

Conference Paper

Does Online Learning Meet the Expectation? A Case Study of Short Semester General English Class

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Abstract

The fact that today's students are mostly equipped with high level of digital literacy encourages English teachers to use the Internet as one of the teaching learning media. Moreover, the abundance of online materials for EFL students which are easily accessible makes the teachers' job much easier. However, these advantages do not come alone without any drawbacks that challenge the teachers in implementing effective online teaching-learning activities for the class and get the most of it. This paper highlights the challenges that the teachers face in implementing online learning for general English class during the short semester program and reveals students' perceptions on it as part of the reflection on the teaching-learning process. The unique characteristic of this program which is run only for one month requires the teacher creatively seeking effective activities for the class in order to meet the program requirement. The class shows that the students' performance during the online learning is better compared to the offline class. The students become more active as well as enthusiastically involved in posting thread and giving feedback to their classmates' thread. Although during the process the students show interest in joining the online discussion, the teacher still have difficulty in finding the strategy to measure the effectiveness of this mode of learning. The reflective writing written by the students identify some issues which mostly deal with their impressions in joining the online learning as well as their difficulties in performing during the teaching learning process. Some students even give suggestions for better improvement in the next application of online learning.

Keywords: online learning, teacher's reflection, students' perception, students' performance

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1. Introduction

By the growth of technology in language learning and teaching, more teachers start to explore the use of ICT in the classroom. This trend leads to the new delivery platform of education which eventually attracts many teachers to blend internet and technology to enrich their method of teaching. Many terms are used to identify the integration of technology and internet, such as internet based learning, E-learning, online education, online learning, and distant learning. In [2], p. 2, define online learning as an instructional environment which is supported by internet and it covers variety of programs

that uses internet to provide the access to the instructional material as well as facilitates students-teacher interaction. It can be on the format of fully online or blended learning with face to face interaction. Using this definition, the writer will consider other terms which basically have the same idea as online learning.

As there are more variations on the teaching and learning method, teacher and students could experience a more interesting session inside or outside the class. It also at the same time becomes the solution of common traditional class where teachers usually only see their students in class based on the fixed schedule planned by the school. However, by applying online learning, teachers do not need to be worried about the limited time allocation in the class since online course can be done 24/7 which consequently increases the interval of teacher-student interaction. In other words, online learning offers a new dimension of material delivery that across the boundaries of common traditional class that is lack of physical setting and schedule [7], p. 1083.

Furthermore, the reasons why teachers decide to use online learning is because by going online they can find lots of free materials such as quizzes, closed test, e-book, podcast, videos, games and many other interactive activities (Meena, 1997). Thus, teachers can choose different kinds of materials that suit their need or retrieve it if they want it and share it to the students in no time. They do not need to go to different places to collect, select and distribute the materials which in this case save their time and energy. Email, instant messaging, class website can be the media to communicate and deliver materials or ideas in an online learning. Another reason that may encourage teachers to challenge themselves in integrating technology in their teaching is that teachers can build students' autonomy where students can learn the material by themselves without depend on the teacher's help too much as the online resources offer immediate feedback and sometimes give score as well [1].

However, the popularity of online learning is certainly without any drawback. The change of learning mode evidently carries its own consequences especially for the students as the receivers of the instruction. Therefore, it is important to know what students feel about blending the traditional class that they normally have and a cyber space instruction which quite new in some ways such as the teacher-students interaction, material delivery and variety of tasks. Online learning is not a new experience for many students in Jember University as the university provides E-Learning facility for every lecturer to be used. However, this online learning uses Facebook to facilitate the teaching learning process because it offers online chat which the researcher considers a very important aspect of the instruction. Hence, the study has additional purpose which is as an evaluation for the teacher in using internet based learning especially for non-English students program as well as its potential future use in different classes.

2. Method

The subjects of this study are the non-English Department Program students who re-take General English class during a short semester program (*Semester Antara*). This program was only run for about a month which consequently forced the teacher to create a class that can be run as effective as traditional class which is commonly

registered for 14-16 meetings in 6 months. This program was an initial program in Jember University and some problems occurred throughout the completion such as conflicting schedule and room arrangement. There were 48 students joined the course and most of them are seniors. In addition to the offline class that carried out twice in a week, the teacher asked the students to manage an online meeting on a fixed schedule that had been agreed by both the teacher and the student. The online class was conducted every Saturday for about two hours sometimes more when they students got too excited in discussing the material. A Facebook group was created to be the cyber space main interaction of the online learning.

The data of the study were taken from the reflective writing that the students wrote at the end of the course. They were allowed to write in English or Indonesian in order to make it easier for them expressing their ideas and the fact that they are not English students is considered too much troublesome for them to write in English. Some guidelines were given to the students to focus on in order to help them voice out what they feel about the online learning that they just followed.

3. Findings and Discussion

Out of the 48 students who joined the course only 41 students wrote the reflective writing and sent it back to the teacher's email. There were some points that the researcher can highlight from their reflections which will be divided into two major ideas which are the positive and the negative perception of online learning.

