

# **Beyond Classroom Wall: A Review of Research on Online Learning in EFL Teaching Contexts During Pandemic COVID-19**

Siti Kustini<sup>1\*</sup> Nurfitriah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin*

<sup>2</sup> *Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin*

\*Corresponding author. Email: [kustini@poliban.ac.id](mailto:kustini@poliban.ac.id)

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to synthesize and critically examine the empirical research on online learning particularly in EFL classroom contexts during the time of pandemic COVID-19. The research articles reviewed in this study utilized several inclusive criteria including (1) peer-reviewed articles; (2) studies using online learning framework in EFL classroom contexts; and (3) studies within the last 1,5 years. The aim of the review is to identify patterns and themes through qualitative content analysis across the research studies. Accompanying the qualitative data, the results of this study also present descriptive statistics characterizing the studies reviewed. To this end, a combination of search engine databases (e.g. ERIC; Google Scholars) and some reputable journal websites (e.g. tandfonline.com; springerlink.com) were utilized to navigate the research articles. Across the corpus of 85 studies, findings show the characteristics of the research studies. The quantitative approach in the form of survey-based online questionnaire (32%) was the most preferred research design. Then, the most prevalent research was qualitative design with interview (26%) for the data collection. Most of the studies in this topic involved students as participants (64%) in tertiary level of education (74%). The results also indicate the commonalities (themes) including the challenges of emergency online learning, the perceptions and attitude of the research participants, and the practices of online language teaching. This study suggests English teacher education provide courses not only for face-to-face classroom, but also for online teaching and equip in-service teachers with training to conduct online teaching effectively and efficiently.

**Keywords:** *Covid-19, Education System, EFL, Online Learning, Review Research.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Due to the global pandemic COVID-19, schools and universities across the globe closed their doors and cancelled on-school classes and embarked on an effort to provide remote education. Schools replaced the delivery instruction from the customary traditional approach to the new unplanned shift of online approach with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous instructions offered via Web-based learning platforms such as Canvas, Edmodo, Google Classroom, and Moodle. The emergency remote learning seems to become a panacea for this unprecedented worldwide pandemic despite the overwhelming challenges posed to both teachers and learners. E-learning tools indeed have played a significant role during this situation, providing schools with applications to facilitate learning during the closure of schools and universities. Transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning

can be a completely different experience for both learners and educators, which they must adjust to because there are few or no other options.

In the context of English language teaching, the online learning is not a new phenomenon. It has been practiced prior to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and many of English language practitioners and learners claim to have become accustomed to the online learning [1]. The term Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), for example, has been recognized and implemented for more than 40 years. Due to the advancement of technology, the practice of CALL evolves considerably, and open the door for more advanced online language learning. Thus, the familiarization of teachers and learners to technology in English teaching leads to the best outcome of student learning. Yet, the sudden transition of pedagogical practices from face to face to remote learning in English

teaching may trigger challenges both for teachers and students.

Since the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, a plethora of research studies has been massively conducted taking focus on various elements of teaching including, for example, the teacher's teaching practices, the teaching activities and strategies, the impact of online learning, the student motivation and engagement, the availability of teaching and learning resources, and other educational aspects. Similarly, in English language teaching, many research studies have been done to investigate various aspects of teaching including learning materials, teachers, students, assessment, technology tools, teaching platforms, and challenges or barriers in online English learning (see for example [2], [3], [4], [5]).

Take for an example the study conducted by [6] this research attempts to investigate students' readiness and willingness towards online learning education. Involving first-year undergraduate English learners as participants, this study tries to shed light on students' readiness by looking at their learning autonomy based on gender. The results of the study indicate that Saudi first-year students are autonomous in a moderate way that both males and female students perform similar levels of aptitude and readiness for taking responsibility for their learning.

