



# Personalized Learning in Teaching English as Foreign Language: Limiting the Challenges, Increasing Its Effectiveness

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**Abstract.** Personalized learning is a teaching model that focuses on learning outcomes, voluntary learning, and the concept of autonomy learning. The basic idea of this is the individuality of each student and the active activity. This study aims to find out why lecturers apply specific methods to individualize their teaching and the advantages and disadvantages of the methods. This research is conducted qualitatively as a study focusing on the experiences of English lecturers regarding the implementation of personalized learning. The data were collected by analyzing the questionnaires filled by the lecturers. The lecturers who participated in this study had a positive attitude toward the personalized learning model. According to them, this model accommodated both fast and slow students and increased the students' responsibility. This study also reveals the importance of choosing the suitable teaching method for each personalized learning session. However, for several students, lack of motivation became the main problem for this model. While for the teachers, the focus challenges were a lack of knowledge and experience in conducting this model. How lecturers overcome the challenges and increase the effectiveness of implementing this model is also discussed.

**Keywords:** language teaching · learning autonomy · personalized learning · self-paced learning

## 1 Introduction

Students have various differences in term of interest, learning style and learning pace that they influence the learning effect got by the students. Personalized learning that highlights students' interests, learning styles and different cognitive levels becomes the most suitable learning approach to be implemented by the teachers. Personalized learning is different from traditional one in which students focus rather than teachers lead [1] and does not depend on face to face traditional classrooms that focus on teachers lead.

The rapid progress of technology influences human lives nowadays. It is then added with Covid-19 pandemic that forces educational institution to shift from traditional classroom learning to e-learning [2, 3]. The use of electronic devices provides learners with free access for various resources, and it then brings awareness to the teachers that

the “one-size-fits-all” teaching approach may not be suitable anymore, so the learning process should be tailored to gain students’ learning performance and satisfaction [4].

Looking at that condition, personalized learning is considered appropriate to that situation. Personalized learning shows that students have their own pace of learning, instructional preference and learning outcomes that are customized to their needs. Personalized learning escalates learning and support students that is linked to a significant decrease of drop-out rate [5].

This study focuses on how personalized learning is implemented in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Due to the digital world nowadays, the implementation of PL is increasing. Personalized learning is explained as a teaching approach that highlights the learners’ roles in having responsibilities and ownership of their learning process. In Personalized learning, each student has opportunity to learn the distinct points that are the most relevant to their learning process.

Although the implementation of PL is possible nowadays, however the lecturers still face challenges in implementing it. This study investigates the advantages of implementing personalized learning in teaching English as foreign language, the challenges they face and what the teachers need in implementing personalized learning.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Personalized Learning Approach

Personalized learning is often seen as students control their own learning process, in which it may increase their engagements since it is related to their feeling of ownership and pride.

Personalized learning is also described as student-centered approach, flexible learning, demonstrated competencies and holistic perspective to the whole child [6]. Personalized learning is designed to increase students’ engagement in the teaching-learning process, build their learning interest that later on they will impact on increasing students’ motivation and achievement.

[7] stated that personalized learning needs environment that is adaptive to student individual knowledge, experience and interest and should support and promote the expected learning outcomes effectively.

Furthermore, [8] mentioned that personalized learning may become the solution to tailoring student’s individual needs and prior experience in order to achieve their maximum potential though personalized instruction [9]. Moreover, personalized learning can be an effective way to gain students’ motivation, engagement and understanding [10].

One of the most central ideas in learning process is that students are the active party and the center of the teaching-learning process as well. The main aspect to achieve it is by implementing self-regulation of learning which allows students to control their own learning process. In other words, the teachers should pay attention to the main element of this process, that is the flexibility of the learning design, especially the flexibility of learning outcomes, strategies, learning sequences and assessment method, in which all these elements are closely related to the idea of personalized learning [11].

