

EXPLORING BENEFITS AND OBSTACLES OF ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: Since the Covid-19 outbreak, all of the institutions in Indonesia have been forced to use online learning. The sudden use of online learning causes many obstacles. Many previous studies explored the obstacles of online learning. However, this present study aims to discover the benefits and obstacles from the students' experiences during online learning in the pandemic Covid-19. This present study is a qualitative research design which is used thematic analysis. Since the students' characteristics and other factors differ from the previous studies, this present study has different findings. The benefits that students can get from online learning experiences are becoming technology literate, making learning accessible and flexible, increasing positive attitudes, and being more efficient. Nevertheless, the obstacles in using an online learning platform are technology illiteracy among particular students, hard-to-understand course material, laziness, lack of communication among the students, time management, less lecturer's guide, excessive assignments, and cheating during the examination.

Keywords: students' experiences; benefits; obstacles; online learning.

Abstrak: Sejak menyebarnya Covid-19, seluruh institusi di Indonesia terpaksa menggunakan pembelajaran secara online. Penggunaan pembelajaran online secara tiba-tiba menyebabkan banyak kendala. Banyak penelitian terdahulu yang mengupas tentang kendala pembelajaran online. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui manfaat dan hambatan dari pengalaman siswa selama pembelajaran online di masa pandemi Covid-19. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif dengan desain analisis tematik. Hasil temuan dalam penelitian ini meliputi manfaat yang dapat diperoleh siswa dari pengalaman belajar online antara lain siswa menjadi melek teknologi, pembelajaran menjadi mudah diakses dan fleksibel, meningkatkan sikap positif, dan lebih efisien. Namun terdapat kendala yang dihadapi oleh siswa dalam pembelajaran online seperti beberapa siswa buta teknologi atau gptek sehingga mahasiswa kesulitan menggunakan platform pembelajaran online, materi kuliah kurang dipahami, malas, kurangnya komunikasi antar mahasiswa, kesulitan dalam manajemen waktu, dosen kurang memberikan panduan kepada mahasiswa, banyak tugas, dan mahasiswa melakukan kecurangan seperti mencontek selama ujian.

Kata kunci: pengalaman siswa; manfaat; hambatan; pembelajaran daring.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of December 2019, it was discovered that there was a disease similar to pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, from data showing that 75,000 people affected by the disease came from this area (Duarte et al., 2020). This disease became known as covid-19. The disease that attacks the respiratory system then spreads rapidly throughout the world, such as the United States of America, Australia, and France; and Indonesia is no exception. Diseases caused by the coronavirus have infected all continents in the world.

This virus also spreads to all continents in the world very quickly. The impact caused by this virus is tremendous and dangerous. Therefore, WHO ordered all countries to stop their daily activities to prevent transmission and enforce work from home (WFH). All sectors of the economy were hit, including the education sector. The limitation of space for movement makes the teaching and learning process was carried out online. All Indonesian citizens must adapt to the new normal protocol (Hidayaturrahman et al., 2021), including academia, where people have to learn with the online system. All educators in this country must learn to get used to mastering technology. All levels of education from early childhood to university level have to use e-learning.

Computers were first used in language classes around 1950 and 1980 in the form of a language laboratory which later developed until 1980, where teachers began to use technology in learning (Brown, 2007). The forms of technology that can be used to teach in classrooms other than computers include films, posters, slides, and so forth (Brown, 2007). Along with the times, technology is also getting more sophisticated. Computers can not only be used as modern technology but can also be connected to another even though from a distance of thousands of kilometers with a network called the Internet. E-learning or distance education began in the United States in the 1800s, when faculty and students at the University of Chicago lived in different areas and attempted to join the courses (Adebo, 2018).

E-learning tools and programs have been essential in increasing student-teacher engagement (Elshareif & Mohamed, 2021). As a result, many colleges have made extensive use of e-learning. Thus, the need for intellectual and technical understanding to teach using the Internet has emerged, and this knowledge is quickly becoming a key competency for many instructors (Harandi, 2015).

The industrial era 4.0 technology is developing very quickly; all activities require us to use technology. E-learning has significantly impacted both education and the business world, and it complements traditional delivery methods (Harandi, 2015). In education, internet-based e-learning applications are also used to facilitate teaching that can be accessed anytime and anywhere. Online learning or e-learning means that students are physically far from the instructors and need some

devices to deliver the course (Hermida, 2020). The device to connect between students and instructors is technology. There is a lot of available online learning platform, some of them can be used freely, and some are paid. Not only can online learning platforms provide many education features, but also social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, and others can be used as media to deliver the course. It just needs instructors' creativity to design the lesson (De Freitas, et al., 2015).