Another interesting study was performed by [7] which explores the challenges of conducting online English instructional practices in Iran. Employing exploratory mixed method design in the research, this study shows several challenges encountered during the implementation of online learning. Among the barriers are lack of appropriate learning materials, learners' lack of attention and demotivation, and lack of funding and support for language learning institution.

Drawing upon the research findings based on the potential benefits and challenges of online instructional practices in English language teaching, the technological resources, technical issues, and teacher-student related problems, a comprehensive study based on an integrative literature review is required to be conducted to obtain the general overview of what has been done in the practice of English language teaching during critical period of pandemic. Reviewing the literature may be beneficial to provide guidance on the critical gap of what has been researched thus far. In addition, the review of this kind may provide critical insights into the pedagogical and technological aspects of online English instructional practices and the global impacts may have on students. With this aim in mind, this study attempts to synthesize and critically interpret the empirical research on the practice of English

language teaching during the period of Covid-19 pandemic.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The prominent theoretical framework used in this study is online learning in English language teaching.

### **Online Learning in English Language Teaching**

Teaching English in an online environment is a daunting task, particularly for teachers who are accustomed to face-to-face teaching. Online English education has been around for decades, and in recent years has become mainstream in the time of Covid-19 pandemic. More English educators are involved in delivery of courses using technological tools in various ways. The existence of the notions of "blended learning" and "the flipped classroom" is the evidence of this online trend.

Online learning, also known as e-learning, takes place over the internet or virtual environment. It is one type of distance learning. The increasingly fast development of advanced technologies and open educational resources paves the way for learners to have more opportunities to access digital materials, to interact with other people one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many as well as to immerse in virtual learning. Online learning environments can be categorized into three central groups: fully web based, blended or hybrid format, and traditional courses using web-based supplements. Fully web-based courses are conducted entirely on the Internet with no face to face interaction, all aspects of the course being conducted in an online learning environment. Hybrid courses consist of both web-based and classroom sessions, with a varying degree of time allotted to the online and in class sessions, depending upon the nature of the class and discretion of the instructor. The last programming format uses online technology as a medium for presenting supplemental material for traditional classroom study.

Conducting online learning in the instructional practice may provide several advantages. First, online learning is learner-centered approach in which the role of the teacher is a guide or facilitator of student learning. Second, online learning allows students to access the learning materials any time, any place, increase learner motivation which is essential in English language learning, and foster interaction among students and teachers. Third, online learning is fast and dynamic and reduces the amount of expenses (like: travel time and travel costs for students). The last, online learning is comprehensive learning in nature because it contains sources and tools such as virtual classes and simulation.

Despite the advantages that online learning offer, there are some drawbacks that should be taken into consideration. The drawbacks include reducing social interactions among learners, learner's limited knowledge on how to utilize technology so that learners are unable to work with the technology appropriately, decreasing the amount of face to face meetings and teacher's supervision among learners, teacher's limited experience with online learning, load of expenses spent, and technical problems.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding on the practices of English language teaching during Covid-19 pandemic through analytical review of the existing empirical research. To achieve the aim of this research, a descriptive study with qualitative approach based on systematic integrative literature review was utilized as the research design. As a distinctive research method, integrative literature review is intended to create new knowledge by reviewing, synthesizing, evaluating, and setting new frameworks making use of the representative literature on a specific topic [8]. Integrative literature studies are implemented in a systematically way to generate generalizable data on the topic that is under scrutiny. In this integrative literature review study, document analysis was used to collect the necessary data. This study also adopts the definition of literature review study proposed by [9] referring as "a written synthesis of journal articles, books, and other documents that summarizes and critiques the past and current state of information about a topic, organizes the literature into subtopics, and documents the background for a study."

The search for research paper were conducted systematically in three prominent steps: setting up the criteria for selecting research articles, conducting online search using search engine, and analyzing the research articles to determine the characteristics and the emerging theme. Focusing specifically on research examining online English language teaching, the following inclusive criteria were applied: (1) peer-reviewed studies, (2) studies concerned with online English language teaching during covid-19 pandemic, and (3) studies published within the last 1,5 years.

