



Online Learning for EFL Learners: Perceptions, Challenges, and Expectations

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Abstract

This article discusses EFL learners' perceptions, challenges and expectations on online learning during Covid-19 pandemic. The participants of this study were the second semester students of Magister of English Study Program in one public university in Banten. Questionnaire and interview were conducted to collect the data. The data were then analyzed qualitatively based on the themes. The research results show that the students perceived positively on the usefulness and the ease of use of online learning. They gave positive responses on online learning in terms of learning autonomy, discipline, technological skill, flexibility, accessibility, and their readiness dealing with technical things. The challenges they faced were dealing with the poor internet connection, motivation dynamics and learning material understanding difficulty. Finally, to deal with the challenges, they expected to have more well-prepared lecturers regarding technological capacity, course content and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the countries affected by Covid-19 which makes a policy to send the students in all level of education into online learning. Students of elementary, junior and senior high schools learn with their teachers online. Similar to the school students, students in universities do online learning with their lecturers use online learning platforms or video conference. They also make use of online learning system website provided by each campus.

As one of public universities in Banten, Indonesia, provides online learning system (SPADA) for their students, including English Education department students. This online learning system is created for English Education department lecturers to share materials, give assignments, and create discussion forum with the students. The students can access this online learning system, starting from attending the class online, send their answers and join the discussion forum. Starting from 2019,

English Education department students have been involved in blended learning program. The students have joined face to face learning as well as online learning. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the students have to do full online learning with their lecturers.

Numerous studies on online learning have been ubiquitously conducted around the globe. Before Covid-19 pandemic, some studies reported that online learning policy has created new learning opportunities and benefits as perceived by the students (You & Kang, 2014; Kongchan, 2012, Manowong, 2016; Westberry, 2009; Hartnett, et al, 2011). Those studies report that online learning can support the students' self-regulation, higher levels of student cognition, fostering learner reflection and information processing, and leveling the playing field between participants. Furthermore, the results of the study suggest that online learning has a number of potential benefits, such as freedom of content, space, medium, access, and relationship development. Online learning also has its challenges as several studies reported (Hildebrandt & Teschler, 2006; Ghaffari & Emami, 2011). Hildebrandt and Teschler (2006) posit that online learning doesn't necessarily make learning easier, simpler, more effective or more cost effective than traditional pedagogical methods. In addition, Ghaffari and Emami (2011) reports that the students may have problem for practicing their skills as there are no labs and the students may also have problems with self-discipline like procrastination and failure to fulfill requirements. Those studies, however, gave evidence that the benefits of online learning outweigh its challenges.

During Covid-19 pandemic, several studies on online learning, especially in higher education were conducted. Adnan and Anwar (2020) conducted a study to find out the students' perspective in higher education in Pakistan. The results revealed that online learning cannot produce desired results in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where a vast majority of students are unable to access the internet due to technical as well as monetary issues. Similar to this, Barzani and Jamil (2021) investigated 200 Kurdish EFL university students. They reported that majority of the students have a negative attitude toward online education. However, a study by Şenol, Lesinger, and Çağlar M. (2021) found that the university students in North Cyprus agreed with the benefits of online learning dealing with the better understanding of topics and being educated by different educators and universities. They also agreed with the disadvantage of online learning, such

as passive learning, overload of homework and exams, and fear of online assessments. In addition, Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amen (2021) reported that both faculty and students indicated that online learning gave benefits in terms of self-learning, low costs, convenience, and flexibility. They also agree that the challenges lie in adapting to online education, especially for deaf and hard of hearing students, lack of interaction and motivation, technical and Internet issues, data privacy, and security. From the lecturers' perspective, in Indonesia, Simamora, et al, (2020) found that online learning applications are beneficial for some lecturers to deliver lecture material without face to face, although there are some obstacles such as inadequate internet access.

EFL learners in higher education in Indonesia are also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, in Indonesian context, only limited studies investigating the EFL learners' perception on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. A study conducted by Agung, Surtikanti, and Quinones (2020) identified three major obstacles that the EFL learners in Pamane Talino college found during online learning, such as the availability and sustainability of internet connection, the accessibility of the teaching media, and the compatibility of tools to access the media. Further, Nugroho et.al (2020) conducted a study on the students' perception on online learning in Translation course. They reported that based on the teaching method of the lecturer, 80% of respondents stated that they did not like the online lecture mode because of the difficulties they experienced. In addition, the results of the questionnaire showed a positive perception of 90% on the use of OmegaT and Google Classroom. Those studies reported undergraduate students' perception on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. None were conducted to find out the students' challenges and expectations dealing with the use of online learning to learn English, especially in magister or graduate program. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how the EFL learners perceive online learning in learning English, its challenges and expectations. Employing questionnaire and interview, the study was conducted in English Magister in one public university in Banten, Indonesia.

