LEARNING ENGLISH UTILISING ONLINE PLATFORMS DURING COVID -19 IN TERTIARY LEVEL: INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS' RETROSPECTIVE PERCEPTION

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine the Indonesian EFL learners' Retrospective Perception toward utilising online platforms in teaching English as a foreign language during a pandemic. The mixed quantitative and qualitative research design method is employed to achieve this goal. Seventy-five EFL learners from three different universities who took English for general communication courses were recruited in this study. The data were obtained by deploying two research instruments: questionnaires and a retrospective interview. Many participants preferred to select the most suitable and economical online platform to maximise their online learning experience. They also regard that learning effectiveness and efficiency can only be achieved by utilising blended synchronous and asynchronous modes. The findings also show that lecturers pose a fundamental role in helping students maximise their learning experiences. Thus, lecturer-student engagement during online learning is inevitably essential.
Keywords: *online platform; online learning; covid-19 pandemic; EFL learners' perception.*

INTRODUCTION

The covid–19 pandemics have dramatically affected many life aspects, including education. In relation to this, Indonesian education is forced to make a number of adjustments. Therefore, the Online platform came to give a light as, temporarily, a way out to meet the need of this demand. All school levels from primary, secondary to tertiary level of education in Indonesia made a great shift of teaching mode from teacher-student face to face meetings to online meetings. For that reason, learning English utilising online platforms during covid-19 in the tertiary level is important to be discussed. Some research has been conducted on this issue; however, they focus on certain aspects such as online platform preferences (Amin & Sundari 2020) or teachers' challenges and reflection during the teaching-learning process (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Tathahira & Sriayu, 2020).

As recognised, the study related to the student's experience and perspective after more than one year of online learning implementations during Covid-19 is still under-researched. Thus, this study is trying to investigate the issue in order to give the shield light for all parties in education during this prolonged pandemic. The literature review, research methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion are fully presented below.

During a pandemic, the teaching-learning process, which is typically taken place in a classroom or face to face mode needs to be adjusted to make the demand to avoid the risk of students or school stakeholders being infected by the highly contagious virus which has been considered a global threat (Harapan et al., 2020).

Online learning is defined as learning carried out from a distance assisted by electronic devices, for instance tablets, smartphones, laptops, and computers which require internet connection (Gonzalez & Louis, 2018). Online learning as

opposed to face to face learning has proliferated rapidly for the past decades (e.g Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Tathahira & Sriayu, 2020). Therefore, Huang et.al (2020) said that the "Flexible Learning" technology was used to carry out the learning procedure during the Covid-19 epidemic. Santoso and Lestari (2019) said that at present moment, information and communication technology literacy is the essential and basis of the education sector.

Conducting online learning becomes a new challenge for both students and teachers. According to Cao., et al. (2020), these acts have a significant influence on education, notably on students' learning. In line with this case, this shifting certainly triggers problems, challenges, and opportunities worth discussing. The challenges include integrating pedagogies and technologies, developing engaging activities, improving formal learning, getting student support, and dealing with technology-related issues (Son, 2018). As a lecturer, along with two other lecturers from different campuses, at a private university in Bandung. The researchers took the initiative to capture this phenomenon.

Although a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of online learning (Gonzalez & Louis, 2018), research on online language learning conducted during a pandemic is very rare, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary school settings, as most online language learning research has been conducted at the tertiary education level (Lin & Warschauer, 2015). Because of this extraordinary event, online language learning occurs unexpectedly and unprepared. A study of totally online language acquisition, on the other hand, is highly unusual (Sun, 2014), especially during a pandemic.

Many EFL/ ESL teachers and researchers have extensively investigated the efficacy of online learning concerning students' learning achievement (Waluyo, 2020). Many studies about the effectiveness of online learning recognise that it is essential for students satisfaction and that it is a critical factor in students academic achievement (Hew, 2016; Yeh., Kwok., Chien., Swean., Baek., & McIntosh., 2019). Related to academic achievement of positive student learning outcomes, Attractive features in online platforms have engaged students. Interactivity in the online environment is a key to keeping students engaged (Deschaine & Whale, 2017). Online environments might benefit certain types of engagement

(Dumford & Miller, 2018). and it is often related to the achievement of (Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot., 2016). In addition, Ahmad, Sosa and Musfy (2020) stated that online learning is indeed beneficial.

Besides, others have been focused on its strengths and shortcomings as well, e-learning also facilitates networking and information exchange, but it has the disadvantage of possibly squandering time (Salmon et al., 2015; Hollis & Was, 2016; Brownson, 2014). However, only a few emphasise how students or EFL learners perceive it (Khotimah, Widiati, Mustofa,& Ubaidillah., 2019; Wright, 2017). Therefore, the promptly significant shift and direction from offline to online has to be taken, furthermore in the context of *force majeure* due to an outbreak.

Given the opportunity to contribute significantly and fill in the gap on the proposed issue, this study is primarily intended to unfold how the students viewed the unprecedented shift of learning from face-to-face to online mode based on their personal experience. What they perceive likely affects the efficacy of the online program in the future, which can shed light on the online curriculum and some pedagogical aspects at a larger scale. Thus, this study specifically put a focus on (1) the online platform references, (2) Students' view toward Lecturers' role during online learning, (3) the efficacy of the teaching-learning process, (4) students' comprehension toward the lesson on online learning, and (5) synchronous/ asynchronous tacit view.

