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The findings of the study reflect four themes of the students' experience. They are time management skills, the acceptance of personal responsibility, the way of learning, and the challenge the students face. The findings provide information for further development and improvement in online teaching and learning methodologies. Further research on the strategy of how the students face the challenge is encouraged.

Keywords: *EFL students, online learning, reflection*

1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of the corona virus (covid-19) originating from the city of Wuhan, China caused a polemic that had major impact worldwide. This flu-like disease attacks half of the population worldwide due to its rapid spread through the air. It is also revealed emerging vulnerabilities in education systems around the world. Burges and Sievertsen (2020) stated that the global lockdown of education institutions is going to cause major (and likely unequal) interruption in students learning; disruptions in internal assessments; and the cancellation of public assessment for qualifications or their replacement by an inferior alternative.

Governments and tertiary institutions across the world utilize technology in support of online learning. However, there are ambiguity and disagreement about what to teach, how to teach, the workload of teachers and students, the teaching environment, and the extend of internet access. Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Wang (2020) argue that one of the most pressing current tasks is to conduct in-depth investigation into online education, especially students' support.

The Indonesian government made policy by dismissing activities in schools and even lectures to tackle the spread of the virus. Some higher education institutions in Indonesia respond to it by conducting

online learning or online lectures. In a public university in Jambi, Indonesia, the policy began on March 14, 2020.

The teaching mode was shifted from mostly face to face learning to fully online learning. It gives different experience to everyone involved, especially to the students as online learning was not yet a major form of education in the institution, and many teachers had no previous experience in online teaching. This, of course, may result in and cause an impact on the students' learning. The students are not prepared for the demanding and highly isolated learning experience of online learning. They may experience frustration and failure because of the challenge. (Kim, Rosemary; Olfman, Lorne; Ryan, Terry; Eryilmaz, Evren, 2014). Online learning is a lifeline for many students caught in the consequences of the spread of the virus but may also be a way of coping with fourteen days of home confinement for all: there is a lot that can be learned in two weeks.

Some studies had been carried out previously on online learning and COVID-19. Among them are the study carried by Ali (2020) that explored about online and remote learning in higher institutions. This research is an exploratory research aiming at portraying the trend of moving to a more online learning due to covid 19. It employed meta-analysis and literature study as the methods of the research. Another related previous research is the study carried by Atmojo & Nugroho (2020)

that investigate how EFL teacher carried out EFL online learning and the challenges the faced. The next previous research is the one carried out by Allo (2020). This research has a close resemblance with the present study in which they both are concerned with the students' point of view of online learning in the pandemic situation. In this study, Allo (2020) investigated learner perception on online learning in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. It employed semi-structured interview as the data collection technique and this make it different from the present study. In this present study, the main data were taken from students' essay reflected on their learning during the covid 19 pandemic. Therefore, it is obvious that none of the previous studies specifically discussed about EFL students' reflection on their experience on learning online during COVID-19 pandemic.

This study is part of a research on self-directed learning conducted by the researchers in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. It was guided by the following research question: *What are EFL students' experiences reflected in response to online learning during the beginning of covid-19 in a higher education institution in Indonesia.* The objective of this study is to explore the EFL students experience on online learning during the beginning of COVID_19 pandemic as reflected in the students' essays. Understanding EFL students' experience with online learning might provide information for further development and improvement in many aspects of online teaching and learning, especially in the institution.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Self-directed learning and Covid-19 pandemic

Knowles (1975) describe self-directed learning as process in which individuals initiate (with or without the help of others) in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. The literature shows that self-directed learning is a concept embodies many factors connected to students' responsibility and independence in learning. According to Silen and Uhlin (2008), there are two factors which are important in the development of self-directed learning. They are 1) the students' feelings of being in charge on the learning situation which is crucial for the desire of taking responsibility and 2) the students' feelings which are connected to understanding the demands of the learning context, experiences of managing and getting feedback. Covid-19 pandemic is a situation where students are required to be responsible and independent in their learning.

