

CHALLENGES OF HAVING ONLINE LEARNING ACTIVITIES: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: Within the covid-19 pandemic, most teaching and learning activities are conducted online. This is to avoid the spread of the Covid-19 and to ensure the safety of the lecturers, teachers as well as the students. However, since the enactment of online learning in March 2020, the online learning is still perceived as less effective than offline learning. To increase the effectiveness of online classes, the writers believed in the importance of revealing the real problems faced in online learning. Hence, the writers did a quantitative study by using an open-ended questionnaire to capture 85 students' perceptions about the challenges of having online classes in the English Language Education Department of Pekalongan University. The questionnaires were then analysed by using thematic content analysis. In the findings, there were 166 codes which were categorized further into 34 sub-categories, 15 categories, 9 sub-themes and 6 themes. These six themes cover the main challenges faced by the students in joining the online classes namely lecturers' poor performance, students' poor independent study skills, technical issues with the use of technology, heavy tasks, students' low motivation, and unsupportive environment. This finding becomes a call for addressing these issues for improving the quality of the online learning.

Keywords: *challenges, online classes, covid-19*

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic which has been happening since March 2020 has brought a lot of changes in our educational practices. The most evident influence is on the practices of teaching in which there has been a shift from offline into online teaching. This was done to avoid the spread of the covid-19 within the educational settings. The pandemic has forced both teachers and students to adapt to these new educational practices regardless of their readiness and capabilities, especially in the use of technology in teaching and learning.

For many countries, online teaching and learning or what is sometimes known as distance learning is not fully a new idea. In Indonesia, there have also been several regulations about this online teaching and learning. Among those regulations are MOEC Regulation No 109/ 2013, MOEC Regulation No. 119/ 2014 and MOEC Regulation No. 24/ 2012. Those regulations were issued far before the pandemic occurs yet they are not directly followed by the implementation of online classes in all Indonesian schools and universities. Only after the occurrence of the covid-19 pandemic, all universities and schools, especially those in the high-risk-areas, were required to implement the distance or online learning. Unfortunately, after several months of the implementation of online classes, there have been many research reports which suggest the ineffectiveness of those classes. As an example, Zamroni (2020) found that the online teaching and learning did not run well. Similarly, Adibah et al. (2020) and Rosyidi (2020) reported that the online classes were not effective. Even, the Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia in his press conference in August 2020 admitted that the online teaching and learning has not been as effective as the offline teaching and learning in Indonesian contexts.

Many research findings also highlight the challenges within the implementation of online teaching and learning activities. These challenges have been reported to result from expensive internet data package and bad signal (Rasmitadila et al., 2020), limited IT infrastructure, limited

knowledge and skills on using IT, and limited internet access (Aji, 2020). The Minister of Education of Indonesia also reported that the barriers of online teaching and learning come from the students, teachers and parents. In other words, the challenges within online classrooms come from various different sources.

With the variety of barriers in the implementation of online classrooms, there has been unclear information about the variety of online teaching models and the challenges which emerge from each of the model applied at schools and universities. Therefore the writers tried to fill this research gap by conducting the research on models of online teaching implementation and their challenges across different educational levels. This research aims to reveal the models of online classrooms done in various educational settings and the challenges or barriers faced in their implementations. This research is important to conduct to provide information on the real problems occurring in the implementation of online teaching so that solutions to those problems can be offered properly.

METHOD

The research is focused at finding out the models of online classes and the real problems faced in those classes. The data were collected through the use of open ended questionnaires which were distributed to both teachers and students in different educational level (high schools and universities). The questionnaire consisted of several questions and one of them asked about the respondents' perceptions about the challenges of having online classes. After the questionnaires were completed and submitted, the data were analyzed through the use of thematic content analysis.

