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ELT IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: THE BOUNDARIES AND BEYOND

Investigating urban and rural students' practice and challenges in distance learning

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Abstract

The sudden shift from face-to-face learning to distance one gives rise to several different perceptions. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the perception of EFL students in experiencing distance learning. The participants are EFL students from rural schools and urban schools in Indonesia. The study scrutinizes how the participant experiences learning activities as well as encounters the challenges in distance education. To analyse the data, open-ended interview question was distributed online by using *WhatsApp* and *Google-form* platform. The result reveals that the implementation of distance learning has both positive and negative impact, however most of them agree that distance education implementation is more challenging, specifically dealing with the use of technology as they need to maximize many online applications provided on the internet. They acknowledge that technology is a good instrument with many purposes, and that it is a useful and most relevant platform which can be utilized in distance education. Additionally, the students tried many ways to minimize challenges or obstacles in their online learning. Furthermore, the result of this study will be useful for the teacher to maximize teaching and learning process as it provides challenges and obstacles encountered by the students in engaging with distance education implementation.

Keywords: distance learning; EFL students; students' challenge; students' perception

Introduction,

The spread of Covid-19 pandemic has led the scholars to think about other alternatives of teaching and learning processes that can be conducted effectively and efficiently. Consequently, the condition forces the education institution to adopt distance education, specifically during emergency public activity due to the growing number of Covid-19 cases in many countries. Only by switching from a traditional face-to-face to a distant learning model will the educational process be allowed to continue in part or entirely in isolation (Bojović et al., 2020). The term distance education and learning then gains its popularity among scholars (Bornschlegl & Cashman, 2018). According to Zhang (2014), distance education is a process that develops and gives access to learning, when time and distance separate the source of knowledge and the learners. In addition, Cakir (2014) defines distance education as a learning environment in which learners are not physically present (Lamy, 2013) and educational materials are combined through the use of information technology (White, 2017). White (2012) argues that through

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distance education, individuals (students) can gain flexible access to language learning possibilities with the help of a variety of technologies such as audio, video, print, Web, and interactive conferencing. In other words, the role of technology, specifically internet, is very crucial in distance education and learning. However, teachers need to reevaluate the connection between pedagogy, content, and the affordances of new technology as a result of the emergence of a new technology tool by asking questions about the effectiveness of the new technology and how it can facilitate learners to engage actively in language learning (Li et al., 2019).

Nowadays, distance education and online learning, often known as e-learning, are almost interchangeable terms (Power, 2007; Ryan & Latchem, 2016). The implementation of distance learning which is mostly conducted online cannot be separated from the utilization of technology. The advances and the development of technology gives great contribution in conducting distance education and learning. The adoption of distance learning in education has produced a lot of enthusiasm and optimism as a result of recent technological advancements. As stated by Motteram (2018), technology is viewed as having a big impact on the availability of distance learning in many areas around the world as it continues to grow. Distance learning, on the surface, offers the potential to reach out a much larger number of individuals at a lower cost than traditional classroom education. Education systems in rural regions of the country are particularly interested in the issue of access to information. By extending learning options and possibilities, as well as linking teachers (and students) with a larger choice of resource materials, distance education technology can assist rural schools overcome the drawbacks of physical isolation. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether future distance learning technologies will address or create new equity and access concerns. The sudden shift from face-to-face environment to distance education and learning rises different challenges and perception for students from different part of the world. Refae et al. (2020) consider several difficulties with distance learning, including the digital literacy, the main objective of the learning process, communication and interaction between teachers and students, plagiarism, and financial concerns.

The high prevalence of distance learning programs results in a growing number of research on distance education (Lansing, 2017). Series of studies were conducted within the context of higher education (Gravani, 2014; Arif et al., 2017; Fidalgo et al., 2020; Rizvi & Nabi, 2021). It is because distance education has become an important component of higher education (Ryan & Latchem, 2016). Refae et al. (2020) scrutinize the readiness of the higher education institution, including the faculty members and the students, in conducting distance learning. The result indicated that teachers and students showed high satisfaction with the institutional preparation for distance learning and believed in its benefits and potential. However, based on the survey, it found that they were concerned about the obstacles that distance learning faces. Another study done by Ismaili (2021) investigated how distance learning as a new learning platform during the pandemic Covid-19 affects students' satisfaction with their education and attitudes about it. Students' attitudes about e-learning, as well as their access to

technology platforms, use of such platforms, and satisfaction with online courses, are processed and evaluated using quantitative approach. The findings of this study show that distance learning is still in its early stages, and while traditional classrooms appear to be necessary, the majority of students' positive attitudes and willingness to participate in distance learning classes in the post Covid-19 pandemic indicate that e-learning platforms in higher education institutions have a bright future. In line, Nikou & Maslov (2021) claims that students might view e-learning systems as a better and safer option to traditional one conducting in campus education, given the pandemic requirements for safety via social distancing and distant learning. In other words, students have no choice but to adapt to the changing environment and embrace the usage of e-learning systems to cope with the shifts in their learning styles.