Reflection is one way to evaluate the students' learning. It plays important role for the students to learn

and develop their skills. Reflective education allows the learning experience for students to show and reflect deeply on their thoughts and beliefs on topics and events that are an important part of their education. Online learning which is imposed to the students amid this pandemic situation is one of the events in which the students need to reflect on. Their reflective practices on their online learning will surely contribute to the betterment of the practices of online learning.

2.2. Face to face learning and Online learning

Face to face learning involves the learning structure at which the teacher is physically facing each other in being. Online learning, in contrast, include teaching via online (related to the computer system or accessible by computer) connection between teacher and the individual learner. That may exist in the form of pictures, photos or text documents exchanged electronically via the internet. Communication is completely different in online class as compared to face-to-face. Anna (July 2020), an implementation consultant, wrote that online learning is a great alternative and supplement to face-to-face learning.

3. METHOD

This qualitative study explores EFL students' experiences on online learning at the beginning of COVID-19 outbreak on March 2020. The participants were a class of EFL students who were taking Second Language Acquisition subject at the time the policy of learning online was announced by the institution. The participants were taken purposively for the sake of easiness of access and because the subject they were taking is about what, why and how people learn. Besides, this study is part of a research on self-directed learning conducted by the researcher in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia that the same students were the participants.

The qualitative data were taken from the students' essays which were the students' written task of the course and Whatsapp group discussion for clarifying some issues to the students. The reflective essays written by the students were expected to give more honest responses as they were asked to reflect on their own learning practices during the pandemic. The essays were about students' reflective practices on their online learning. The students uploaded their essays with a theme 'corona and my language learning' to Google Classroom to promote self-directed learning process and independency of the students. This theme was chosen by the students themselves. The data were analyzed qualitatively by using thematic analysis performed through the process of coding in six phases: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among

codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding of the concept of second language learning is facilitated and constructed when students discuss about their own experiences in learning. When students develop meta-cognitive awareness of their learning both in order to engage and as a result of engaging in a dialog with adults about their learning experiences and needs, they not only construct their understanding of subject matter content but they also construct themselves a new version of themselves (Cook-Sather, 2008). The data were synthesized into four main themes. These four main themes were generated from the probes given in the essay prompt. They are time management skills, the acceptance of personal responsibility, the way of learning, and the challenge the students' face.

4.1. Time management skills

Time management is the process of designing and practicing conscious power of time spent on particular action, particularly to increase strength, efficiency or productivity. It is the juggling act of different needs of learning, social life, business, family, and individual interest and commitments with the finiteness of experience. Using time effectively makes the individual "option" on spending/managing actions in their own time and expediency (Cottrell, 2013).

Instead of managing time for efficiency and productivity some of the students experience lack on time management skill during their online learning.

- 1) The lack of time management in using technology makes me dependent on technology and makes me an anti-social person.
- 2) Because of the corona virus, lecture study is held online. It makes my study schedule disorganized.

The first student realizes that he lacks time management skill in using technology. It could be in the form of spending more time on searching for the resources and being mismanaged/distracted by social media uses and by his dependency on the technology. This could be explained by the concept of digital natives' fallacy. Online learning needs online digital skills. Grown up surrounded by digital technologies does not mean that students digitally literate. Fortunately, not all students are lack of time management skills. Some participants manage their time during study at home.

- 3) I manage my time like I know when I'm productive and when I'm not productive to do something.

The difference in students' response reflected the concept of differences in learners (Saville-Troike, 2012).

4.2. The acceptance of personal responsibility

The acceptance of personal responsibility means that the students acknowledge that they are solely responsible for the choices they have made for their learning and life. They accept that they are responsible for what they choose to feel or think as a learner and as a good citizen.