## 2.2 Technology Used in Personalized Learning

Personalized learning becomes trend in the world of technology nowadays. Many teachers implement technology in their personalized learning classrooms since it helps them differentiate teaching materials and equip them with more meaningful learning experiences suitable for their students. In this case, technology becomes the important role in addressing students' differences and facilitates the improvement of personalized learning. Technology enables students to get learning materials easily, use technological tools in processing information and present their learning comprehension in their own ways,

Technology provides personalized learning class with opportunities and ways to fulfil students' needs. [12] mentioned that the synthesis and development of technology help student overcome the barriers in getting information and knowledge, as well as the learning boundaries. Furthermore, technology support personalized learning with platform for students to learn in virtual classes, it may facilitate interactions among students and between students and teachers.

Furthermore, [13] stated that technologies also create opportunities to take into account the differences that lie among learners. The changes that happen in the ways of acquiring knowledge and skills can be happened through social media, free access to various learning platforms, and this condition makes students become more autonomous and innovative. Moreover, [13] also mentioned that learning is about curiosity attitude that goes beyond class and encourage students to participate and contribute more in the learning process.

However, according to [14] although personalized learning is often related to the use of technologies, people interaction still plays an important role in personalized learning. Interaction among the respective people help students respond each other's moods by understanding each other's interpersonal hints. That becomes the reason why Bulger then said that while technology developers propose their learning solutions and administrators give their effort to enhance education efficiency and performance, the insight and needs from several respective people, such as parents, teachers, subject matter expert, are often ignored. This condition becomes a problem that influences the effective implementation of personalized learning.

## 2.3 Teachers' Roles in Personalized Learning

Regarding the teacher's roles in personalized learning, [15] explained several roles that should be conducted by the teacher, they are being the concept organizer by arranging topics to learn and skills to develop, being an adviser for the learning objects to be used, being an teacher to explain the thorough overview about what must be done in order to understand the learning materials, being an adviser to offer options in conducting the learning process and being an expert to make use what has been already known. In a simple way, it can be said that teacher in personalized learning class should modify teaching methodology that acknowledge the different approaches suitable for the students. Furthermore, [16] explained that personalized learning must be comprehended as a process with several stages with various emphasis of the learning materials, so teachers may choose to vary their teaching approaches based on the emphasized materials.

One thing that the teacher must focus on personalized learning is designing student learning goals since they are the starting point for students to participate in their learning process and the focus of their learning assessment. Several studies state that learning goals may help students think of the forms of their engagements in the learning process [17]. Furthermore [18] mentioned that a teacher must show an honest interest in students' ideas and always think their relationship with the learning outcomes.

Furthermore, [19] added that in personalized learning teachers do not lecture theory to the whole classes but students either learn the theory on their own or in a group by employing peer support in group discussion. It does not mean that this approach excludes any teaching method, however the main idea is that all teaching methods are implemented according to what students need. Moreover, [19] continues that the traditional classes in which the students pay more attentions on the same topic and try to learn the same thing together is even the unnatural one, since it needs more mental energy to be transferred to even the less important thing. This condition leads to the ineffectiveness of the teaching method. In personalized learning, teachers need to understand that their roles should be transformed, not to control the classes all the time, but become more like personal instructor for the students.

### **3 Method**

Mixed-method was conducted in this study since it provided a more complete result and understanding regarding the reasons for their choices regarding challenges, advantages and suggestions when they implemented personalized learning. [20] stated that mixed-method research allowed for collecting and analyzing the quantitative data to inform the qualitative part of the study, which elaborates more upon the quantitative results. Based on this explanation, mixed-method was considered suitable to this study.

The quantitative part was based on the survey data got from the questionnaire that described challenges and advantages of implementing of personalized learning in English as foreign language class.

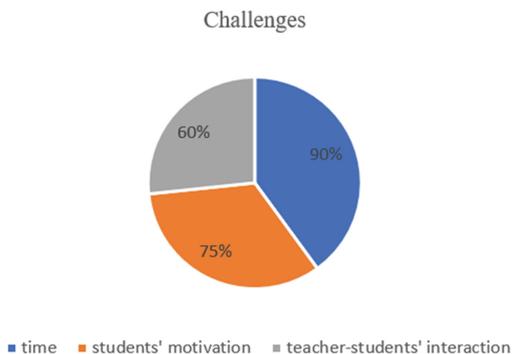
The qualitative data components used in this research were based on open-ended questionnaire result asking about the detail information about the challenges, advantages as well as lecturers' suggestions to make a more effective personalized learning class.