The research was in the form of quantitative study and it was done in the odd semester of the academic year of 2020/2021 by involving hundreds of respondents. In this article, however, the writers report the initial findings of the research from the questionnaires completed by 85 students in the English Language Education Department of Pekalongan University.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaires which have been completed by the 85 students were analyzed by using thematic content analysis. First, each of the answer was copied and then coded. From the analysis, there were found 166 codes which were categorized further into 34 sub-categories, 15 categories, 9 sub-themes and 6 themes. These six themes cover the main challenges faced by the students in joining the online classes namely lecturers' poor performance, students' poor independent study skills, technical issues with the use of technology, heavy tasks, students' low motivation, and unsupportive environment. Each of the themes is discussed individually below.

Lecturers' Poor Performance

In the questionnaire, students acknowledged that one of the challenges in joining the online classes were the lecturers' poor performance. They perceived this as resulted from the lecturers' lack of focus in teaching. One of the respondents described one of the situations which the students felt as a problem in an online classroom:

"The lecturer explained in [a] complicated way and the lecturer never seemed want to be teaching us, because she always seemed distracted and would interrupt class to make personal calls or would need to answer personal email or chats perhaps which was so frustrating" (R46)

The answer above suggested that the lecturer was not in a full focus in teaching as she had many other things to do. Despite many possibilities on why the lecturer did so, the students saw this as disturbing the teaching and learning activities. Other students wrote:

“Some of the lecturers just drop the PPT and leave it” (R55)

“Sometimes the lecturer started the class at inappropriate time or schedule or if they were busy they were late in giving announcement” (R66)

These answers represent the poor performance of the lecturers especially in terms of their teaching method and schedule. The respondents saw these lecturers’ behaviors as unfavorable and they perceived them as distracting the online classes in which they participated.

Students’ Poor Independent Study Skills

Apart from mentioning that the problems faced in online classes came from the lecturers, the respondents in this research admitted that the problems also came from themselves as students. They felt that they lacked of independent study skills which made their learning ineffective. The majority of the respondents mentioned that they had problems with time management for their independent study. They often forgot the online class schedules and the deadline of the assignments. In addition, with the lack of skills for independent study, they experienced confusion in learning. This was explicitly expressed in the statement below:

“Some lecturers give us a file of materials and we get confused if we learn all of that by ourselves. We still need a guide” (R26)

The other student wrote:

“I can understand the materials better when the lecturers explain directly in the class and I felt difficult in understanding the material through online classes (R5)

The students’ statements above suggest that they did not really know what to do to understand the materials. They still relied heavily on the lecturers’ explanation and guidance in understanding the materials. This may indicate the students’ needs for independent study trainings.

Technical Issues with the Use of Technology

Another problem within the implementation of online class deals with the use of technology. The students experienced several technical issues in using technology in their online classes. Among the issues were the bad signal, unstable internet network, limited data package as well as unsupported gadgets. The respondents shared the experiences of having these issues in the following statements:

“At my house the signal is bad and there is no wifi. The second is the internet quota problem because there are times when we don’t have money. Then my laptop broke down. And I used my cell phone for online classes so it made it a little difficult.” (R35)

“The gadget is going slow” (R14)

“My broken laptop makes me have to use additional applications on my mobile so that it becomes distracted because of additional applications. My phone camera is not clear so when there is a task that requires a camera I have to borrow my cousin’s phone” (R15)

“Sometimes I am late to join online classes because the notification that appears on my HP comes late” (R20)”

The answers above represent nearly all the respondents' problems. Most of the respondents shared similar problems of having bad signal and poor gadgets when they joined online class which disturbed their learning much. This suggests the need of good signal, internet network and good gadgets to support students' online learning

Heavy Tasks

Another type of challenges of having online learning activities reported by the students was the burden from the assignments or task given by the lecturers. The students noticed that they received more assignments from online classes. They felt that the tasks became heavier especially when the tasks from different lecturers came at the same time. Some of the respondents wrote:

"The material becomes more difficult to understand, more assignments than usual for all lecturers." (R17)

"We have to understand the materials just by reading them and usually in every meeting, the lecturers give assignments and the deadlines for those assignments are almost the same" (R28)

Other respondents expressed that the challenge came from the type of the tasks:

"The challenge that I've ever join is making an article with a short deadline. This makes me tired because I should make the article with my own (R19)

"The hardest thing of joining online class is if we got a video task and we were ordered to upload it in YouTube and that was a big size of file and spent really big internet data and become worse if the upload process failed" (R11)

Based on the findings above, the types and the number of tasks contributed to the problems within online classes. The students perceived the extra burden due to the big number of assignments which came at the same time and for some of them writing essay and making video then uploading it in YouTube were quite challenging especially with the short deadline.