Numerous studies provide insight into students' perception on distance education and learning. Unfortunately, none of the previous studies reported the issue of distance learning seen from the point of view of both rural and urban students, specifically in Indonesia. Thus, to address the gap, the present study aims to examine the students' practices and challenges in experiencing distance education and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, through the perspective of rural and urban students in Indonesia. Furthermore, to achieve the research objectives, the two guiding questions are investigated:

1. How do EFL students perceive and manage distance learning implementation?
2. How do EFL students deal with the challenges they face when administering distance learning implementation?

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate the students' perception in experiencing distance learning which specifically focuses on their practices and challenges of distance learning, implemented in both rural and urban area. The participants of the study were six EFL students from two different school locations; three students from rural school and three students from urban schools. The present study employed a qualitative research methodology. The researcher designed the research instrument through the help of *Google form*. The researcher's questions were based on her own experience/practice as well as in-depth literature review. The survey was developed in response to the research questions that guided this study. Then, the survey was distributed to the students via online platform by using *Google-form* and *WhatsApp* application by utilizing *chat*, *voice notes*, and *telephone* features provided within the application. The online interview was carried out considering the COVID-19 pandemic so that participants feel comfortable and safe.

The data was collected through in-depth interviews. The instrument consisted of two sections collecting data on perception towards practices and challenges of distance learning. In addition, the survey instrument contained several open-ended written questions to gain information related to the participants' perceptions and practices on distance learning as well as the challenges they encountered when joining distance classroom environment. Besides, open-ended question which is interviewed

orally was also used to let the participants express their feeling and opinion more freely about implementation of distance learning as an effort to prevent the spread of the *Coronavirus*. Furthermore, the data analysis started from checking the result of the interviews, transcribing and translating into English, coded the data, categorized the codes, and elaborated and depicted the data in the narrative form. The transcript was created since the material was not only in the form of written text but also in the form of oral text. Transcript checking was carried out repeatedly to ensure that the data was written correctly and to ensure that the authors were familiar with the data to prevent misrepresenting.

The data of the participants are as follow:

Table 1. The participants background

Participants	Gender	Age	School Location
A	Female	15 years	Rural
B	Female	16 years	Rural
C	Male	17 years	Rural
D	Male	16 years	Urban
E	Female	17 years	Urban
F	Male	18 years	Urban

Findings and Interpretation

To address the questions of the study, the findings from the class observation and open-ended interview are organized into three central issues: 1) How EFL students perceive and manage distance learning implementation; and 2) How EFL students deal with the challenges they face when administering distance learning implementation. The ideas are given in order.

Students' perceptions of distance learning implementation

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions to experience other learning approach that has required them to switch from traditional (face-to-face) learning to distance learning. To avoid falling behind in lessons as well as to achieve the learning objectives, both the teachers and the students must adjust efficiently to this new situation. With the implementation of distance learning system, the teaching and learning process can still be carried out as the teacher can deliver the material and the students can study in their own homes. Hence, the process of teaching and learning process in distance education greatly depends on the availability of information and communication technology. Thus, it was necessary for the students to be familiar with various kinds of learning applications used in virtual classrooms.

When it comes to distance education and learning implementation, most of the participants agree that they prefer having traditional face-to-face to having distance one. They admitted that they were bored with virtual learning because they could not meet and interact with their friends directly. They got difficulty in discussing the materials with their friends via online platforms due to the limitation of time and space. They are obliged to join distance learning as it has become government regulation to not carry out face-to-face learning in class due to the pandemic. They believed it was the best decision and solution of the government to shift the learning process virtually. When they were asked about the reason in detail, one of the participants from urban school said:

“I don’t think I like this kind of learning model (distance learning); however, I do believe that so far, this is the best decision to be chosen. First, by having distance learning, we play a role in suppressing the spread of covid-19. I cannot imagine if we push ourself to conduct face-to-face learning, there is a high possibility that we may bring the virus from school to home or vice versa. If there is a cluster at school, the time we should be studying, socializing, and interacting will be lost and replaced with quarantine, treatment, and isolation”

The researcher sees this as such wise statements of high school student. If new cluster of *coronaviruses* occurs at schools, it will not only cause problem to the school’s environment, but also the students’ family at home. Consequently, it will make the health facilities full of patients. The worst is that other patients who really need help more than the teenagers, cannot be handled maximally. Thus, the educational institutions can minimize the risk of face-to-face learning by conducting the distance learning models.