3.1. The Positive Perceptions

The first is that most all of the students said that they never joined any online class which has interactive forum/discussion where the teacher and the students are able to interact in a real time and discuss the material they had that day such as, the questions from online quizzes they did that day. They also said that the e-learning that they knew previously did not give online quizzes, some related links or videos from which they learn a lot and learn autonomously. They found it interesting of how the online quizzes showed the reason why they got incorrect answer so that they could learn from their mistake. It was very helpful and they thought that it made them more independent and confident because they can try the quizzes many times when they failed once without worrying they would disturb other students. It means that they become more active than passive since they realize the online learning puts greater learning responsibility for their own learning [5], p. 341. Moreover, the variety resources that were selected by the teacher gave them more information that can be learnt every time they need it and they can found many examples of sentences that were produced with clear context which help them understand on how to apply grammatically and contextually correct sentences. It is important to make them understand the concept of how different tenses operate for different purposes and time as language is a means of communication which requires clear context in order to be understood.

Another aspect that the students really enjoyed joining this online learning was that they could interact with the teacher. In traditional class, some students are too shy to ask or answer a question, but in this class they felt more secured as they did not face the teacher directly. They were less afraid of making mistake as they saw that everybody in the forum did contribute actively anytime they were ready by posting thread or giving comments. This finding is in line with what [4] found as the advantage of online learning that is the students' participation is leveled up during the online course. Besides, they did not feel the pressure of having the teacher pointed at them to answer the question and got strange look from their friends or being laughed at when they could not give the correct answer. It seems that not being physically present made them less worried that they could boldly disagree with their friend's answer or opinion during the interactive discussion. In [8] also mentions that students feel less self-conscious and able to perform better in any activity they engage because this this cyber environment allows them to be anonymous. However, at the same time, they also felt that the presence of the teacher during the discussion was the best part that they reveal it was nice to know that the teacher was there to lead the discussion and provided immediate feedback to any questions the students had.

The next issue the students like from this online learning is that they can save their time and energy. Because they did not need to come to class to receive the material, they could save their time and energy traveling back and forth to the campus for only a 90-minute-class. In other words, it is cost saving as well as time saving because learning is delivered directly to the learner instead of the other way around [8], p. 8. The only things they need to have with them in order to engage in the course are internet connection and laptop. So, it was quite convenient for them to join a class that did not require them to be in class, but anywhere else they like such as, their boarding house or some hot spots around their neighborhood. Some students even said that they could have snacks during the process of teaching and learning which commonly cannot be done face to face in the class. It corroborates what [6], p. 6, found in his study that online learning is convenient for some reasons. The students said that they can join the class without going out of the room, wearing their pajamas, and taking some breaks in the middle of the class, snacking.

3.2. The Negative Perceptions

Everybody agreed that internet connection is the main problem of having online learning. These students informed that the slow or poor internet connection causes them to miss the updates in the forum or fail to join the class as it was scheduled. This fact well describes what [4], p. 4, said in her study that "The lack of access either due to logistics or economic reasons, will exclude participants from the cyber class" and this problem goes to any mode of learning with internet access. The worst case from this internet problem was that they miss the discussion so that they have to read it one by one from the beginning which in this case made them confused. As the chat is in a real time and there were about 48 students in it, the chat was very crowded. As a result, if somebody missed the time to log in, he/she might be lost as

there was too much information to be absorbed in a short time to catch their missing. In this situation, [3] implies that the students can eventually give up reading those abundance posts/threads or long comments. Besides, the comments were sometimes overlapping or kept repeated by different students when the internet network did not run at the same speed for everyone in the forum.

12 out of 41 students clearly mentioned they prefer traditional class than the online one. It happened because they considered seeing the teacher physically and listened to the teacher's explanation directly are better for their understanding. According to the "Online Learning" survey conducted by the Office of Information Technology in the Electronic Educational Environment [10], it was found that the students feel it too much harder to understand teacher's explanation or to interpret what teacher means without seeing him/her physically. Some students also mentioned that they think the online class worked because the teacher has already explained the material in the class so that when the students join the online class they just need to match what the teacher said previously and did the task more easily. In other words, face to face meeting is needed to help them understand the material and online learning is just a supplementary course to practice what they have learnt more independently. It seems that learning the material through online course is too much difficult for them, but they do not mind taking one if the topic is not difficult to be learnt by themselves. This finding confirms the finding by [6], p. 15, who said that students avoid taking online course if they feel the subject is too difficult to understand without teacher's presence.

The last, the students consider that the online learning became too hard to follow when the teacher did not have good time management and system. Some excited students keep asking the teacher or posting thread although the time is up so that the other students must wait for them to finish and the teacher faced difficulty cutting the flow of the question. With (too) many students in the forum, it naturally created bigger commotion during the application. So, unlike traditional class where teacher could more easily manage everyone in the class by giving signs to stop or dismiss the class, this mode of learning surely lacks of this meaningful interaction. It supports what [8], p. 3, finds cyber chat system does not allow for voice intonation and hand gestures, so, when the online discussion gets a fast flow going, it is difficult to control.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

From the response that most students gave, it can be concluded that they have good impression on the implication of cyber learning that they expect more teachers use this mode of learning besides the face to face class. However, online learning could have been more favored by the students if the main conditions are fulfilled. The internet connections which become the main channel where the teacher student interaction takes place become the major reason why this class is still opposed by the students. Although at the same time they cannot deny that this online course gives them so many things to learn and make them to more independent and confident, their way of thinking that connected to internet to learn is still troublesome for them. They also suggest the teacher to create a better system for online learning so that they can get

the most advantages of the use. To sum up, it is a worth trying method for teachers to apply to give different experience and wider students' limit to a new dimension of language learning as almost all students agree that online learning is fun, exciting, and enjoyable to experience.

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