

Research article

Exploring the Challenge of EFL Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ORCIDPaisal: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5532-6065>**Abstract.**

Learning English as a foreign language is a challenge for learners in Indonesia. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions to adopt an online learning approach. The combination of these problems has thus made it more taxing for EFL learners. Accordingly, the current study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by EFL learners during the pandemic. The study used a descriptive research design, and data were collected qualitatively through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants from MTs Darussalam Kubu Raya. The findings indicated that the commonest issues faced by the learners were their inaccessibility to the Internet and the teachers' inability to guide or properly explain the lessons. Therefore, the researchers of this study recommend education stakeholders to ensure accessibility of the Internet to their pupils and invest in qualified teachers.

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1. Introduction

The Corona Virus, or known as Covid-19, was discovered in December 2019 and has become a global pandemic since March 2020. The data of the infected human from this disease has significantly increased in a short time. Thus, many countries declared emergency states. Most countries tried to make regulations to reduce the spread and transmission of the virus. The governments throughout the world promote physical distancing and the use of masks, also shutting down some places like parks, schools, and universities for an unspecified time until the spread of Covid-19 can be controlled.

The school closures affected most students in the world. According to UNESCO [1], nearly 1.6 billion or 91% of the population of students have been impacted at the maximum point of school closures. The impact on students is in terms of knowledge acquisition, social and psychological development, and terms economic and food security. The prolonged closure of schools, combined with the impact on the economy and health, has direct implications for children's present and future development. Children

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are at greater risk of dropping out of school and of lagging in their studies, food insecurity, abuse, physical and emotional health problems, and, not least, loss of learning, with potentially devastating consequences for an entire generation.

Current status progress according to UNICEF, as of April 2020, about 188 countries were using alternative ways to provide continuous learning using technologies such as the internet, television, and radio. Online platforms were the most general platforms used by many countries, with 83% of worldwide countries are using these platforms. Television reached 62% of students globally and only 16% of students reached by radio. However, this alternative access by using technologies is still limited to many low- and middle-income countries, mainly among poor households. About 463 million or 31% of children worldwide cannot reach remote learning using the internet. This was either due to the lack of technologies at home, or not being targeted by policies [2].

Distance learning is a term often used synonymously with online learning, e-learning, distance education, correspondence education, external studies, flexible learning, and massive open online course. Common features of distance learning are the teacher-learner separation by space or time, the use of media and technology to enable communication and exchange during the learning process [1].

Vai & Sosulski (cited in Aaron [3]) gave a clear difference between a traditional classroom and an online classroom in the physical location. The traditional course environment requires a building and students to meet together to receive instruction from the teacher. Meanwhile, online classes are virtual; coursework can be completed anywhere when there is a computer and an internet connection.

Online or distance learning, however, is not a new education practice. There are some studies related to the implementation of online learning before the strike of Covid-19, but not implemented fully remote on the school. Research conducted by Anggraeni [4] using Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) showed a distance learning model applied to EFL learning. Moving backward to 2001 where King [5] divided distance learning with real-time interaction such as teleconferencing, video teleconferencing, online chat, and CUSeeME; and those which are not allowed for real-time interaction such as correspondence courses, e-mail, and web/server-based instruction.

Fojtík [6] described the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning from students' perspectives. The most common advantages of distance learning are the opportunity to study at work, the possibility to study in time, the possibility to individually plan the work and study mode, not to attend school daily, and the ability to process and forward tasks over the Internet. Meanwhile, the advantages are limited personal contact with the teacher and other students, missing classical lectures and seminars, occasional

lousy communication with some tutors, self-study occasionally escape information, which the student would have recorded during his / her attendance, the difficulty of organizing the time correctly, more considerable difficulty in understanding some terms, and to retain motivation for the study.

Several studies have been conducted to find out the challenges in learning during Covid-19 based on students' perspectives (e.g. Rotas & Capahay [7], Rahim & Chandran [8], Elumalai, et.al [9]), and students' motivation in online learning [10].

Indonesia is the 4th largest country in the world. According to the population census in May 2010, the total population is 237,641,300 people. The projection of Indonesia's population in 2010-2035 estimated the total population of Indonesia in 2016 is 258,704,900 inhabitants with the growth rate the population projection of Indonesia's population in 2010-2015 (June) is 1.36% [11]. The archipelagic state still faced continuous problems from the education sector, and with the crisis of Covid-19, there are more problems to face.