Online Learning

There are several definitions of online learning. The earliest definitions of online learning focus on the instruction and the method of delivery as Khan (1997) who defined online learning as the delivery of instruction to a remote audience

using the Web as an intermediary. Further, Watson & Kalmon (2005) posits that online learning is education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the internet. For the purpose of the study, the definition proposed by Watson & Kalmon (2005) is taken. Further, the benefits and disadvantages of online learning will be discussed.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Online Learning

Online learning offers several benefits for the students in terms of flexibility and accessibility, self-regulated learning, information and materials resources access, and individual learner difference. In terms of flexibility, a number of instructors and students commented on their ability to focus more of their attention on the content of the course and less on issues such as parking, traffic, and other problems that may arise when attending a traditional class environment (Thomson, 2010). Meanwhile, regarding self-regulated learning, online learning has been found to be conducive to students who favor self-regulated learning (Holmes & Gardner, 2006; You & Kang, 2014). In terms of material and source access, online learning allows the students to access huge information and materials for their own learning. Finally, in regards to individual learner difference, since online learning is student centered, it takes into account individual's need and difference.

To some extents, however, online learning has its drawbacks on the students. The drawbacks of online learning are lack of social connectedness, problems with discipline and motivation, and learning cost. Online learning draws a bold boarder line among students and lecturers. Each student learns by her or himself. Although online communication can easily be done among students or teachers, a study by Rovai, et al (2005) suggested that online students feel a weaker sense of connectedness and belonging than on campus students who attend face-to-face classes. Dealing with discipline and motivation, students doing online learning will have different phase of learning which influences their discipline and motivation. A lot of assignment may cause the students to be unmotivated. Students lacking motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, can easily lose sight of their original goal, quickly become lost within the course, and ultimately withdraw (Chaney, 2001). The last is about learning cost. The use of internet to learn may cause the high cost of learning

The Use of Online Learning in Language Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic

During the Covid-19n pandemic, online learning benefits students in

language learning as it provides the students with resources or information and place for practicing skills. Online learning provides tools for language learning and tools for acquisition of language skills.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a case study employing a questionnaire and interview as the data collecting techniques. The participants of the study were fifteen students of the second semester of magister program in one public university in Banten who voluntarily joined the research. The questionnaire is adapted from Kongchan (2012) and Manowong (2016). This is a closed-ended questionnaire using five-lickert scale consisting of twenty items in which ten statements deal with the students' perception on the use of online learning and ten statements of the students' perceptions on the ease of use of online learning. The interview mainly asks about the students' challenges and expectations on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The data taken from questionnaire and interview were analyzed qualitatively using the data analysis technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) who set the analysis through three procedures: data reduction which involved the categorization based on the themes, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the research results as well as their discussion. They are the students' perceptions, challenges, and expectations on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. The Students' Perceptions on Online Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic

In general, the students perceived positively on the usefulness and the ease of use of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The detail of each will be elaborated below.

a. The Perceptions of Usefulness of Online Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Basen on the questionnaire, the students posited that during the Covid-19 pandemic online learning was useful as seen in the following diagram.