Bringing technology in the classroom can give advantages. It is flexible, improves the effectiveness of knowledge, eliminates barriers from the fear of talking to others, is efficient in cost because the students do not have to travel, and allows self-pacing (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014). Besides advantages, online learning also has negative impacts. The disadvantages of e-learning are it lacks interaction between teacher and students, e-learning is less effective than face to face learning, lack of communication among the learners to share their knowledge, cheating during examination because the teacher cannot control the students, students mostly copy and paste from the Internet, the subject that needs more practical skills cannot be done by e-learning, and it spends more cost in time and money (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014).

Many institutions have used e-learning since mid-March 2020, immediately after the announcement of the WFH ordered by the central government. Learning that initially ran offline (face-to-face) suddenly turned online. The methods and applications of e-learning used by the lecturers are various. The learning activities used several applications, including Google Classroom, Edmodo, G-meet, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Moodle (Karjo, et al, 2021).

The use of e-learning suddenly has some effects on educators and students. They were facing new things full of challenges and obstacles; of course, distance learning is not as easy as imagined. There are obstacles faced during the learning process.

Starting from an invisible virus that forces educators and students to be technology literate in learning. Thus, everyone can feel the impact of e-learning. The problem is not simple; many problems arise from weak signal coverage access, inadequate devices, power cuts, disability to afford cellular credits, and many more. As stated by the NTB Provincial Government, the implementation of distance learning is not effective due to many obstacles, including the lack of teacher-student interaction, inadequate networks, and facilities (Zakaria, 2020). Seeing this problem, is Indonesia ready to use online learning in the future? From this experience, many things need to be evaluated to carry out online learning.

Many researchers conducted studies exploring online learning. There are shown many different results from the impact of online learning. A study entitled "A Study on EFL Students' Use of E-Learning Programs for Learning English -Taking Taiwanese University as an Example" for students

studying English as a foreign language / EFL (English as a Foreign Language) using e-learning at Taiwan University. The results showed that e-learning did not benefit EFL students' abilities; technology was never successful in facilitating the learning given by the teacher. That technology cannot replace the teacher as an essential element in teaching activities (Soong, 2012).

The research entitled "Students' Perception on the Implementation of Moodle Web-Based in Learning Grammar". This research was conducted to determine the use of Moodle in teaching grammar because the grammar ability of students in writing at a university in Central Sulawesi is very minimal. After conducting experiments using instruction online with the Moodle application, student responses were very optimistic when learning grammar using e-learning rather than conventional learning (Thamrin et al., 2019). Allo (2020) researched online learning entitled "Is the online learning good during the Covid-19 Pandemic? The case of EFL learners". The results showed that online learning was beneficial for students learning during a pandemic.

A study conducted in Pakistan involving undergraduate and postgraduate students where online learning carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic did not satisfy anything. Many students cannot access the Internet for economic reasons (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The study of e-learning in Saudi Arabia showed that e-learning in learning English in the EFL class has several roles, namely to promote primary learning skills, independent learning, flexible and interactive learning (Mutambik, 2018).

Regarding the explanation above, this research tries to determine the students' perceptions of online learning in a private university in East Java, Indonesia, especially in English education study programs. This study focused on the benefits and obstacles of students' experiences in online learning. Even though many studies explore the students' perceptions and experiences in online learning, this present study fills the gap from the previous studies that only explore the challenges. This study explores both the benefits and the obstacles in online learning from the students' experiences. However, the result of the study may be different with the previous studies because students' characteristics and other factors in this present study may differ with the previous studies (Meltzer, 2002).

Regarding that the education quality improvement is significant, the results of this study can be used as an evaluation for further online learning because technology is an important part in higher education. So that, the use of e-learning in the university can be maximized. In addition, the result of this study suggested to the educators to increase creativity in teaching online, improve the quality of teaching, facilitate interaction between teachers and students. Furthermore, this research can also be used as a reference for consideration or study to the local government and the ministry of education

and culture in particular to improve the facilities to support online learning throughout Indonesia, especially in rural areas (Djalante, et al., 2020).

From the background of the study, which had been explained above, the research problems can be formulated as follows what are the benefits of online learning to EFL students? And what are the obstacles of online learning to EFL students?.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative research design. The participants were English education students in a private university in East Java, Indonesia: nine students consisted of four males and five females who enrolled in the 2018 academic year. The subject was chosen because they were already had lots of experience in online learning since the break out of pandemic Covid-19. The students were asked to write their opinions reflecting their online learning experiences. The data then were analyzed in thematic analyses regarding the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Benefits

Technology can bring benefits to human life, including education. Students get some benefits during online learning in the pandemic Covid-19 era.