In respect to the search of research articles, this study employed three strategies. First, electronic searchers were conducted in the following databases: *Google Scholar*, *Proquest* and *ERIC (Educational Research Informational Center)* and journal publisher websites (e.g., *tandfonline.com*, *link.springer.com*). In the search of the target journal articles, keywords were used to include general terms such as e-learning in EFL teaching, teaching English during Covid-19, and the practice of English teaching in the time of Covid-19.

Second, conducting manual review on peer-reviewed online English language learning in EFL teaching journals. The articles reviewed were among others taken from *Arab World English Journal*, *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literature*, *Interactive Learning Environment Journal*, and some others. Third, reference lists of collected studies on online language learning were mined for other compatible studies. A ninety-five (95) total number of potentially eligible studies were located and evaluated, of which 85 found to meet the inclusion criteria.

### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1. Characteristics of Research on English Language Teaching During Covid-19 Pandemic

The main aim of this integrative review research was to analyze the characteristics and findings of the research studies carried out specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic period focusing in English language teaching and learning across the world. In this analytical review study, a total of 85 research articles published during the time of pandemic were selected. As depicted in Table 1, the majority of research articles (53%) was published between a time span of January to August 2021. The majority of research studies on English language teaching during pandemic Covid-19 period were conducted by employing quantitative approach in the form of survey-based online questionnaire (32%). The second most prevalent research study type was qualitative design with interview (26%) for the data collection. The third preferred study was mixed-method approach with sequential explanatory as the design. The data collection of this typical type of research was conducted through online questionnaire and subsequently followed by interview. The other preference of the qualitative research studies was content analysis (2%), open-ended questionnaire (3%), observation with interview and documentation (7%), observation (1%), web-based survey and web-group discussion (3%), assessment followed by interview (1%), and narrative inquiry research (1%). In terms of quantitative and mixed-method design, the least preferred type of the studies was equation-structural model (1%) and sequential exploratory design (1%).

Most of the studies conducted in this particular topic was interested in taking students as participant (64%) instead of teacher (32%) and teacher-student (5%). As can be seen from table 1, most of the studies reviewed took place in tertiary level of education (74%) rather than in secondary school (24%) or in primary school

(2%). Interestingly, the study indicates that the productivity of Indonesian researchers to study this topic (51%) is nearly even to those of the researchers from other countries.

**Table 1.** Summary of Research Studies (N=85)

Characteristics	n	%
<b>Publication Year</b>		
2020	40	47
January - August 2021	45	53
<b>Research Design</b>		
<b>Qualitative</b>		
<b>Data Collection technique</b>		
Content Analysis	2	2
Interview (Semi-Structured/In depth)	22	26
Open-Ended Questionnaire	3	7
Observation-Interview - documentation	6	1
Observation	1	7
Interview and Survey Questionnaire	6	1
Web-Based Survey and Group Discussion	3	4
Assessment Result-Interview	1	1
Narrative Inquiry Research	1	1
<b>Quantitative</b>		
Survey-Based Online Questionnaire	27	32
Equation Structural Model	1	1
<b>Mixed-Method</b>		
Sequential Exploratory Design	1	1
Sequential Explanatory Design	11	13
<b>Research Participant</b>		
Teacher	27	32
Student	54	64
Teacher - Student	4	5
<b>Research Context</b>		
Primary School	2	2
Secondary School	20	24

Tertiary School (University)	63	74
<b>Research Setting</b>		
Indonesia	43	51
Overseas	42	49

## 4.2. Thematic Analysis of the Reviewed Studies

The following section discusses the commonalities of the studies which are grouped into three major themes including, the challenges of emergency online learning, the perceptions and attitude of the research participants towards online English learning, and the practices of online language teaching in the time Covid-19 period.

