INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE TOWARDS DISTANCE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 pandemic has shifted face-to-face learning to distance learning since 2020. It occurs around the world including Indonesia. Generally, distance learning is new for the students but they have no choice to learn during this pandemic situation. Thus, this qualitative study aims to explore college students' experience towards distance learning during Covid-19 pandemic. The college students taking English course at a Hindu Religion School located in Jakarta, Indonesia were administered a close and open-ended questionnaire and interviewed. The data were analyzed thematically. Findings suggested that the technology platform mostly used in the learning process was Zoom. In addition, most students did not find the obstacles to learning and only a few students had problems getting a stable internet access during learning. They also had adequate financial resources to undertake distance learning. They lacked time to study during the pandemic. Majority of them perceived that their language skills (speaking, reading, writing, listening, and vocabulary) were quite improved. They also reported that distance learning had positive and negative impacts. By comparing those impacts, they preferred distance learning to face-to-face learning in future. The recommendations for the instructors and policy makers are explicated to improve future learning better.

Keywords: distance learning, technology tool, Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic spreads the globe rapidly including Indonesia. The pandemic situation forces the Indonesian government to determine a national policy to close schools and campuses from March 2020 to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 virus. As a consequence, all students must study at home online using technology tools (distance learning). The shift from face-to-face learning to distance learning was unprecedented because the majority of Indonesian students normally go to the school or campus. Teachers and students have challenges and constraints to face the abrupt transition from face-to-face to distance learning (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). They had to interact using online platforms (Wyse et al., 2020 as cited in Styck et al., 2020). They do not have adequate preparation to undertake the emergency distance learning (Hussein et al., 2020). Some of the students had lack of high-speed internet access at home and lack of electronic technology (Bokayev et al., 2020).

A body of research explored distance learning during Covid-19 pandemic. Azhari & Fajri (2021) investigated the distance learning process including the problems, strategies and efforts to undertake the distance learning in Aceh Province, Indonesia. Hussein et al. (2020) scrutinized attitudes of students taking general English courses in United Arab Emirates University during emergency online learning. Kast et al. (2021) carried out the

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research by investigating teachers' attitudes and beliefs about home learning (distance learning) in Austria. Xie et al. (2021) described the instructional designers' perceptions during transition learning in the United States of America. Metscher et al. (2020) reported teacher educators' experiences on transition learning from conventional to digital environment. Dong et al. (2020) portrayed Chinese parents' beliefs and attitudes on online learning. Kruszewska et al. (2020) examined the challenges to undertake distance learning in primary school in Poland. Lemay et al. (2021) explicated Nepalese teachers' experience on online teaching. Yates et al. (2020) investigated New Zealand senior high students' experience on distance learning. Bokayev et al. (2020) investigated parents' perception of distance learning in Kazakhstan. Ewing & Cooper (2021) described the perspective of students, teachers, and parents toward remote learning experiences in Australia. Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison (2020) elucidated EFL pre-service teachers' perspective on challenges and opportunities of distance learning in Chile. Palau et al (2021) exposed the implementation of teaching and learning process in primary and secondary schools in Catalonia (Spain).

The aforementioned previous studies indicated that few studies investigated the students' experiences on distance learning undertaken at higher education level in Indonesian context. This study aims to explore experiences of students taking English course at Hindu Religion School in Jakarta, Indonesia because distance learning is new for them. It is a sudden change for them so it is important to delve into their experiences on distance learning.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with case study as a research design. A convenience sampling method was applied to determine the participants. The participants were college students taking an English course at a Hindu Religion School located in Jakarta, Indonesia. They were in their second semester and comprised 20 females and 18 males with varied ages ranging from 16 to 69 years old. To keep their confidential, their names were pseudonyms to keep them confidential. Their names were coded S (the abbreviation of student) such as S1, S2, S3, and so on. Thirty-eight students were administered a 21-item closed and open ended-questionnaire using Google Form. Eight of them were also voluntarily interviewed with the same questions as the questionnaire to establish credibility.

The students were given informed consent and they agreed to participate. They took an English course for one semester online from February to June 2021. At the end of the semester, they were given a questionnaire to explore their experience on distance learning via WhatsApp and thirty-eight students returned it. Eight of them were interviewed via mobile phone. Each interview took an average 20 minutes. The interview was recorded and transcribed as data analysis. The questionnaire and interview used Indonesian language to explore students' responses deeply. The interview responses were confirmed to the students to build credibility.

The students' responses of questionnaire and interview transcription were coded. After coded, the data were categorized thematically. The categories consisted of the application used, the obstacles faced on distance learning, students' satisfaction on distance learning, students' learning improvement, and positive and negative impacts of distance learning. The questionnaire and interview data were triangulated as the credibility and consistency basis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 provided the application used in English class during distance learning. The result of questionnaire analysis suggested that zoom (66%) was mostly employed. The other

applications used were Google Classroom (19%), Google Meet (12%), and WhatsApp (3%), respectively. Eight students also stated that zoom is the prominent application used during learning English. This finding was in line with Becker's work (2020) that zoom was one of popular tools in distance learning besides Skype, GoToMeeting, and Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Moodle, Blackboard, Google Classroom, Brightspace, and Canvas.

S3: During the pandemic, we learn English using Zoom.
S5: We use Zoom when learning English.
S7: Zoom is used when we learn English.

When asked whether the students had difficulty using the application while learning English, 84% of the students revealed that they could use it well and 16% of them had difficulty with signal problems (unstable internet connection). The difficulty was explained by S1 in an interview that she had a problem with the internet signal. It was similar to Kruszewska et al. (2020) that the internet access or broadband was one of obstacles in distance learning.