Distance learning offers the potential to reach a far larger number of individuals at a lower cost than traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. It is because they do not have to spend any money to go to school. They just have to sit down at home in front of their phone or laptop. On the other hand, not all of the students’ parents are able to provide complete technological tools to support their distance learning as some of them come from underprivileged families. This mostly happen from students who come from rural areas of the countries. Some of the students even have to borrow the digital tools from their relatives in order to be able to join the virtual class.

Both the students from rural and urban schools claimed that there were significant differences between distance learning implementation and the traditional one. In the context of understanding the material, they found difficulty in mastering the subject matters as they cannot ask directly to their friends and teacher. This reflects to the intensity of the interaction between students-teachers, and the students-students. The students became more passive in participating in teaching and learning process virtually. Accordingly, the distance classroom during the teaching and learning process feels boring and monotone. The student from rural school even revealed that some teachers in her school often gave the students homework and assignments only through the use of *google form* without explaining the materials first. As a result, the students did the assignment carelessly without any comprehension at all.

They did the assignment because they had to; and they did not care whether they understood the materials or not as their purpose is to finish the task, not to understand.

Dealing with the motivation issue, the students felt that they were lack of enthusiasm with the teaching and learning process during online learning. Their curiosity about the materials was very low. It was because the teachers do not set any specific rules in class. Most of the students preferred turning off the camera during the lesson. They admitted that they do other activities while learning; some of them were away from the keyboard, lying around the laptop while listening to the teacher's explanation, and some of them are playing their social media. It often happened because the teacher allowed the students to turn off the camera during the lesson, so that she/ he could not control and warned the students whenever they were not focused on the lesson at that time.

"I do not really care about understanding the materials well. I only concern on finishing my homework and assignments from teacher. I even ask my sister sometimes, to do my assignment when the teacher give sudden deadline to submit. But mostly, I try to find the answer myself by browsing on the internet or searching it in *google*. hehe"

In addition, it was found out that the teachers from urban schools utilize some different application to support the learning process in distance learning, such as *WhatsApp*, *Zoom*, *Google meet*, *YouTube*, *Nearpod*, etc. This strategy really helps the students to minimize the boredom during the distance teaching and learning process. On the contrary, teachers from rural schools always gave the same application during the lesson. They only used *WhatsApp* group and *google meet* in delivering the material. As the process of teaching and learning process was less interesting, the interaction that occurred in the classroom was only one way interaction. Accordingly, the gap in digital technology use between the students from rural and urban schools' areas result in different learning outcomes.

Students' challenges of distance learning implementation

Education systems in rural areas of the country are particularly interested in the issue of access to information. By expanding program options and learning possibilities, distance education technologies can assist rural schools overcome the limitations of geographic remoteness. During remote teaching in an EFL classroom, the use of technology in learning English helps students to easier the process of teaching and learning process. On the contrary, the teacher's and students' lack of knowledge on using online learning tools has become an issue that prevents the success of virtual learning in the EFL classroom. Thus, the students are challenged to maximize the utilization of technology developments. However, there are some obstacles that some students should face when it comes to distance education and learning, specifically for the students who come from rural area. Internet access become the biggest problem of the students when having distance learning.

"I live in a very remote village. My biggest problem dealing with distance education is my internet connection. I often lost my internet connection suddenly when the teacher is explaining the materials. When I finally can re-join the class due to the signal, my teacher calls my name and gives me question. How can I answer then?? I really hope this pandemic will end soon."

The unstable of the internet connection hinders the students to engage with the teaching and learning process as the students cannot fully take part in the classroom discussion. Accordingly, the students may miss some important information of the topic delivered by the teachers. It can be vital as such condition will reflect to the students understanding with the materials. Additionally, their achievement will also be decreased. The students claimed that they had tried to change many providers which had good internet signals. Nevertheless, such case still happens at class. Therefore, some students, specifically from rural schools, decided to move places in order to get a good signal, such as going to a relative's or neighbour's house.