### 4.2.1. Challenges of Online English Learning in the Time of Covid-19

The foremost and prevalent theme of the research studies undertaken was concerned with the challenges encountered both by teacher and student in the instructional practices of the emergency online English. Learning. Despite the benefits of the online learning offer, there exists potential challenges that most studies highlight. These unplanned and sudden transition to emergency online teaching, undoubtedly, left learners and educators in a confusion and challenging situation. The analytical review results showed some common constraints which may provide insights for the betterment of the online instructional implementation.

In respect to learner’s barriers in online learning, some studies reveal that the technical issues such as internet connectivity problems, unfamiliarity with digital platforms, downloading materials problems, electrical power disruption, limited internet data were the most significant factors in hindering student to reach the best in online learning [10], [11], [3]. The second most problem were related to the learner’s internal psychological factors such as low motivation, attention deficit, poor engagement, low understanding, and lack of learning management with class activities [12] The next prominent factors were related to financial issues, inability to access modern equipment, ineffectiveness of learning process that focus more on giving assignments, healthy reason (e.g., eye strain, dizziness), and uncondusive learning environment [13].

Regarding the challenges confronted by teachers in implementing the remote teaching, studies reveal that the primary issue was concerned with inadequacy of

teacher's knowledge and skills to conduct online learning including also classroom management knowledge. The other prominent challenges were teacher's unfamiliarity with the digital platforms, inability to provide quick feedbacks, lack of student's motivation and engagement, lack of appropriate materials, time consuming to prepare online materials, lack of direct interaction with learners, learner's lack of attention and demotivation towards online learning, low bandwidth of internet connection, assessing students' learning, lack of accessibility to infrastructures, and lack of funding and support from institution (see [7], [14], [15]).

#### *4.2.2. Perceptions and Attitudes towards online English Learning*

The results of the empirical research review analysis indicated that the implementation of online learning was perceived positively and negatively by participants during Covid-19 pandemic. The positive perceptions regarding the practices of online learning can be traced among other from the research conducted by [16], [17]. On the positive side, the research results showed that learners had a high level of participation in synchronized online EFL courses in their online learning experiences [16]. The ease and flexibility of online learning were also pointed out in the research [18]. Learners also held good perception on online learning due to the interactive course environment provided. This became the crucial factor in improving learners' motivation. Learners acknowledged that interactive learning through online applications could improve not only their language skills but also their digital skills [19], [20]. The use of social media and various technological tool applications which allowed them to interact with their online learning community, their peers and teachers likely enhanced students' interest in learning [21] [22].

The results of analytical review also indicated that teachers and students also held negative perceptions regarding the implementation on the emergency online teaching. The findings reveal that the unplanned shift from face to face to online teaching was perceived ineffective despite several efforts had been done to provide better quality teaching. Teachers, for example, had tried hard to involve in professional development through workshops and seminars for online learning, adjusted learning materials, assessment, techniques and strategies in teaching and other useful efforts to provide productive online learning for students. However, the students' learning outcomes were not as promising as expected. Among the reasons of teachers and students' unfavoured attitudes towards online learning are the

barriers they experienced during the instructional process. The barriers that already mentioned in the previous section of this paper seemed to minimize the affective domains of teachers and learners. Lack of knowledge and experiences in conducting online learning, insufficient knowledge on how to utilize online platforms, internet connection problems are several encountered hindrances that prevent teachers and students perform the best in online learning. The study also found that face-to-face learning is more favourable for students despite their readiness to adapt to online learning and some beneficial impacts that online learning offer. The research results from Alotaibi (2021), for example, showed that the majority of the students formed negative attitudes towards EFL online classrooms and they preferred traditional classroom. The study involved undergraduate students studying at the preparatory year programs in one of universities in Saudi Arabia. The other contributing factors that contribute to the negative attitudes of online learning were, but not limited to, lack of interaction between teachers and students, the excessive tasks and unclear learning instruction [20], [23], [24]. These factors contributed to the low quality of teaching and were regarded as less facilitating. Due to the negative attitudes and drawbacks on online teaching and learning encountered equally worldwide, it is reported in the study that online teaching of English yielded lower outcomes of students' learning.