The students were asked whether distance learning better helped them to master the English material than face-to-face learning. 66% of them reported that they did not understand English material better during distance learning because of internet signal problem impeding understanding (62%), difficulty to ask to the lecturer (19%), limited time to learn via zoom (5%), lack of exercise (5%), difficulty to communicate and interact to the lecturer (5%), and obstacle to see the gesture hindering understanding (5%). In a similar vein, Saif Almuraqab (2020) found that distance learning limited the interaction between lecturer and students that led to lack of comprehensive explanation of the materials. It might be a hurdle for the students to understand the material. On the other hand, 34% of them understood the material more during distance learning.
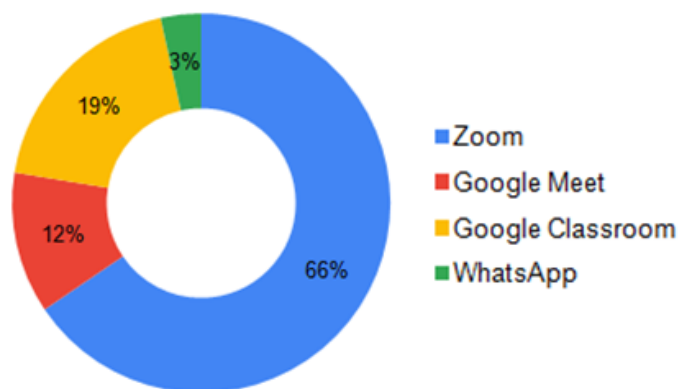

Figure 1: Application used during distance learning

Sixty-three percent of the students did not have financial problems to conduct distance learning but they had internet problems because of the bad or unstable connection, raining, blackout, and a lot of internet users. To overcome those problems, they asked the materials to the lecturer, added the internet bandwidth, found a better place providing better internet, and went to the neighbour's house to get the better internet signal.

S8: I don't have financial problem because my house has Wi-Fi
S4: If I have a problem   with my   internet connection, I find a   better place….go to my neighbour to find better signal.

Seventy-four percent of students perceived that face-to-face learning was better than distance learning. They felt that distance learning is less effective and the material delivered is hard to understand. It was the lack of interaction between lecturers and students. The

students lacked motivation to learn. 61% of them did not spend much time studying   during the pandemic because they must work and be busy doing other activities. They also had limited time to study during distance learning. The internet signal was not stable and the cost to buy the internet data package was high. Conversely, 26% of them thought that distance learning was better because it prevented the covid-19 transmission, could accomplish other works, was flexible to learn whenever or wherever they could, and was effective and efficient because they did not spend much time going to campus. Even though they thought face-to-face learning was better than distance learning, they preferred distance learning in the future because it was more flexible, time and cost saving, and safer. It was contradicted by the work undertaken by Hussein et al. (2020) that students preferred face-to-face learning than distance learning though they had good academic performance. Similarly Yates et al. (2020) found that students preferred to study at school because it was hard to study at home and they had to help their parents at home.

Seventy-six percent of students were satisfied with the distance learning because the lecturer had a good teaching competency, the methodology was interesting, the lecturer was patient and friendly as well as motivated the students. Teachers or lecturers had an important role in distance learning. They had to have good attitudes and accept the technology (Sutherland-Smith, 2002; Yuen and Ma, 2008 cited in Palau et al., 2021) and have good ability to communicate and employ various educational resources (Alamri & Tyler-Wood, 2017 as cited in Palau et al., 2021). On the other hand, 24% of them were dissatisfied because of the signal problem, lack of interaction and limited time to study.

When asked about the language skill improvement during the distance learning, the students generally responded that their language skills were quite improved. 79% of them reported that their speaking skill gained during distance learning because they were encouraged and trained to speak English and given the exercises. 82% of them admitted that their listening skill improved because they were provided listening exercise and listening materials (authentic video) and encouraged to have discussion. 82% of them have improved in writing skill because they were trained to write and provided a lot of good writing samples. They also reported that their reading skill and vocabulary gained.

The students perceived that the distance learning had a positive impact such as their language skill improved and they got a fast response from the lecturer. They reported that it was flexible, efficient and effective because they did not need to go to campus (saving time for commuting). They felt more relaxed, more confident and safe and learnt independently. These findings were congruent with Hussein et al. (2020) that students felt that distance learning offered the effectiveness of time and cost. Saif Almuraqab (2020) also suggested that distance learning provided the flexibility of location which the students could learn anywhere.

The students also explained that the distance learning had a negative impact. They could not understand the material well because of signal problems and did not know others' personalities deeply. They experienced that distance learning needed the high internet data package cost, lacked direct interaction between lecture and students and lack of study time. Hussein et al. (2020) found that the negative impact of distance learning was technology and internet connectivity. Dong et al. (2020) also pointed out that it led to social isolation and lack of interaction and participation. Lemay et al (2021) and Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison (2020 stated that teacher and students lacked interaction (disconnected) during distance learning. By considering those positive and negative impacts, they expected that the distance learning in future provided more interesting learning and various learning activities as well extended the learning time.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore students' experiences on distance learning in English class. The result shows that the students do not have difficulty using the distance learning platform but they face problems in stable internet connectivity. Though they perceive face-to-face

better than distance learning, they prefer distance learning in future. They feel that their language skills are quite improved during distance learning. They respond that distance learning has positive and negative impacts. They expect that the learning materials and time extension will be better for future distance learning.

The findings of this study contribute significantly for the policy maker and teachers or lecturers to design the interesting and various learning materials for effective and efficient distance learning. This study employs a small number of participants. It requires a number of participants in further study. It is needed to investigate the distance learning process to portray the students' engagement through class observation.

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