- 1) However, so far, such obstacles do not really interfere with my learning activities or reduce my motivation to learn, especially in language learning. The existence of corona virus does not mean we have to panic and be afraid to make us not concentrate on learning. With the implementation of policies like this does not mean that we should also be lazy at home, precisely this way teaches us to improve our insights independently.
- 2) But besides that all, with the corona virus and various difficulties that must be overcome, encouraged me to become curious and master the material by looking for more sources of support to learn more to understand and master the material.

A student and her friends explained that they personally accept the reality that they had to learn from home, and that although they face some obstacles, they are responsible for their own learning activities. The acceptance of personal responsibility opened the opportunity of improvement of the students' independence in learning. Not only that, it also reflects the students' character as a good citizen.

- 3) Based on instructions from the government to do social distance and stay home more. I prefer to follow it by reducing activities outside the home, so I am more often at home. Besides doing online lectures and doing assignments, I also fill my free time at home by watching films and series from Netflix. Because in my opinion watching a movie can also practice listening and can learn new vocabulary. Recently I watched the Netflix series from Spain, by watching it I was able to learn various Spanish vocabulary even if only a little.
- 4) So basically, the corona virus is hampering my English learning process, but as a good citizen I have to obey the rules set by the government and also the campus to stay at home and study at home. This is done in order to prevent / inhibit the spread of the corona virus.

4.3. The way of learning

Saville-Troike (2012) stated that language learning outcomes are influenced by age, aptitude, and motivation. Each student prefers different learning styles

and techniques. For some students the shift from face to face to online learning influence the way they learn.

- 1) Due to the stipulation of this online lecture the intensity of my meeting with friends and lecturers was significantly reduced. As a result of the reduced intensity I met with friends and lecturers so that it became difficult for me to practice English in my daily life.

There are a few of the students that are not shocked by online learning. They are used to work under pressure and usually work casually.

- 2) It is true that the Corona virus has a bad effect to my language learning in class, but it also have a good side which it motivate me to read more about it. since we start having online classes at home, I begin to gain interest to the Corona virus which have become a hot topic in the internet. Because of my curiosity, I start to read medical articles and journal that related to the Corona virus where sometimes I have a hard time in reading it because most of them used scientific language which I mostly don't understand. But it motivated me more to learn about it because it is something new and quite interesting for me, I also learn more vocabularies from the news that are related to the virus which is a good thing. From the news, not only I can increase my vocabularies, but also my knowledge about health system, social problems and also political movement, it is possible for me to learn all of that because I have more spare time than the usually day.

There is no other choice. The students have to accept the reality that they must stay at home and find the most appropriate way of learning for themselves. The following discussion with students proves that.

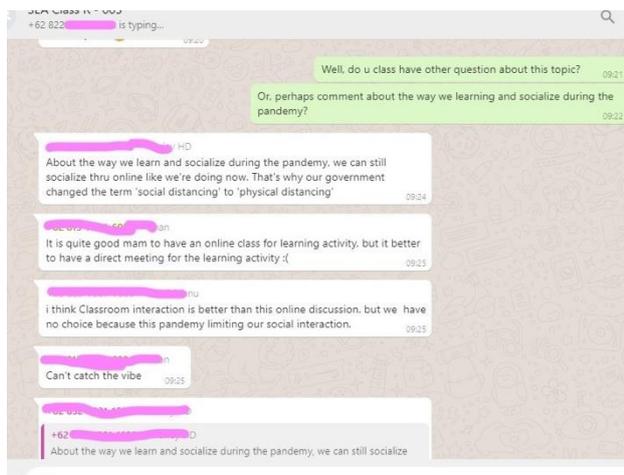


Figure 1 Students' WhatsApp discussion.

When application is applied in a meaningful and organized manner as an online learning tool, students engage in this self-reflection about previous face-to-face

learning experiences and connect them to this new learning experiences. Consequently, students learn to combine this learning matter and move in higher order thinking.

