An Exploration of University Students' Challenges in Learning English as Foreign Language during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 virus outbreak emerged in the world, all industries and aspects of life have changed, including the education system. Face-to-face learning was compelled to be replaced with online learning. Online Learning has made students experience integrating technology into the teaching and learning process. Technological and environmental problems can lead to challenges that may be faced by the students, especially in learning English as a foreign language. Thus, this study was conducted with the aim to identify the challenges that EFL students faced in learning English as a foreign language during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as describing the students' strategies to overcome the challenges. This study was designed as a qualitative study. To conduct the study, 10 students of English education major of Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia were invited to be the subject. Reason of study from home, an unstructured online interview about the objectives was conducted via the WhatsApp application. This study finding indicated that the most common issue faced by EFL students in this situation is internet access, followed by a lack of learning media, material understanding, academic dishonesty, and laziness.

Keywords: University students' challenges, EFL, covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

English is the most universally spoken and utilized language on the earth. In all fields of international communication, English is the preferred language. This is supported by Pustika (2021) that education, technology, tourism, health, economics, and other sectors of human life all use English. It implies that English is a crucial language to master. Along with a country's advancement, someone's ability to use English is essential (Matondang, 2005). English proficiency is essential for global communication in this age of industrial revolution 4.0 (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2019). In Indonesia, English as a foreign language is widely employed in the educational system, from primary to higher levels. Language education at school is an effort to develop language abilities in accordance with their role, which is to communicate, think, and reason (Aprianti & Ayu, 2020). In light of the demand for English as an international language in today's world, the Indonesian government has designated English as a topic that students should know (Mandasari, 2018). Covering English in the curriculum is one of the actual initiatives performed by the Indonesian government towards the importance of English (Pustika, 2019).

The ability to speak in a language is a sign of success in language learning (Mandasari & Wahyudin, 2021). Learning English is difficult because it requires four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In the process of learning English, all of the skills will be improved (Gulö & Widianingsih, 2016). Learning English is much more difficult than learning Indonesian because, in addition to comprehending the meaning of the language, students must also be able to write and pronounce English words according to the English

pronunciation system. It can make learning English more challenging for learners or children. The obstacles may result in less than desired student learning outcomes. The difficulty of learning and understanding this foreign language is worsened by the rise of a global pandemic related to the spread of the Coronavirus, also known as COVID19, that influences almost all industries, including education, forcing students to study from home (Mandasari, 2020; Qodriani & Wijana, 2020). In Indonesia, online learning has become a new rule to solve the paucity of classroom meetings (Pustika, 2020). All teaching and learning activities, notably the teaching and learning process, must be moved online (Putri & Sari, 2021). As a result, the challenges in learning English as a Foreign Language are becoming more prevalent.

Thus, the objectives of this current study are to identify the challenges or obstacles that EFL students had when learning English as a foreign language during the COVID-19 pandemic and describe the strategies used by students to overcome the challenges. The current study investigated the research objectives of EFL students at one university in Lampung, Indonesia.

Theory

Students' Challenges in Online Learning

Previous studies have found that online learning has made the challenges or difficulties of learning English as a foreign language increase. Efriana (2021) stated that the first problem was a lack of understanding of the topic materials. This was due to the fact that the material content was offered in the form of an e-book, which was divided into chapters teaching materials in PowerPoint and video. These materials might be understandable by students, but they were not comprehensive. The subject was understood by students depending on their interpretations or points of view. The second problem was some children did not have access to online learning resources such as gadgets or laptops, and if they did, they belonged to their parents. The third problem, as found in Mahyoob (2020), was that the majority of the students come from remote towns where the network was poor because of the COVID-19 situation. Nartiningrum (2020) also stated the other challenge of online learning, which was laziness. Few students admitted that online learning makes them less committed to learning. They were less motivated to study since the teacher had less control and supervision. When students were learning or doing assignments, they were easily distracted.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

According to Harmer (2004), English as a foreign language is commonly used to refer to students who are learning general English at a school or institution in their country of origin and are visiting a nation where the target language is spoken as a transitory tourist. Students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) nevertheless had some difficulties, either verbally or in writing. EFL is customized for learners at a certain moment or event. Students are part of a worldwide target-language community when they use English for international communication, especially on the internet. They are prepared to communicate in the future by utilizing English as a global language. According to Brown (2001), students in foreign language environments do not have ready-made contexts for communication outside of the classroom.

