

The online learning challenges of EFL students at San Pedro University during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia has impacted the country's educational system. Face-to-face instruction is being replaced by full-fledged online learning from the comfort of one's own home. This study was conducted to determine the challenges of online learning for EFL students. A qualitative method was applied in this study. The data for this study was gathered through interviews and documentation. EFL students from the English education department at Universitas San Pedro in the first semester were the focus of this study. The findings of this study revealed that students faced a variety of challenges while learning online, including Internet data, Internet connection, difficulty completing assignments, intrusion, a lack of prior experience with technology, comprehension of EFL lessons, and interaction between students and lecturers. On the other hand, students have reported feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness as a result of their online learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, EFL, online learning, students

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1. Introduction

The abrupt shift to online learning as a result of COVID-19 has resulted in numerous challenges and new educational approaches across all educational systems (Alawamleh et al., 2022; Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Language learning systems were compelled to use entirely remote education solutions. Responding to COVID-19 is an important investigation to determine the challenges, barriers, suggestions, concerns, and deficiencies of English teaching in Indonesia. Most people had no idea what to do, how to complete their tasks, or who to follow. Students were not barred from participating. They questioned their online responsibilities, learning procedures, evaluation policies, and attendance measures. They quickly transitioned to online education without well-planned learning experiences.

Communication in an online class differs significantly from communication in a traditional classroom setting (Alawamleh et al., 2022). Online learning is a sort of distance learning that incorporates electronic and internet-based technology (ICT) into the learning process. The utilisation of Internet-based technological elements that are significantly reliant on information technology availability is known as online learning.

This Internet distribution mechanism, according to public statistics, produces a slew of issues and concerns. Ahmad (2016) observed a situation in which EFL learning, which requires a lot of practice to be effective, runs into roadblocks when the system is applied. Lecturers' ICT equipment used to train students who are in diverse and remote locations, for example, is usually useless during listening sessions. When giving listening tests to students, lecturers are also unable to provide the greatest possible monitoring. Students in distant or online learning speaking classes have a hard time emulating their lecturer's speaking style. Although they will be studying in a non-English speaking country, EFL students will be prepared to speak English. The English language serves as a global medium of communication, allowing EFL students to participate in a global target-language community (Getie, 2020; Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021). They are taught how to grasp English as a global language, which has a significant impact on their ability to participate in worldwide activities for the nation's advancement. As a result, learning English is required. The use of technology is fast expanding in this 4.0 era and the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon.

Many students are unable to keep up with their virtual classmates because they lack the high bandwidth or a strong Internet connection that online courses necessitate (Sebastian et al., 2022): Their poor monitors make it difficult to follow the course management system, and their learning experience suffers as a result. Furthermore, the majority of them live off campus, making it difficult to keep up with the technical requirements of the chosen course. Some of them do not even own computers and must seek technical assistance from Learning Resource Centres. The only way to solve this problem is to know exactly what kind of technical support they will require for a specific course before enrolling in it, as well as to properly equip them for the course's successful completion.

The problem is not only a lack of learning equipment or facilities but also a lack of an Internet quota. The provision of internet quotas comes at a high cost. This is a challenge for students and parents from middle- to lower-income families. They do not have enough funds to set up an Internet network. Despite having internet access, students have difficulty connecting to the network due to where they live. According to Nashruddin et al.'s (2020) research, some students live in remote rural areas that are not connected to the internet. Furthermore, their cellular network is occasionally unstable due to their geographical location, which is quite far from signal coverage. This is also a problem that many students face when using online resources.

Many other issues have been raised in recent research studies on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, students who have lost the opportunity for peer interactions have experienced increased stress, frustration, and isolation as a result of online or distance learning during the pandemic (Daniel, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017). The unprecedented shift to online learning has also raised concerns about cyber security, cyberbullying, online violence and exploitation, and other psychological issues that have arisen as a result of the difficulties and uncertainties associated with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Daniel, 2020; Singh & Thurman, 2019; Yan, 2020).

According to Means et al. (2010), online learning is useful because it can be used anywhere and at any time. However, implementing online learning predictably becomes complicated, so the lecturer and teacher must prepare a backup plan if one of the online learning platforms or methods fails to function properly. Due to the difficulty of learning a foreign language during a coronavirus pandemic, especially for higher education students, the difficulties of learning online may worsen (Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). EFL refers to a situation in which students were learning English to communicate with other English speakers in the world. Furthermore, Akhter (2020), conducted a previous study titled 'Problems and Challenges Faced by EFL Students of Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 Pandemic'.