4.4. The challenge the students face

Bad internet connection and inappropriate way of teaching resulted in lack of motivation are the main challenges experienced by the students.

- 1) Because of this corona virus learning was held online, it makes my learning schedule chaotic and I'm lack motivation because every time I was doing an online learning. I don't really understand what my lecture explained due to a bad internet connection. Also, because I study languages, I was given different task to do at home, and now instead of turning them in class, I send them to my lecturers via online. It's a very efficient system but for someone like me, who is used to spending most days in campus with my friends, being at home is a real motivation-killer.

Online learning with low bandwidth and weak connection overwhelmed most of the students. To find free wi-fi location is quite impossible because they must stay at home. A strong internet connection is required.

- 2) This kind of learning method made me overwhelmed and stressed because a lot of obstacles they encounter when using an online system. One of the main problems is related to the internet connection, sometimes I have difficulties in accessing both the assignments and the materials provided.
- 3) The government gave instructions to all educational institution to change the learning method, from face to face classroom into online classes to minimize the spread of the Covid-19. We, the student expect it won't any different with regular class but we were wrong, it's not online class but an online assignment. Well actually were not shocked at all with online assignment, because were used to it but we didn't expect that each one of the lecturer will gave assignment with a short deadline.

Some students start out fully engaged in and then discover that their motivation wanes because of lots of assignments.

- 4) Sometimes my lecturers give a lot of assignments in a short time and in same time. This also made it difficult for me to learn English. Why? Because my time was spent just doing work without being able to read, hear, watch or translate things as I usually do to develop my skills in English. Every day assignments haunt me and make me worry.

The other challenge is the closure of learning facilities such as libraries.

5) Furthermore, the thing that hinders my language learning related to Corona virus is the closure of learning facilities such as libraries. As we know the library is a means of supporting learning where there are needed reading resources, especially in the world of language learning. With the closing of the library it also becomes difficult for language learning, although currently reading material can easily be found via the internet but for me who like reading material in the form of printed books is very difficult and disruptive to my language education process.

Some students find it difficult to adapt to online requirements (Xu & Jaggar, 2013). Keeping up with all the work expected can be challenging. Between classes and readings and assignments sometimes it feels like there are not enough hours in the day to get everything done. The workload increases dramatically. It is important to plan well and use time effectively by avoiding procrastination as much as possible. But it is also important to stay healthy and to leave time for having fun as well as studying. Some issues which might be impacting the feeling of being overwhelmed are reading everything, not going to class, not writing things down, and waiting too long to seek help. In short, it can be said that the workload of online classes is larger than that of regular classes (Angdhiri, July 2020)

In today's world, teacher's responsibility is not only to provide e-learning but support the students, stay connected and keep the integrity within the classroom as well. Teacher should open to communication. Keep the lesson simple, and kind in grading assignment. Teacher can find time to discuss students' concern about the world situation during the lesson. Keep calm and optimistic may help the students to gain their motivation back.

However, little can be done to resolve the connectivity problem when everyone goes online. The sad truth is we all have to adapt to slow internet speed amid the coronavirus lockdown and learn to live with it.

5. CONCLUSION

Covid-19 pandemic is affecting the teaching and learning process. Online learning might be a solution, but it requires self-directed and independent learner. For independent learner, the online learning combined with the scary for covid-19 might give positive impact, but for the dependent one, they might experience it differently.

The students' lack of time management skills results on chaotic schedule and anti-social person. On the other hand, most of the students show that they are responsible students and citizen by accepting their personal responsibility. The policy of staying at home and online learning during COVID-19 pandemic teach them to improve their independency and encourage them to be curious for more sources of knowledge. The students'

response reflected their character of a good student and citizen although there are some challenges they face.

The right data in the teachers' hand can be a powerful tool to improve the learning process and students learning outcomes. Sharing reflective experiences and delivery with others becomes an important part of enhancing student learning experiences and developing strong communities of practice within higher educational contexts.

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