Method

This study was conducted as a qualitative research project with the goal of collecting more data and information. According to Gay, Millis, and Airasian (2006), as cited in Suhri, Atmowardoyo, and Salija (2019). "Qualitative research involves the gathering, analysis, and interpretation of large amounts of narrative and visual data in order to gain insights into a specific topic of interest." The research was carried out throughout the academic year 2020/2021. The study involved 10 EFL students from Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia who were undergoing online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The subject of the study was the students of the English Education study program from various semester levels in order to acquire a broader perspective. The goal of this study was to discover the obstacles that the students faced when they transitioned to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this part, to choose the sample, the research used simple random sampling. A Simple random sample (SRS) is made up of individuals chosen from the population in such a way that each group of persons has an equal chance of being the sample (Moore and McCabe, 2006). In-depth qualitative interviews, participant and non-participant observation, field notes, focus groups, document analysis, and a range of other approaches are used by qualitative researchers to acquire data. The data collecting method for this study was gathered through an unstructured online interview with the students. To collect the data, detailed questions about the objectives were distributed via WhatsApp personal chat.

Findings and Discussion

The researcher would summarize the findings in relation to the study's objectives, including (1) identifying the challenges of EFL students in online English learning and (2) describing the strategies used by EFL students to overcome the challenges of learning English online. The researcher interviewed 10 participants of English Education Department students. Participants were chosen from various batches in order to obtain a more diverse set of data. To protect the participants' privacy, the researcher changed their names to pseudonyms.

1. The challenges of EFL students in online English learning

A learner must have encountered a learning challenge during the course of learning English. These challenges may result in less than optimal student learning outcomes. The challenges found in this research have been grouped into different categories. The challenges are explained in more detail below.

Internet access

Since it was embraced and subsequently developed as a medium of communication, the internet has altered the way we work and is now positioned to impact education (Ayu, 2020). In order for the process of online English teaching-learning to run smoothly, communication between the teacher and students needs adequate internet access. Internet access was the most common challenge that students face in online learning. Almost all of the participants mentioned that one of the challenges of English online learning was a poor internet connection. Below is the detailed conversation between the researcher (R) and the participants (P).

R: What are the challenges you face when learning English online during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

P (Ron, 1 participant from batch '19): "I believe the most difficult challenges of learning English online during the Covid-19 pandemic was maintaining the internet connection, as the electricity in my village frequently went out. So, if the electricity goes out, the signal is lost, and if the signal is gone, I can't attend the zoom class. Moreover, I have never missed the posttest due to a lack of signal."
P (Harry, 1 participant from batch '18): "The availability of internet access, which was occasionally restricted by bad weather."
P (Hermione, 1 participant from batch '20): "I think my challenge in learning English online during the COVID-19 pandemic was internet problems because when I had an online meeting class, it suddenly disappeared or was ugly."
P (Malfoy, 1 participant from batch '19): Because I live in a rural area far from the city, the problem of a slow internet network is the biggest challenge I face when learning online. Furthermore, the quota price is quite high."
P (Ginny, 1 participant from batch '18): "Internet access."

It can be determined from the researcher's conversation with the interview participants that the most common challenge in online English learning in this COVID-19 pandemic condition was internet access. Especially for learners who live in remote areas where access to the internet was not always available. Bad weather could potentially be a sticking point to the internet connection. Besides that, the internet package price was also quite high for several students.