1.1. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to look into the challenges of online learning faced by students in the English Education Department at Universitas San Pedro during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Students-created barriers obstruct the online teaching-learning process. Furthermore, during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this research is expected to increase students' knowledge about EFL students' challenges in online learning, allowing them to reduce their problems in online learning. Furthermore, this research can be expected to be used as a reference to discover the online learning challenges that EFL students encountered. As a result, they will be able to comprehend the challenges of this pandemic for online teaching and learning, particularly for EFL students.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data collection instrument

This study used a qualitative research design and was conducted in September 2021 at the English Education Department of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education Universitas San Pedro. The study focused on the online learning challenges experienced by EFL students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. To collect data accurately, the researcher used written interviews and documentation as an aid in data collection.

2.2. Participants

The students of the English Department in the academic year 2021/2022 were the focus of the study. The students range from the first to the ninth semester. The researcher only took first-semester students, ranging from 3 to 10, and the data was collected at random. To collect data, the researcher conducted a structured interview using an online Google form and a written interview. The researcher employed descriptive qualitative data analysis in this study.

2.3. Ethical consideration

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study. All participants remained anonymous and the research posed no harm to any human, animal, or organisation.

3. Result

The COVID-19 pandemic altered education in unprecedented ways. Students were required to not only transition to online learning but also maintain a social distance from their friends and family. It was difficult for some students to adjust to the 'new normal', and they missed having in-person interactions with their teachers. For some, it meant simply spending more time with their parents. Universities and schools must learn more about how students feel about distance education and their experiences. To collect data, they can send out a survey to students about remote learning. The purpose of this study was to look into the difficulties or challenges faced by EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here the researcher presents the result or the responses to the questions proposed by the researcher to the EFL students in the English Department at San Pedro University.

1. What was your experience with online learning as a student?
2. What did you find appealing about it?
3. What was it that you did not like?
4. How does it compare to your experience as a student in a traditional classroom setting?
5. Would you prefer to do more online learning in the future, if you had the option? If so, please explain why. Why not, if not?
6. What have you learned during this lengthy period of a school closure?

3.1. Three of the EFL students in the English Department at Universitas San Pedro

Their online learning experience as students has been less than satisfactory. They only wish they did not have to get up at 6 a.m. every day. What they do not like about it is that it's confusing for them when lecturers assign them to work, mostly because it's easier for them to do work with instructions from the lecturers. In a physical classroom, they can only focus on their work, but online learning makes it difficult to focus because they also have to focus on household matters, which throws them off. They would not want to do online learning in the future because it is difficult for them to focus solely on their work.

3.2. Five of the EFL students in the English Department at Universitas San Pedro

As students, their online learning experience has been even busier than attending regular classes on campus in person because, for the most part, they are not taking it as seriously as they should. However, what they like about learning online is that they are not under as much pressure to present themselves as an excellent student, so they can relax more and think more because in a school environment, they, as well as other students, have to pace their selves to think, which causes stress and anxiety. What they dislike about online learning is that it can take them up to a full school day (6–7 hours) to complete two assignments at most, provided to them by their lecturers. When compared to their experience as students in a physical classroom, online learning is more difficult because they and possibly other students are so used to working with other students. If they could choose whether or not to do more online learning in the future, they would not because, while they are independent learners, the vibe of learning online at home is not the same as learning in a classroom with other students.

3.3. Two of the EFL students in the English Department at Universitas San Pedro

As students, their online learning experience has been satisfactory. They sometimes find themselves uninterested in completing their assignments. They still do the assignments, but they occasionally turn them in late. It's as if they will do the assignments whenever they feel like it. Their online learning experience as students has not been positive. This new learning system has advantages, such as more time to complete assignments at home, not having to get up so early to go to school, and ensuring the safety of both staff and students. Despite these advantages, there are some disadvantages to this method of instruction. For example, they have a lot of responsibilities at home, such as caring for their younger siblings, cooking meals for them, cleaning up after them, and so on. When they are doing schoolwork, they also find it difficult to stay motivated. When they are surrounded by other temptations, such as their phone or other electronics, they lose motivation to work.

Responses to the sixth question, the learning environment were discovered to be ambiguous and fraught with concerns. The students were harmed by the abrupt change in the environment that occurred without any instructions or guidance. They lacked the motivation to study or finish their courses. During this time, they were not at all at ease. They didn't know what was going on. They ran into technical difficulties, a lack of support, and environmental distractions. Their responses show that the majority of the students' responses were similar. They were grouped into a single category that could be described as negative, such as suffering or discomfort. At this point, there is no way to divide the students' reflections into different groups, as seen in the subsequent rounds. This means that all students shared many of the same concerns, expressed similar opinions, and displayed similar perceptions. Similar findings are reported by Mutambik (2018), Oyaid and Alshaya (2019), Sharma (2019), and Al Shlowiy et al. (2021).