In addition to technical constraints such as the availability of facilities and networks, remote teaching has several issues regarding the optimization of the tool and applications used. Some students sometimes are not familiar with the technology applied in virtual learning. This makes the teaching and learning process not optimal due to the lack of digital literacy. Although the use of technology provides opportunities and alternatives for teachers and students in the teaching and learning process, the lack of digital literacy makes students tend to act passively in the class as they are not confident enough in utilizing technology maximally.

On the other, students from urban schools admit that they are very confident in utilizing various kind of new technology introduced by the teachers. They have high curiosity every time their teachers introduce them new learning application. They have no worries in maximizing the use of technology for learning because they are also used to using technology assistance in their daily lives. In addition, they also rarely face any problem dealing with the internet connection.

The technical problems never seem to bother students from urban schools' area. However, when they were asked about their biggest challenge in conducting distance learning, all of the students from urban schools agree that their biggest challenge come from themselves. One of the participants said:

“My biggest obstacle is my laziness. I find it hard to create self-discipline. I think I need help from school to make any rules that can help the students become more disciplined.”

The students asserted that there was not any punishment in distance learning whenever they broke the rule of the teaching and learning process applied by the teacher. This makes the students underestimate the important lesson during the teaching and learning process. They compared the classroom condition between distance learning and traditional face-to-face learning. In traditional face-to-face learning, the students were more conducive as the teacher gave strict rule during the lesson. The teacher also gave specific punishment for the students who disobeyed the teacher's rule at class. Concerning this issue, one student from urban school gave honest statement dealing with the obstacles he encountered during the lesson.

“My biggest challenge come from myself. It is the battle between me and another me within myself when joining the distance learning. I must really commit to study seriously, because if I do not really intend to learn, I can't help but open my social media, such as *YouTube*, *Tiktok*, *WhatsApp*, *Instagram*, and even online shop.”

The case experienced by the student above shows that the students' intention to learn is also very important. Having a commitment to study seriously greatly affects the way the students participate in distance teaching and learning process at class. When the students feel bored with the lesson and get less supervision from the teacher, instead of doing assignment, the students prefer to opening and playing their social media as it is considered more interesting and fun. Therefore, it is needed for the teacher to set specific rule in the beginning of the lesson before starting it. That way, the students will become more focused on the lesson during the teaching and learning process. Consequently, they will become actively engage and participate in classroom discussion.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Academic institutions have found that distance learning is an effective alternative for controlling and avoiding the spread of coronavirus while also assuring the continuation of the learning process (Refae et al., 2020). All of the students both in rural and urban schools' areas agree and support the implementation of distance learning during the pandemic. They believed that such learning model is the best choice to be conducted at this time. Although the implementation of distance education and learning make them got difficulty in understanding the material, they claimed that distance learning offers other benefits as it has the potential to improve ICT skills, support work and education at the same time, promote quality education and innovation, and allow learners to learn at any time and in any location (Refae et al., 2020). Thus, the students need to increase their knowledge of the digital literacy as the process of distance teaching and learning will greatly depend on the availability of information and communication technology.

Answering the second research question about the challenge of distance learning implementation, the finding found that the practice of distance learning rises different perception between students from rural and urban schools' area as they face different problems with the implementation of this new learning model. Students have no choice but to deal with new challenges and embrace the usage of e-learning systems to cope with the shifts in their learning styles. Internet access as well as digital literacy become the main obstacles challenge by the students from rural school area. Meanwhile, the urban student's problem come from their self, including their laziness to join the lesson and willingness to play their social media during the distance teaching and learning process. Hence, the government through educational institutions must facilitate both the students and the teachers for professional development in integrating technology language teaching. In addition, giving the students motivation to learn also needed in order to improve students' willingness to learn in distance classroom; this can be done by both the teachers and also the students' parents to support the success of distance education and learning.

In Indonesia, the use of technology in education has been enacted even though it is less than optimal. The disparity in infrastructure development hinders the teaching-learning process. Some main

issues need to be addressed by the government and the policymakers in Indonesia including the service providers, internet connection, students and teachers' digital literacy. Academic institutions as well as the students should be able to manage, reduce, and restrict the influence of these obstacles on the learning process and students' academic performance (Refae et al., 2020). Furthermore, the result of this study will be useful for the teacher to maximize teaching and learning process as it provides insight about challenges and obstacles encountered by the students in engaging with distance education implementation.

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