This study included 30 lecturer participants from three private universities in Jakarta and Banten Indonesia, all of them teach English as foreign language and hold at least master degree. In answering the questionnaire, they were allowed to choose more than one options.

## **4 Result and Discussion**

### **4.1 Challenges in Implementing Personalized Learning**

The first question is about challenges faced by teachers in implementing personalized learning. The data shows that although teachers have positive perception regarding the implementation of personalized learning, it cannot be denied that several challenges rise



**Fig. 1.** Challenges in implementing personalized learning

during the implementation of personalized learning, especially this is a relatively new approach for them (Fig. 1).

Most of the teachers mentioned that time becomes the challenge in personalized learning. Personalized learning provides flexible time for students to learn, however on the other hand, teachers are also hoped to dedicate their time to prepare the materials and give personal guidance for the students. Moreover, the teachers said that planning a course in personalized learning takes more time compared to traditional classes. Other challenge related to the time is about checking the students' assignment since most of the assignment is in the form of case study or project and students may show their creativities in finishing their assignments. It then leads to the various results of the assignments, and because of this condition, the teachers needed more time to read and give feedback to those assignments.

Other challenge mentioned by the teachers is about students' motivation. The teachers mentioned that personalized learning needs students' intrinsic motivation and it is the point that the students are lacking of. Personalized learning is the students-centered approach that expects students to participate actively and manage their motivation to join the course. However, the unlimited distraction coming from the internet in the form of online games or movies cannot be avoided nowadays and the teachers stated that the students have not been accustomed to be given responsibility to manage their own time effectively, and the result is that they are not able to finish required work on time and it will result on that they might not learn a lot at all with this approach. At the end, what the teachers do to overcome this challenge is related to reward and punishment.

Personalized learning requires a condition in which students are more active. The challenge that is also mentioned by 60% of the teachers is about the students' reluctancy in asking or contacting their teachers when they have problems. These teachers explained that they provided their time and announced it regularly to their students, however many students never contacted them and one of the results was they failed in their course because of wrong understanding of the materials or the learning instructions.

### 4.2 Advantages

Regarding the advantages of implementing personalized learning, the teachers agree that the advantages are about self-paced learning, learners' autonomy and the potential use of technology 21 teachers agree that the advantage of personalized learning is the self-paced learning since it allows students to manage their time and energy on learning the content materials. Based on the questionnaire, the teachers also said that for the advanced students, personalized learning enables them to learn other materials beyond the expected ones, while for the average students, personalized learning makes them to learn the expected materials on their own pace (Fig. 2).

For the teachers, personalized learning that provides self-paced gives students enough time to finish the exercise, the thing that is quite difficult to do in traditional classes in which most of the time is focused on teaching the content.

Other advantage that is related to self-paced learning and mentioned by six teachers is that personalized learning helps the special needs students. In traditional classes, special needs students often struggle to follow the classes since the teachers conduct the pace for all students, while the special needs ones need longer time to learn. In personalized learning, with a more flexible time, enable the special needs students to learn the content materials provided since they have more time to learn and do the exercise or the assignment.

The next advantage is considered new by the teachers, that is about learners' autonomy. In personalized learning, the students may practice and increase their autonomy that hopefully this helps students learn language later on in their lives and develop them to be lifelong learners.

Another advantage that was also mentioned by the teachers is about the potential use of technology. Personalized learning should be supported well by the use of technology. Several teachers said that technology enables the students to use application such as Google Classroom to share materials, such as the answers of the exercise, assignment, etc. Furthermore, through the use of technology, the students may conduct listening class on their own and learn the additional materials. One teacher also mentioned that she can follow and check her students' discussion through live-session anytime and anywhere and provide direct feedback.

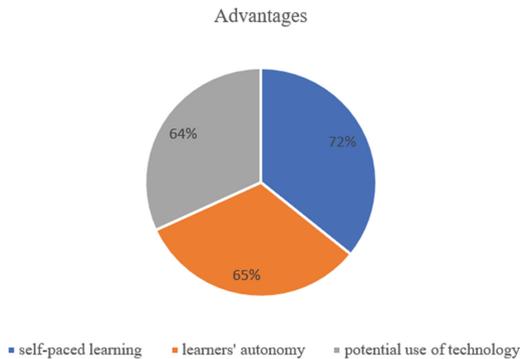


Fig. 2. Advantages in implementing personalized learning

Talking about the teaching materials, all teachers agree that the use of educational videos brings benefits in term of learners' autonomy, in which it allows students to choose where, how and when they want to access the materials so that they will be suitable for their learning processes.