#### *4.2.3. The Practices of Emergency Online Learning in English Classrooms*

During the Covid-19 pandemic period, the findings suggest that online learning or e-learning system was considered as the one and learning method in the teaching and learning English [25], [26]. The analytical results of this study showed that there are two emerging themes on the implementation of emergency online teaching in English learning. The themes the teacher and learner's experiences in using digital applications, and teacher's consideration in developing learning materials.

Regarding teacher and learner's experiences in the online learning system, findings indicate that both teacher and student appreciated the benefits that online learning offer. They supported and agreed upon the online digital platforms use, the grading system, the assessment methods, the training and workshops, and other online technical supports. In terms of the course delivery, various digital platforms were utilized Zoom, Google hangouts, and Google Meet for lecture delivery, Moodle, Google Classroom, Edmodo, and Schoology for the learning management system (LMS), WhatsApp and Telegram for online communication, and YouTube for practicing their English skills.

In respect to developing materials for online learning, it is suggested from the findings that teachers should consider salient criteria such as providing learners with new knowledge, facilitating students' learning style and attitudes, utilizing creativity and resourcefulness, focusing on collaboration among learners, stimulating students' learning process, fostering an inclusive classroom, improving one's teaching insights and practices, and empowering one's teaching motivation and autonomy, and contain audio-visual media.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The abrupt Covid-19 outbreak in the late of 2019 adversely impacted all fields of people's lives including education. Due to the pronouncement of Covid-19 as a pandemic, schools across the globe had to close their doors and shifted the instructional practices from face-to-face to online mode. This sudden changeover of instructional delivery was applied in all course subjects including in English language learning. The teaching and learning of English was conducted through fully online and blended learning. As findings suggest that online learning was considered as the one and only relevant teaching and learning method during the emergency Covid-19 period. Online teaching was not just an option but a necessity in order to continue teaching and learning activity without interruption or cancellation. Despite the fact that virtual learning was already being used in language teaching, the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to the massive implementation of online learning. Thus, it can be reasonably concluded that online teaching and learning will world widely dominate and be applied in educational practices, even in post-Covid-19 era. Thus, the results of this study may yield insights for education in the future.

This study noted a number of salient findings regarding the implementation of English online learning during that can be categorized into three themes: challenges of online learning, perceptions and attitudes towards online learning, and the practice of online teaching in English learning. In terms of barriers in online learning, teacher and student's unreadiness to engage in the virtual environment was the most prominent. Concerning with the perceptions, findings indicate that face-to-face instruction was the favourable mode of teaching delivery than online learning. In respect to the experiences during online learning, teacher and student perceived that online learning was beneficial. In general, it can be assumed that the countries worldwide were unready for a global crisis in that implementing the well-planned teaching of English is necessary [1], [27].

The other findings of this study acknowledged that pedagogical factors such as teacher's insufficient technological and pedagogical content knowledge, lack

of preparation and planning, educational supports and policies in the time of crisis contributed to the unachievable of the expected outcomes. The inadequate awareness of the difference between face-to-face and online teaching prevented teachers to perform their best in the implementation of virtual learning [1]. In other words, teachers' weaknesses in teaching English online were due to their little experience prior transition.

It can be concluded from the findings that some precaution steps should be taken to prevent the obstacles encountered during the implementation of online learning. To this end, the primary major step should be taken is to redesign curriculum in English language teacher education programs at universities. Accordingly, teacher education should equip students not only for face-to-face classroom learning, but for online teaching and learning as well. Teacher education in English departments should provide more courses dealing with educational technologies and pedagogical content knowledge of online instructions. In addition, in-service teachers should be facilitated with training and practice to make them ready to conduct teaching online effectively and efficiently.

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