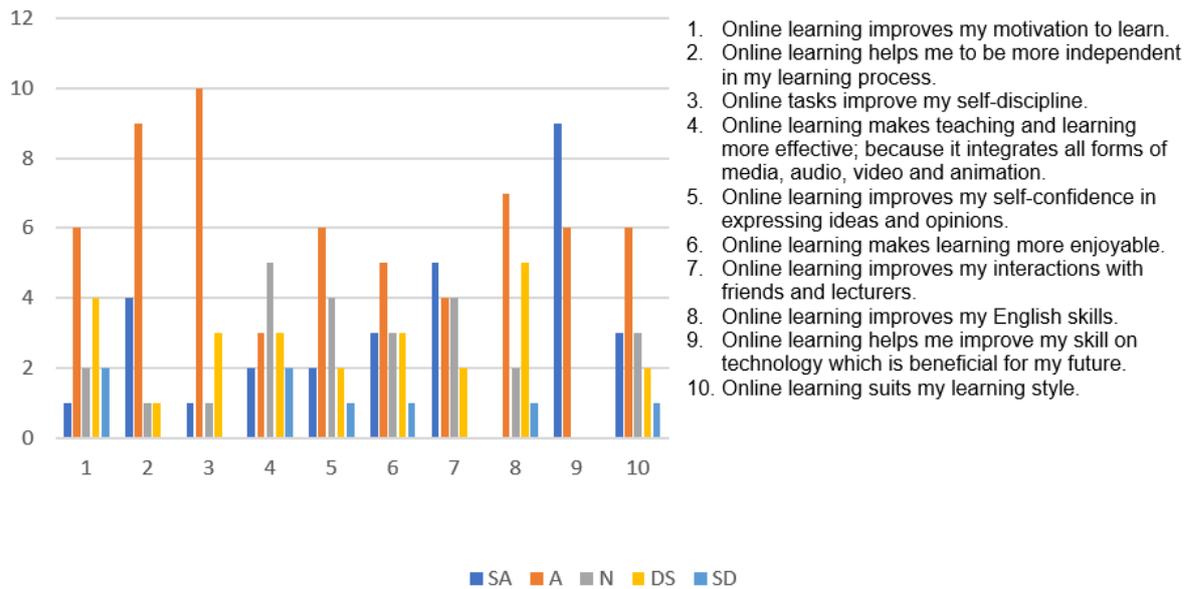


Diagram 1
Students' Perceptions on the Usefulness of Online Learning

Diagram 1 shows that all students (100%) agree that during the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning is useful in terms of technological skill mastery. The students were more familiar with the use of applications, websites, and many more which were used for their learning. This skill is beneficial for their future as the OECD Learning Compass 2030 has set those one of the three skills needed for future learning is practical and physical skills, which include using new information and communication technology devices (OECD, 2019).

The second place of the students' perception is that they agreed that online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic is useful in terms of learning autonomy. 86% of the students found that online learning helped them to be independent learner. In accordance with independent learning, self-discipline in online learning was perceived positively by the students. 73% of the students stated that online learning improved their self-discipline. It suits with what have been suggested by the earlier researchers who argue that online learning is conducive to students who favor self-regulated learning (Holmes and Gardner, 2006; You & Kang, 2014; Almahaasees, Mohsen, & Amen, 2021). Furthermore, the data also revealed that online learning suited the students' learning style. 60% of the students affirmed that online learning was useful dealing with the learning style. It has been widely known that individual learns differently form others. The data indicated that online learning could accommodate the students different learning

style.

In terms of self-confidence, 53% of them argued that online learning could improve their self-confidence. Confidence has been the focus of the studies on learning English as the foreign language around the globe (Vazques, 2017; Elaidi, 2016; Jamila, 2014). The studies indicated that confidence had been one factor contributing to the success of English language learning.

In terms of fun learning, the students found that online learning was enjoyable. 53% of them posited that online learning was enjoyable. Enjoyable situation is needed to motivate the students as Crisfield and White (2012) argued that motivation is considered as one of the crucial factors that can affect individual differences in acquiring a language. Interestingly, however, the data revealed that in terms of motivation, less than 50% students found that online learning was motivating. 39% of them disagreed that online learning was useful while 13% of them stayed neutral. This should become the lecturers' concern as students lacking motivation can easily forget original goal, quickly become lost within the course, and ultimately withdraw (Chaney, 2001).

In terms of language skill mastery, the students perceived positively although it was not significant compared to other factors mentioned before. 46% of the agreed that online learning helped them learn language skills, while 39% of them disagreed, and 13% stayed neutral. This probably correlated with what they perceived regarding effective learning as the number of the students who agreed, disagreed, and undecided were the same. 33% of the students voted in each category that online learning made teaching and learning more effective; because it integrated all forms of media, audio, video, and animation.