English is also faced with problems within. English, being part of a foreign language, is seen as a tertiary need by this archipelagic state which is sometimes being underestimated. There are also challenges to face by the English teacher to teach English. In addition to the Covid-19 crisis, these challenges with different categories are combined into a mix of challenges which can lead to broader challenges. Based on the mention above, this study aims to explore the challenges of EFL learners during the pandemic.

2. Method

This section presents the methods used in conducting the research. This includes research design, population and sample, data collection tool, and data analysis.

2.1. Research design

The study is carried out as qualitative research. Furthermore, this study was specifically adopted a descriptive approach to qualitative research. It described the challenges faced by students based on their experiences in the English online classroom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.2. Population and sample

The population of this research was all of the students in MTs Darussalam Kubu Raya. As the sample, because the school is not hugged so the sample is all of the students in MTs Darussalam Kubu Raya, except for ninth-grade class because they were focusing on the final examination.

2.3. Data collection tool

Qualitative researchers often collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. It is carried out by talking directly to people and seeing their behavior [12]. The research instrument is in the form of a semi-structured interview. The use of a semi-structured interview was intended to allow the participants to answer the questions in their language and in their way. The interview questions focused on English learning challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview was performed individually using Google Meet which lasted about 15 minutes for each participant. To achieve the research aims, the interview questions were guided according to the research questions. The semi-structured interview can provide an in-depth description as well as detailed perceptions generated by the respondents of the study, as it seeks to investigate and recognize the personal performances, experiences, and perceptions of the participants.

2.4. Data analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interview was analyzed with content analysis. It is the inspection of data sources generated across an extensive collection of practices stored in different forms such as written words and images.

3. Findings and Discussion

The results of semi-structured interview revealed that there are several challenges that faced by students while learning English during pandemic. The findings are revealed based on the challenges they have revealed so far.

TABLE 1: Challenges of Students in Learning EFL during Covid-19 Pandemic

Interview Results	Challenges
The problem on online learning is that the internet connection is poor and unstable. I have problems to fetch information especially from YouTube. Learning English needs to use media like YouTube, or making videos. Somehow it is hard for me because of the bad internet connection. Sometimes, my phone got bad internet connection, and it's getting worse by the rain. There are so many problems while learning English in online classroom, but most of them is the unstable internet connection. It's hard to open videos like those in YouTube when the internet connection is unstable. Poor internet connection has made me left behind to complete the task given. Sometimes, I got asleep while waiting for the YouTube content to be fully buffered because of the slow internet connection.	Unstable internet connection
Sometimes, I cannot understand on what the teacher had instructed. It is because the teacher sometimes uses English as the instruction for the task. Me and some of my friends are lazy to learn. I often play games because the teacher cannot see and control us in online situation. I need a fun learning activity, not just giving me some texts with tasks all the time. I cannot understand teacher's explanation when learning in online classroom. The teacher needs to find some extra sources instead of just giving Power Point presentation and YouTube videos. Online learning especially online English learning is struggling for me. I don't really understand on what the teacher explained in an online classroom, but when it comes to offline classroom, I did understand the lesson.	Poor teaching guidance or explanation
There are so many tasks given with different subjects with improper time limitation given. There are more tasks in online classroom than in offline classroom. Sometimes I have to answer tasks quickly without learning or understanding the material first in order for my tasks to be delivered on time. My phone is having some problems due to overload school tasks, sometimes it lagged and the storage capacity went full.	Overload school tasks
I have to fill the internet quota to study, much intense than before having online classes. It is hard to find money that could fulfilled my learning needs. My parents are frustrated at me because they have to cost higher than before pandemic to give me internet voucher. My parents cannot afford me a WIFI for a better connection. I'm using phone data so I have to buy voucher every time it reached the limit.	Financial problems
Since I am at my house all the time, my parents thought that I didn't do anything. So, they give me some responsibilities at home. As a girl, there are many responsibilities that I must do at home. After finishing the responsibilities, I felt tired and couldn't focus on the lesson. Both of my parents are working all day long and I have to help them to do home responsibilities.	Home responsibilities interruption
My little sibling always disturbs me while I'm studying and doing my school tasks. So many kid noises outside my house that can lessen my concentration in learning. The neighbor always plays music with loud speaker, I cannot bear on this.	Disturbance at home or in surrounding environment
I use WIFI connection at home, but when the electricity went off, the WIFI also went off. I experienced that when the electricity went off, the internet connection gone bad. I always forget to charge my phone and when the electricity went off, I cannot join the lesson.	Electricity going off