Technology Literate

Even though the students are forced to use technology in learning activities, it does not mean that all students are technology literate. They are learning by practice because of the demand to use the only platforms. Some students might feel confused and do not know how to use the online learning platform. Without giving any workshop on how to use the online platform, they are needed to be able to learn by themselves. Students felt that in this pandemic covid-19, online learning could make them technology literate and improve their knowledge of using technology.

"I learn how to operate technology to study, and it is helpful for the future" (P1)

"I can practice using technology to study and can be as my experience for online learning in the future" (P2).

"I am more knowledgeable about technology" (P4)

"I become more understand about technology and online learning application" (P6)

"I get used to being technology literate (P7)

"Increase my knowledge about technology" (P8)

Accessible and Flexible

Online learning cuts the distance between teachers and students in different areas. The students can access the information from anywhere and everywhere. It is similar to the previous finding that e-learning promotes flexible learning (Adi et al., 2021; Mutambik, 2018; Rawashdeh et al., 2021). Distance is not a matter anymore. They can learn from home without going to campus. Online learning platforms can record, save and manage the course material so that students can repeat and access it easily every time. Furthermore, the assignments can be done online; they think it is easier than offline or face-to-face learning.

"I can study from my home without going to campus" (P1)

"Online learning is more flexible because I do not have to go to campus. it can save the course material easily, and I can find the sources of material easily" (P3)

"Online learning can be accessed everywhere and anywhere as long as there is a strong internet connection so that I can get much information" (P5)

"I can repeat the course material many times because it is recorded. I can do it everywhere". (P7)

"More relaxed and flexible. It can give more spare time to learn new things". (P8)

"It is more enjoyable and relaxing because I can study anywhere and everywhere. I can do my assignments easily because it is online". (P9)

Increase Positive Attitude

Online learning also gives benefits to students' character. Changing character into the positive one is another impact in online learning. The students felt that online learning changed them to be disciplined and responsible. The other study supports that students become organized and disciplined by learning with technology (Hermida, 2020). Moreover, online learning can change the student to be an independent learner. Students can learn by themselves without the lecturer's assistance. They can find and learn more information from the Internet. This finding has the same result as the previous study that technology can promote independent learning (Mutambik, 2018; Saifuddin, 2018).

"Online learning triggers me to read more sources on the internet so that I can be an independent learner even though sometimes I am still confused" (P4).

"Online learning can teach me to be responsible and disciplined" (P5)

"I can be an independent learner without lecturer and learn to be disciplined" (P6)

Reduce Shyness

Another positive attitude that students have is to reduce shyness. Students who usually keep silent during face-to-face learning become active in online learning. Technology or online media can reduce nervousness and shyness. Those students are not afraid or shy to share their opinions or ideas through an online learning platform. This finding is in line with Arkorful & Abaidoo (2014) statement's that e-learning reduces the anxiety of talking.

"Online learning can reduce shyness because shy students can share their idea in the forum" (P5)

More Efficient

A student said that online learning could minimize the use of paper and other stationaries. Therefore, it is more efficient than face-to-face learning when they have to use paper and stationaries during the teaching and learning activities. Less paper means that it is more efficient and also environmentally friendly.

"Online learning can minimize the use of paper and other stationaries, and it is also environmentally friendly" (P6)

Obstacles

Besides the benefits, the students have faced some obstacles during online learning in pandemic Covid-19. The sudden use of technology may give some obstruction for them. Many students do not ready to do online learning. The obstacles that the students in conducting online learning have faced can be seen as follows;

Technology Illiterate

Students are unable to use technology. They have never been to use the online application before. Therefore, students have to learn to use the online platform during online learning by themselves. Because of technology illiteracy, students found some difficulties during online learning. The students did not give any workshop or training before the online course, so they did not know how to use it. To conduct e-learning in an institution, the administration needs support and training for the technology (Finch et al., 2012).

"Not all of the students are technology literate, so it becomes the obstacles to use the online learning application." (P2)

The Course Material is Hard to Understand

Online learning is not effective in the way of delivering the course material. Students felt that they could not understand the course material explained by the lecturer. They have difficulty in understanding what is said by the lecturer. The lecturer's explanation in face-to-face learning makes the students more understood because there is a direct connection between students and lecturers. This finding is in line with the previous study that students can not understand the lecturer's explanation in online learning (Adi et al., 2021; Yuzulia, 2021).