Dealing with learning interactions, online learning was perceived less useful. 40% of them disagreed that online learning could improve their interactions with lecturers and peers. This confirmed what has been found by Rovai, et al (2005) who suggested that online students feel a weaker sense of connectedness and belonging than on campus students who attend face-to-face classes.

b. The Perceptions of the Ease of Use of Online Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The data from questionnaire revealed that the students perceived positively on the ease of use of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic as illustrated in the following diagram:

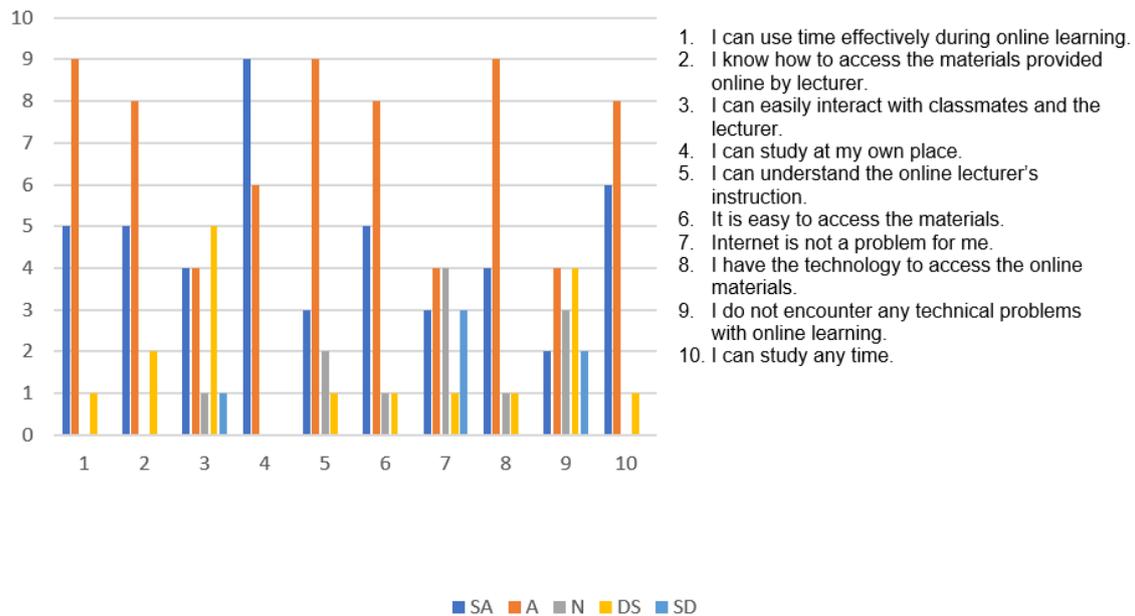


Diagram 2
Students' Perception on the Ease of Use of Online Learning

Diagram 2 shows that the students positively perceived the ease of use of online learning, especially learning flexibility and accessibility. This confirms what has been predicted by Thomson (2010) that online learning made the students focus more of their attention on the content of the course and less on issues such as parking, traffic, and other problems that may arise when attending a traditional class environment.

All students (100%) students agreed that online learning was flexible in terms of place. They could stay in their own places. They did not need to go to campus to study which probably led other problems like traffic and time. Furthermore, regarding the time, 93% of them agreed that they could study any time and they could use their time effectively. This also conforms with their perception that online learning suited their learning style and independent learning.

In terms of accessibility, 86% of the students agreed that they could access the learning material themselves. Furthermore, they also agreed that they knew how to access the material. 86% of them agreed at this point. In addition, 86% of

them also agreed that they had technological skill to access the material. This correlates with their perception that online learning can accommodate their technological skill although they still encountered technical problems and internet connection during online learning like what had been found by Agung, Surtikanti, and Quinones (2020) who reported that the respondents had problems in the accessibility of teaching media. This becomes one of the challenges of online learning that will be elaborated in challenges section.

Although the students perceived that online learning was less useful in regards to their interactions with their lecturers and friends, technology supports them to lead them to better interaction. 53% of them agreed that they could easily interacted with their lecturers and classmates.

Dealing with learning instruction, 86% of the students agreed that they could understand the learning instruction. This might help them to deal with the bulk of assignments and activities during online learning.

2. The Students' Challenges and Expectations on Online Learning

Data from interview illustrated that the students dealt with several changes and gave their expectations on online learning which might become further consideration for the stakeholders.

a. The Challenges of Online Learning

The biggest challenge the students dealt with was internet connection or network as stated by respondent 14:

The biggest challenge during online learning is the difficulty of having a good internet connection for learning, causing miscommunication between what the lecturer says and what the students understand (Respondent 14)

The use of internet connection is significant in online learning as online learning based on Watson and Kalmon (2005) is education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the internet. The problem with this, based on respondent 14, causes miscommunication.

Another biggest challenge of online learning found by the students is the difficulty to understand the learning material compared to that in face-to-face learning as commented by respondent 12:

My biggest challenge of online learning during Pandemic is it's so hard for me to focus and catch the materials given by lectures in online learning process, because it isn't maximum if I compare when teaching learning process held by face to face in class.