The main challenge faced by the students is a lack of understanding of the subject matter. For instance, the content of online reading materials may not be understood by all students. This is because the material content is presented in the form of an e-book, which is presented per chapter, as well as teaching materials in the form of PowerPoint presentations and videos. These materials may be understandable to students, but they are insufficient. The material is understood by students based on their interpretation or point of view. This is evidenced by the number of students who call their lecturers directly after viewing the material online. Based on the researcher's experience as an EFL lecturer in the English Department at Universitas San Pedro this online system is only useful for giving students assignments and quizzes. This means that if the lecturer presents the lesson material along with assignments or quizzes in a single meeting, students will actively and enthusiastically study the material because they are concerned about failing to complete the assignment or quiz. On the other hand, if the lecturer posts materials without assigning them, and students are only asked to learn them, students are less likely to be interested in learning them.

4. Discussion

Understanding the challenges of online learning can help students, especially when the perceived usefulness of online learning is linked to their perceptions of it (Almarashdeh, 2016; Yuan, 2023). Acceptance of virtual learning and adaptation to its environment is dependent on students' ability to recognise their role as independent learners (He, 2020). It is difficult to improve their online learning experience without addressing their perception that face-to-face learning is preferable to online learning and without lowering the barriers to online learning.

Lecturers may be unaware of the difficulties students encountered during the pandemic. One of the barriers is a lack of technical support, which may prevent learners from using and accepting online

learning, especially in the beginning. In the event of a school closure, it is best to prepare students with a pre-planned transition to an online learning environment (Baytiyeh, 2019; Hidalgo-Camacho et al., 2021). Their parents should also be trained on how to effectively implement the plan at home to provide effective support to the students. The plan should make it easier for students to communicate with one another and with teachers. Lecturers, on the other hand, must guide students through online learning materials, respond to their questions, maintain live teaching sessions, and establish appropriate interaction with their students.

5. Conclusion

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the online learning difficulties encountered by EFL students at Universitas San Pedro were internet data, Internet connection, doing assignments, intrusion, lack of experience in using technology, comprehension of EFL lessons, and interaction between students and lecturers. Students, families, and lecturers must use online remote learning tools as effectively as possible during this gradual reopening of schools, with some schools continuing to use hybrid teaching models depending on national and local circumstances. Furthermore, efforts must be made to ensure that the most vulnerable children and adolescents attend school. It is critical to consider the diverse needs of these various groups and to incorporate responses and pedagogical approaches that are sensitive to and tailored to their needs.

Priority should be given in the short term to the following suggestions:

Expand programs that help students access the internet from home. Providing support for students' home Internet access is more relevant for remote education than providing digital devices because many families have access to at least one type of digital device (such as a Smartphone), but cannot always afford Internet connectivity, particularly during an economic downturn. Indeed, the most widely used remote education strategies were those of asynchronous provisions, such as online delivery of learning materials via WhatsApp and email, and delivery of videos containing recorded classes and teacher feedback. Even when schools reopen, home Internet access will be critical, as schools with limited infrastructure and staff will continue to use some form of remote education as part of a hybrid model.

Assist families in using technology for remote learning. Schools that were successful in increasing student participation in remote learning activities reported active parental involvement strategies such as training sessions to teach families how to use online platforms. Furthermore, families with digital skills are better equipped to protect their children from the increased risks associated with their children's internet use.

Assist students with their online learning. Monitoring student progress regularly allows teachers to identify students who are struggling in specific areas and provide them with targeted assistance. Formative and self-assessment can assist teachers in evaluating and modifying remote learning activities. Furthermore, teachers can encourage group activities among students, maximising their ability to learn and collaborate. In the medium term, the use of technology can be very beneficial in removing additional barriers to quality education and access for marginalised populations.

Students should adjust to online lectures. It is critical to remember that online lectures are simply lectures and content delivered in a different format. Listen to them as if they were a normal lecture, and if you're watching a recording, try to watch it at normal speed. Hitting the pause button too frequently may cause you to become easily distracted. Understanding the material should be your top priority

above all else. Also, if you're going to watch recorded lectures, do so when you'll be able to give them your undivided attention. For some, it may be first thing in the morning, while for others, it may be later in the evening.

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