"The lecturer delivered the course material generally so that some of the students did not understand with the course because we have the different ability in learning" (P1).

"The teaching-learning activities are not well done" (P7)

"Online learning is practical, but it is difficult for the students who have lower ability to understand the course material" (P8)

"Online learning is not effective to deliver the course material because there is no direct connection to the lecturer so that the students do not understand the material" (P9)

Internet Access

The foremost obstacle that the students have faced is internet access. It is the most significant obstacle during online learning. Most of the students complain that online learning spends many data. It is not suitable for students who are in lower economic conditions. Furthermore, students who live in the village or rural areas have difficulty finding internet access. Not all internet providers in Indonesia have strong signals (Yuzulia, 2021). This finding is in line with the previous research that online learning is not suitable for underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, which have improper internet connections (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

"Students who live in the rural area have difficulty finding internet access. Furthermore, the lecturer who gives the project online spends more data. In addition, the students have the different economic condition" (P1)

"Not all of the students are technology literate, and it spends a lot of data so that it can make destruction for the students in lower economic condition." (P2)

"I have difficulty in internet connection. It is difficult to access" (P8)

"Excessive in using data internet" (P9)

Laziness

Instead of a positive attitude, there is also a negative attitude resulting from online learning. Some students become lazy and more passive in online learning because their surrounding

environment does not support them. This finding is in line with the previous study that found that students have difficulty balancing their life, school, and work (Hermida, 2020). Other factors affecting the students' laziness are because the lecturer only gives assignments without giving lectures, and there is no direct contact with the lecturer. In addition, some students are more passive and irresponsible because the lecturer did not give any assignments or questions to them.

"Online learning can make laziness because there are no supporting circumstances. Furthermore, the activities are conducted through mobile phone which can be the distraction in learning "(P2)

"Some students become lazy because they are more passive. Most students do not have any responsibility to be active because the lecturer does not give many assignments or questions. Many of them only fill the attendance list" (P3)

"Most of the students become bored and lazy because the lecturer only gives assignments" (P5)

"Students become lazier because there is no direct contact with the lecturer (P7)

Difficult Communications

Even though online learning cuts the distance, it brings difficulty in doing collaborative assignments. Students felt that the collaborative assignments did not effectively do online learning. It happened because some of their friends did not participate in the discussion. Moreover, the lack of communication between lecturer and students becomes an obstacle in doing the assignments. The students were confused with the assignments and did not ask for further explanation.

"If there is a collaborative assignment. Some of my friends are not active at that time, so it is difficult to discuss the assignments". (P3)

"Lack of communication between lecturer and students make students confuse to do the assignments." (P4)

"My friends do not give any response when doing the collaborative assignment." (P8)

Time Management

Time management is a critical factor in conducting online learning. A student felt there is no different time to study and do other activities at home. If students cannot manage their time, it can give obstacles in doing online learning. This finding contrasts with Rawashdeh et al. (2021) that said e-learning is effective in time management. Maybe it happened because of the student's personal factor that cannot manage the time.

"I cannot manage the time between studying and other activities in doing online learning at home". (P4)

Lack of Lecturers' Guide

Many lectures only give assignments without explaining the course material in online learning. It is also an obstacle the students face in conducting online learning. The role of the lecturer cannot be placed by the technology, so the lecturer still needs to guide the students in teaching-learning activities. This finding is in line with the previous study that cold technology can never effectively become a "facilitator" played by a teacher (Soong, 2012).

"Many lecturers often give many assignments without guiding us" (P4)

Cheating

In conducting online learning, the lecturer cannot watch the students. Therefore, many students can cheat by finding the answer on the Internet or asking their friends when doing the exam. E-learning promotes piracy and plagiarism. This obstacle brings unhealthy competition to the students to achieve better academic achievement (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014). This finding is in contrast to Finch et al. (2012) statement that technology can benefit students to have critical skills.

"Students are easily cheating during the exam and doing the assignments because they can find the answer on the internet and ask friends" (P6)

CONCLUSION

Online learning that has been conducted during the pandemic Covid-19 provides both obstacles and benefits. Through online learning experiences, students are becoming technology literate. The learning process also becomes accessible and flexible because it can be held anywhere and everywhere. Furthermore, it can increase positive attitudes such as discipline, responsibility, and independent, efficient learning. Besides, the obstacles in using an online learning platform are technology illiteracy among particular students, hard-to-understand course material, laziness, lack of communication among the students to do group assignments, time management, less lecturer's guide, excessive assignments, and cheating during the examination. Those benefits and obstacles need to be studied thoroughly to consider the learning management improvement in Indonesia.

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