This confirms what has been suggested by Hildebrandt and Teschler (2006) who

posit that online learning doesn't necessarily make learning easier, simpler, more effective or more cost effective than traditional pedagogical methods.

One of the advantages of online learning is the flexibility in terms of time. This, however, becomes the challenge to the students, especially those who are working and being mothers at the same time as said by respondent 2:

Time management is the biggest challenge for online learners especially if you are a mother and you have a job as well. It is not easy to finish the assignments from the lecturers when we have only permissions on our lecturing time. I face it as a challenge, not a burden. (Respondent 2)

The flexibility of time, at the same time, creates a problem to those who are not well in time management as Ghaffari and Emami (2011) report that during online learning, the students may have problems with self-discipline like procrastination and failure to fulfill requirements.

Dealing with motivation, some students found that they had problems with motivation like respondent 6 who noted:

I often do not understand the material presented by several lecturers through online learning which makes my learning motivation decrease (Respondent 6)

Her difficulty in learning the material might lower her motivation. This is in line with respondent 1 who said:

I feel like I could learn more materials if the class is held offline rather than online. Instead of gaining new information from the class, I usually gain more from discussion with friends and reading articles and books (Respondent 1)

b. Students' Expectations on Online Learning

Dealing with the challenges of online learning, the students have set their expectations. The first expectation was about the online learning lecturers. The respondents said:

I expect an interesting usage of technology in online learning, interactive discussion, and engaging material visuals. (Respondent 1)

To be the main source of students' findings, I hope that lecturers prepare everything they need well before the class begins because the learning activity is not only to greet each other but explaining the materials and leading the discussion for right understanding of the content. They should focus on our online activity as scheduled or agreed and give feedback on our assignments.

(Respondent 4)

As difficulty of learning material becomes one of the challenges of online learning, the students expected to have more well-prepared lecturers. In addition, they also expected to have more interesting learning process as noted by respondent 5 and

8:

Attractive presentations made us as students interested. Hopefully, the content can be delivered in an interesting and fun. (Respondent 5)

My expectation is when online learning is not only presentation but other activities which are more fun sometimes (Respondent 8)

The expectation on fun learning situation might confirm what has been found in the questionnaire in which 53% of the students found online learning was enjoyable.

In terms of learning motivation, the student commented:

I expect attractive class to build my motivation by giving new knowledge or information that never heard before. (Respondent 13)

The lecturers will more engaged with the students therefore we could feel more motivated in the class (Respondent 15)

Those comments showed that learning motivation highly correlates with learning situation prepared by the teachers.

The students' next expectation on online learning is related to the interaction. All students expected to have better interaction between them and faculty members, especially the lectures, like respondent 9 and 13 who mentioned:

I hope that faculty and students can get along so well that online classroom situation can feel more heartwarming that motivated me to learn more.

(Respondent 9)

I expect two-way interactions between peers and students and lecturer to make an interactive class (Respondent 13)

The expectations on interaction might become concern of the faculty members as based on the questionnaire, most students found that online learning was less useful in terms of learning interactions.

Finally, regarding the students' expectation on the assessment, they expected to have more transparent assessment. Furthermore, they expected to get feedback for their better future assignment. Respondent 1 and 4 commented:

I expect lecturer to be transparent in grading the test and assignment, also give us feedback on what to improve from students' works (Respondent 1)

I hope the lecturer assesses and evaluate students' understanding by comprehensive home-assignment just like problem-based or inquiry so that students will be trained to think and find best solutions for any difficult situation in the future.

Motivating feedback is something special that students are waiting for and this is meaningful and important to keep students motivated (Respondent 4)

Feedback is very essential in learning. Observing the students' expectation, the needed feedback is like Marzano (2010:96) argued, "The best feedback appears to involve an explanation as to what is accurate and what is inaccurate in terms of student responses. In addition, asking students to keep working on a task until they succeed appears to enhance learning"

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In terms of the usefulness of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, the students found that online learning was useful regarding technological skill mastery and learning autonomy. This means that online learning still can be a hope during this situation. Dealing with the students' perception on the ease of use of online learning, the students positively perceived positively regarding the flexibility and accessibility. Network, learning material understanding, and motivation became the challenges of online learning. Hence, they expected to have well-prepared teachers who created better learning environment which increase their learning motivation. Finally, due to the limitation of the study, a larger scale study employing other methods is recommended to gain deeper and different perspectives on EFL perception on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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