Lack of learning media

One of the challenges to online learning was the media. According to the OECD in 2005, as cited in Ayu (2020), information and communications technology (ICT) to enhance and/or support learning in tertiary education is referred to as online learning. According to Fu in 2013 as cited in Aminatun (2019), using ICT in education has many benefits, including assisting students in efficiently accessing digital information, supporting student-centered and self-directed learning, creating a creative learning environment, promoting collaborative learning, and providing more opportunities to develop critical (higher-order) thinking skills. Because most of them are digital natives, the use of technology can be a crucial aid in mastering language learning in the digital era (Oktaviani & Desiarti, 2017). Since online learning was conducted at home in pandemic conditions, learners were required to have online learning equipment such as a smartphone, laptop, or computer. The following is the summary of the researcher's (R) and the participants' detailed conversation (P).

R: What are the challenges you face when learning English online during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

P (Snape, 1 participant from batch '18): "Lack of media is one of my biggest challenges, especially in this 6th semester. I have a smartphone, but since the assignments and projects are mostly about making essays and articles, I need a laptop to do it neatly, but I haven't had a chance to buy it yet. As a result, I often have a problem in doing my assignments, and I always ask for my friend's help to fix up my problem in the assignments."

Only one participant in the interview mentioned the media as a challenge. This problem occurred since the availability of smartphones was insufficient for students, particularly those in their last semester. This absence of learning media was a problem for pupils who had not yet had the opportunity to purchase the necessary equipment.

Material understanding

The material understanding was another of the online English learning challenges. The material understanding was the key to students' academic success. Below is the summary of the interview about material understanding.

R: What are the challenges you face when learning English online during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

P (Dumbledore, 1 participant from batch '20): "The challenge that I face in learning English during the pandemic is to understand more deeply the material that has been given by the lecturer. Considering that during this pandemic, learning is done online, there are many subjects that are difficult to understand. Not infrequently, the material conveyed by the lecturer cannot be accepted by the brain."
P (Hagrid, 1 participant from batch '18): "There's a problem with material understanding. The lecturer delivered a bad material that makes me sick hearing it."

R: Is there any other challenge you deal with learning English online? If yes, what is it?

P (Malfoy): "It is difficult to understand the material because online learning reduces the effectiveness of learning."
P (Voldemort, 1 participant from batch '19): "Then, there are cases when the teacher does not explain the subject, learns the assignment directly, and there is a ppt or video of the material available, but it is difficult to understand by myself."
P (Harry): "The challenge I faced when learning English online for the first is understanding the material."

The understanding material challenge was the biggest problem since it was the key to the success of academic performance. From the perspective of the learners, we can see that the material provided by the lecturer was frequently dismissed by the brain. One participant reacted negatively to online learning, claiming that it decreased the effectiveness of learning. Furthermore, in some cases, lecturers just provided material such as in the form of PowerPoint Slides or a video without explanation, causing learners to be unable to comprehend the lessons independently

Academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty can be a problem because learning was done online. Below is the interview recap between the researcher and the students.

R: Is there any other challenge you deal with learning English online? If yes, what is it?

P (Snape): "Academic dishonesty, when doing an individual task, the students share the answer with others."
P (Ginny): "Academic dishonesty."

Only two people reported that academic dishonesty existed. However, it demonstrated that academic dishonesty existed in online learning and was one of the online learning challenges. This finding was also supported by Pustika in 2020, which mentioned that one disadvantage of e-learning usage was the prevalence of cheating.

Laziness

One participant stated that laziness also appeared to be one of the challenges of online learning. Because of the internet and other forms of entertainment media, attracting and maintaining learners' attention was one of the most difficult components of teaching-learning activities (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2020). This also led to students' laziness. Below is the detailed conversation between the researcher and the student in the interview.

R: Is there any other challenge you deal with learning English online? If yes, what is it?

P (Dudley, 1 participant from batch '18): "No, but when the teacher assigns a large number of assignments, I become lazy."

2. EFL students' strategies to overcome the online learning challenges

This section described the strategies that participants took to overcome the challenges.

Internet access

The most common challenge in online English learning in this COVID-19 pandemic situation was, certainly, internet connection, as determined by the researcher's conversation with interview participants.

R: What is your strategy to overcome the challenges?