Students' Low Motivation

The next challenges perceived by the students were their motivation which was sometimes not sufficiently high to participate in their online classes. Most of them said that they felt the boredom with the online teaching and learning activities. Some of their responses were:

"To be honest I don't have the interest with online classes". (R67)

"I get so bored to use the internet every single day, less motivation to join the online class" (R37)

"Online class was boring" (18)

The answers above indicate the students' inability to maintain their motivation in learning. The lack of interest might be due to the absence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the drive which pushed them to keep learning. At the same time, the finding also suggests the lecturers' lack of capability in motivating the students.

Unsupportive Environment

The other challenges emerged from the findings were the unsupportive environments. As the learning took place at students' houses the situations were not as supportive as those in the university. Students reported that the crowd, the noise, and the parents' requests to help the household disturbed the online learning. The respondents described the challenges in the following statements:

"I can't focus 100% because my house is crowded". (R48)

"At my house, there are many kids so they often bother me while attending lessons and it makes me feel uncomfortable". (51)

"When online learning starts sometimes my parents ask me to help them so sometimes online learning is a little distracted". (R15)

These statements indicate that the students' learning got much disturbance at homes. The problems were faced by those living with big number of family members. Interestingly the disturbance in learning came not only from the younger members of the family but also from the older members of the family particularly as there were parents' requests for the students to do the household chores.

From the findings above, it is getting clearer that the students perceived various challenges in their online learning activities. The challenges came not only from themselves as students, but also from the lecturers, from the technology and gadgets, as well as from home. These findings were very similar to the findings reported by Rahiem (2020) which highlight a lot of tasks, internet cost, noisy home, and technology as the barriers in online learning activities.

The findings of this current research are also in line with the findings of the previous studies conducted by Assareh and Bidokht (2011) and Mailizar et al. (2020) which found the students as the challenges of online classroom teaching and learning activities. The findings of this current research also supported the ideas proposed by Balanskat, Blamire and Kefafa (2006) which highlight teachers as one of the barriers in online teaching and learning activities. As this current research revealed the students' concern on the bad signal this research supports the findings of the study done by Rasmitadila et al. (2020) who also found the bad signal as one of the barriers in online teaching.

With these various challenges faced in online learning, there are several aspects which can be improved such as lecturers' performance, students' study skills and students' motivation. In terms of technology, some aspects were beyond the university control like the gadgets and the bad network and signal. Similarly, in terms of the challenges from the unsupportive environments particularly from the students' home, some issues are hard to handle. The crowd which is due to the number of family members is apparently unavoidable. Considering the culture and norms in the local community it is also inappropriate for the students to decline their parents' requests to help them with the house work. With this issue, students may need to inform parents the online class schedule so that parents are clear about the students' learning time. It is also necessary to tell their parents that they can assist their parents after the online learning activities are completed. To reduce the noise from kids, the kids need to be told not be too noisy when the students join the online classes. If possible the students can choose a learning space at home in which noise can be put into minimum.

The writers believe that the findings of this research give some insights on the real problems faced by the students in online classes. Finding the solution to minimize those challenges becomes the next task for the lecturers. By looking at the real problems, the writers are optimistic that the solutions can be offered properly to help students overcome their learning problems.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has focused on revealing the challenges faced by the university students in joining online teaching and learning activities. The findings have revealed that the challenges or problems in the online study come from various sources. It is necessary to address these

problems although some challenges are beyond the control of the lecturers and students themselves. However, some solutions can still be offered to minimize the problems. Besides, the research findings can be used for the university lecturers to reflect on their teaching practices. The lecturers have got important feedbacks to perform better in their online classes. All in all this research calls for more awareness on the part of the teachers and the students that problems in online classes are real and they need to be minimized so that more effective online teaching and learning can take place.

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