3.1. Challenge 1: Unstable internet connection

This is the most influential challenge among students who lived in a rural area; even students in the city cannot be guaranteed to meet this challenge. In this study, the school is from a rural area where the problem is caused by geographical area. There were several times when the internet was unstable so it is hard for the students and

the teacher to make a good learning environment. There were also times when the area poured with rain and made unstable internet connection or even gone. When the interviewer asked about this problem to the EFL learning, they repetitively told that the problem was when they have to watch YouTube improve their listening skill and writing skills by summarizing the lesson. They have a problem in opening YouTube videos when the internet connection was unstable and made them wait for long enough time to watch the videos.

This is confirmed by Dwidienawati et al. [13] where students claimed that internet connection was the biggest drawback in their e-learning process. Rahiem [14] in her research revealed that the students clarified had poor internet connectivity, while others did not even have internet access available. These previous studies voiced out the same challenges in the same country of this study. When talking about Indonesia, there are still many regions are left behind, particularly those in a rural and remote areas.

3.2. Challenge 2: Poor teaching guidance or explanation

This is also can be both struggling for students and teachers. First, the students experienced difficulty in understanding the teacher's instruction using English. Although this might be from the shortage of students' knowledge, the teacher must prepare the instruction that can be understandable by the students for the tasks can be done properly. Second is the looseness of teacher's control to the students who were lazy at school. This is beyond the control of the teacher, as this is an online learning and the teacher has a limit in monitoring his students. Their parents will be needed to collaborate with the teacher in monitoring their children. Third, the students complained about monotone learning sources like PowerPoint and YouTube. This also can be marked for the teacher to improve his abilities and skills in finding and using a variety of learning sources. The force-closing of schools and the shift in learning style has made teachers and students need to adapt to new changes in learning.

3.3. Challenge 3: Overload school tasks

In this pandemic time, students repetitively complained about the overload tasks given to them. Some students told about the struggle of having so many tasks with the limited knowledge they've earned in the online classroom. This also made the students lose the learning value from the lesson because they have to be quickly answered and finish the tasks on time.

3.4. Challenge 4: Financial problems

Rural areas, especially low-income families, are often vulnerable to financial problems. Low-income families are probably less well prepared in terms of finance and also suffer deeply from both the economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis. Online learning required internet expenses to fulfil their learning needs. The expenses are higher because they have to use media with an internet connection. The financial problems confirmed by Ro'fah [15] that in the Covid-19 situation, the cost of internet access is higher than with the accessibility of online learning.

3.5. Challenge 5: Home responsibilities interruption

Students indeed have to devote themselves to their parents. In a situation like this, students are often at home all the time and this makes their parents give them some responsibilities to do at home. The students expressed difficulties in focusing on their studies while doing responsibilities. They also felt tired after doing their home responsibilities and made them couldn't be focused on the lesson.

3.6. Challenge 6: Disturbance at home or in the surrounding environment

Home might be a comfortable place to avoid Covid-19, but cannot be confirmed to avoid the disturbance on it and the surroundings. Most of the students told about the noises that came from their homes and surroundings. They found a home as a not conducive place to study.

3.7. Challenge 7: Electricity going off

Since distance learning relies on an electronic device, the electricity problem is also part of students' challenge in this pandemic time. Some were related to the unstable internet connection but the main cause of it is the electricity that went off. In another case was caused by the negligence of the student for not charging his phone in preparing for the online classroom. When the electricity went off, he cannot charge his phone and he had to skip the class for the day.

4. Conclusions

This study aims to explore the challenges in EFL learners during the pandemic. Based on the results, there are seven challenges of EFL learners in MTs Darussalam Kubu Raya during the pandemic. Those seven challenges are an unstable internet connection, poor teaching guidance or explanation, overload school tasks, financial problems, home responsibilities interruption, disturbance at home or in the surrounding environment, and electricity going off. Most of the problems are an unstable internet connection and poor teaching guidance or explanation. Therefore, both the accessibility of the internet and the teacher should be improved.

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