P (Ron): "I had a listening project due at 1 p.m. at the time, but the lights were out from the morning till noon, so I went with a friend to hunt for a signal to finish the homework and found it on the bridge beside our village. Finally, by the side of the road, I worked on it."
P (Hermione): "Looking for a location with a sufficient internet connection so that a Google meeting will not be disrupted."
P (Ginny): "Go to another place so that I can get good internet access."

In this situation, each participant used the same strategy. Looking for a location with a sufficient internet connection was the strategy used by many students. We can see that from the interview, students have to put in a big effort to overcome this challenge.

Lack of learning media

As we know, this challenge is faced by students who haven't had the chance to buy equipment for online learning. Below is the strategy used by the students to overcome this challenge.

R: What is your strategy to overcome the challenges?

P (Snape): "To overcome this challenge, I saved money to buy a laptop. For the time being, I am still seeking help from my friends. "

Asking for help from friends was one option for overcoming this challenge, but we can't always rely on others. Saving money to buy the equipment needed for online learning was the best strategy to overcome this lack of media challenge.

Material understanding

The key to a student's academic success is material understanding. The following is a breakdown of the interview about the strategy to overcome the material understanding challenge.

R: What is your strategy to overcome the challenges?

P (Malfoy): "The first thing is I need to make a limit for my study. I need to put more effort because it is quite hard to understand the topic only from the files. Also, this online learning made us more efficient at using time."
P (Harry): "Studying material from other sources such as the internet and YouTube so that I can better understand the material."
P (Dumbledore): "What I do is re-learn the material given by the lecturer, and I discuss it with my friends, then if there are still difficulties, we will consult with the lecturer of the course."
P (Voldemort): "We have to figure things out for ourselves because the lecturer never explains it, right? So, I hunt for references on the internet or try to deduce what I don't understand from the material; if I still don't comprehend, I give up."
P (Hagrid): "My strategy is to improve my time management skills, read and read learning resources regularly, and collaborate with friends to comprehend the material better."

According to the participant's responses, the majority of their strategy was to manage their time and put more effort into studying materials from other sources, such as the internet and YouTube. Elango et al., in 2008, as cited in Sari and Oktaviani (2021), consider the internet to be a helpful tool to provide possibilities for learners to satisfy their learning needs and learning styles. Besides that, the learners also tried to consult with the lecturer and collaborate with their friends to understand the material.

Academic dishonesty

As we know from the previous section, only two participants mentioned this challenge. Unfortunately, there's no strategy to overcome this challenge.

R: If so, what is your strategy to overcome the obstacles?

P (Ginny): "Then, with academic dishonesty, I don't know how to overcome it."

It is true that there is no way to overcome academic dishonesty. The best strategy to overcome it is to avoid it completely. We have to always assume that we will be expected to complete tasks on our own.

Laziness

According to the interview, laziness appeared when the teacher assigned too many assignments. The student stated that he must be aware of the future and always prepared for what we have in store for him with this online learning. Being aware of the future is, indeed, the best strategy for success in it. Below is the conversation between the researcher and the participant.

R: If so, what is your strategy to overcome the obstacles?

P (Dudley): "To face the challenge, we must first have an energetic study because it will benefit us in the future, and we must also not be lazy and always prepare what we have planned for the future with this online learning."

Conclusion

During learning English, a student must face a learning challenge, especially in online learning, which was the only option for educational fields in the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges may lead to less-than-ideal student learning outcomes. The challenges that EFL learners have faced in this situation include internet access as the most common challenge among students, lack of learning media, material understanding, academic dishonesty, and laziness. However, there must be a solution to every problem. As a result, the students have strategies to deal with the difficulties. The strategies include making an effort to look for a location with a sufficient internet connection, saving money to buy the online learning necessary from sources such as the internet and YouTube, and being aware of the future to avoid laziness. However, there's no strategy to overcome academic dishonesty other than avoiding it. Future researchers will also observe EFL students' challenges and their strategies in the classroom. This study suggests that further research could expand the sample size to boost the study's degree of generality and make the conclusions more reliable and accurate.

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