Regarding the assessment, four teachers mentioned that they check students' assessments by using WhatsApp in which the students must record their speech and send to their teachers, after that the teachers will give feedback by sending the correct pronunciation of the words spoken on the speech. These four teachers also said that in traditional classes, it is almost not possible for them to correct students' pronunciation one by one because of the limited time, but personalized learning with its more flexible time makes the teachers able to listen to their students' speech more carefully and provide better feedback.

Furthermore, there is one teacher who teach English business presentation asked her students to make video for their presentation. The students should present in a situation as if they were in a real business setting. The teachers then provided feedback in term of attire, business setting, content, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary used.

On the open-ended question, four teachers also mentioned other advantage is related to teacher-students relationship. It is quite surprising since the face-to-face sessions were less than the traditional classes. However, teachers mentioned that personalized learning makes them able to know their students better. On personalized learning classes, teachers were able to fully concentrate on the students' task and analyze each student's strengths and weaknesses. Traditional classes pushed them to focus more on classroom management, however personalized learning enabled them to work together with the student individually and it impacts to how students respected their teachers. Moreover, it gave insight to the teachers regarding what they were working and they ways they were doing when they had to do their tasks and some of them were relatively new for the teachers.

### 4.3 Suggestions

The next question asked to the teachers is about their suggestion to make personalized learning class become more effective and all of them mention that they need to gain their knowledge and skills in conducting personalized learning, and professional development program is considered that the best way for it.

Professional development program becomes the point suggested by almost all of the teachers. Personalized learning is quite new for some teachers, so instead of a one-shot training, a set of professional development program is more needed for the teachers. The professional development program should consist of the concept of personalized learning that this must become the basic knowledge that have to be understood by the teachers, how to prepare suitable resources and lesson plans for personalized learning classes and implementing personalized learning included sharing from other teachers who have implemented this approach.

In a more detail explanation, teachers also suggest that the type of professional development program is also in the form of personalized learning. When professional development program is designed based on the needs of each teacher, there will be more possibilities for teachers to learn how to differentiate and individualize the learning

process and content materials that it will impact on gaining teachers' knowledge and capabilities in conducting personalized learning. Leaders, administrators and teachers should collaborate together to design a professional development program that is personalized for each teacher. This kind of professional autonomy will increase teachers' efficacy and responsibilities for their professional growth.

## 5 Conclusion

This study focuses on the implementation of personalized learning in teaching English as foreign language, especially the challenges they face, its advantages and what they need in implementing personalized learning.

The implementation of personalized learning brings several advantages for teachers and students as well. Self-paced learning in personalized learning enables students to learn the materials and do the exercises based on their own pace and time. This is a kind of privilege the students have that cannot be had in traditional classroom. Personalized learning also provides students with autonomy, especially in term of where, when and how they access the materials, that it will help they learn how to be lifelong learners.

However, personalized learning also gives teachers some challenges that may not happen in traditional class. Those challenges are about the time needed by the teachers to provide the materials and check the students' assignment, in which the implementation of personalized learning needs different types of assignment that it effects on the longer time needed by the teachers to check their students' assignments. Another challenges that are also faced by the teachers are about students' motivation and teacher-students' interaction. Personalized learning provides students with flexibility in learning, however it also forces students to have more intrinsic motivation, and unfortunately it still becomes a problem that the teachers should solve.

Personalized learning is an innovative approach in teaching-learning process. However, this approach will be effective if teachers have better understanding about it. Continuous professional development program is a necessity in achieving the successful personalized learning. Nowadays condition that provides people with unlimited access to information may result on the mandatory implementation of personalized learning, thus the challenge is no longer be on what personalized learning is but on how teachers are able to implement it well and give a better students' learning experiences. That will be a challenging topic to investigate in the future study.

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