METHOD

To achieve the research goal, the mixed quantitative and qualitative research design method is employed, embracing the characteristics of survey research design. 75 EFL learners who came from three universities. The participants were distributed equally from those campuses. They enrolled in education, economy, finance, management, and religious study programs. The vast background of the research participants is taken into consideration to prevail rich and robust data, which is discussed later. For ethical consideration, all participants' names in this study remain pseudonyms.

Firstly, the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire, which consisted of 6 questions divided into several issues. The questionnaires were tailored in Bahasa Indonesia as participants' first language. Secondly, they are then distributed online through google documents for its convenience. After all responses were collected, 3

participants from each university were invited to have semi-structured interviews consisting of 5 related questions. It was held via zoom and lasted between 15 – 25 minutes. The interview was performed in the participant's first language (L1). The questionnaire is then analysed quantitatively, whereas the interview results are transcribed and analysed qualitatively. Those two findings support each other to reveal and answer the research objective being proposed profoundly (Creswell, 2013; Ubaidillah, 2018). The researchers translated the excerpt used in this study as accurately as possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results
Online platforms preferences
Among seventy-five students who participated in this study, more than half (52%) preferred to utilise WhatsApp® as their learning platform during the online class. In contrast, google classroom comes into second choice (21.3 %), as shown fully on the pie diagram below.
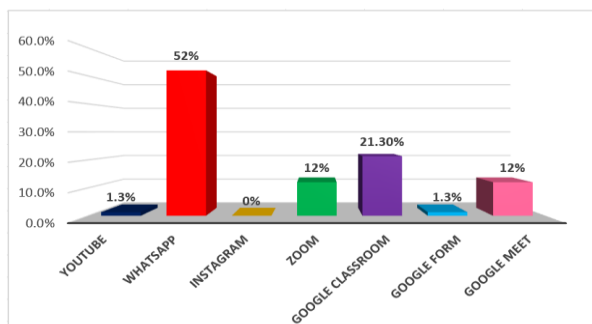

Figure 1. *Online platforms preferences*

Three of the interviewees stated that the reasons that drive them to use WhatsApp® compared to other platforms are economical, practical reasons.

> ….it doesn't consume data much, and generally, everyone has this application, learning is not difficult to use, …………. makes it easy for us to interact with what lecturers …. if there is new material or ask questions that have not been understood (Putri).

> …. More economical and I can study the lesson again….(Guardian)

> …… it can make it easier for me to ask questions when there are some materials that I don't understand…. we don't need to scroll to find our answer. (Iman)

Although WhatsApp has its drawback,

compared to other platforms, when it comes to real-life interaction, this handicap can be relatively covered by its useful default features. As stated below, the respondent found it very useful when learning as uttered by Novyanti (pseudonym) and her peer.

> I prefer to use WhatsApp because…(thinking) using it can support tasks both in terms of images, docs, and also voice notes (Noviyanti).

> Because in WhatsApp, there is a feature reply which when the lecturer answers or when we ask, we can immediately find the answer to the question, especially in English (questionnaire responses)

To sum up, this section displays that WhatsApp has become the most preferred choice by the students due to several reasons. Even though it does not possess all the required features, it still can relatively help them get most of the lessons given by the lecturers. This platform has met the demand of most respondents when participating in online learning.

Students' view toward lecturers' role during online learning
The information gained from this section shows that the students had diverse viewpoints towards lecturers' role in the online class. For the top three, They considered lecturers as controller (30%), tutor (26.7%), and assessor (18.7%), respectively.

It can be interpreted that the students may prefer to have the lecturer–centred based rather than student-centred based.
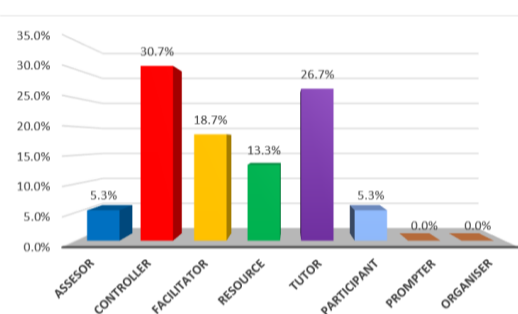

Figure 2. *Students' view toward lecturers' role during online learning*

Comment from those who viewed lecturers serve as the controller included the following:
students still feel unfamiliar with this method of learning, and they still need a lot of direction from the lecturer (questionnaire response)
... lecturers are very influential in the continuity of the teaching and learning process during online learning by continuously controlling students to do

assignments on time (questionnaire response). With this online learning, the control (from lecturers) is very much needed. (questionnaire response)

As depicted from those comments above, even college or university students are categorized as adult learners who generally tend to be independent learners and are expected to be more autonomous and be responsible toward their learning process and goal (Khotimah et al., 2019).

Surprisingly, in the context of online learning in the outbreak situation, they tended to depend more on their lecturers. Lecturers who act as controllers are more favorable for them. Controlling is urgently needed by most participants in this study as they are not entirely familiar with the system approach, as the teaching materials potentially hinder them from comprehending the subject.

The effectiveness of online learning
One of the critical issues that become apparent is the effectiveness of the online class. Interestingly, the finding shows that students were primarily uncertain (50,7%) about online class effectiveness they underwent, whereas 36% disagree and 13.3 % agree, as shown in the figure below:
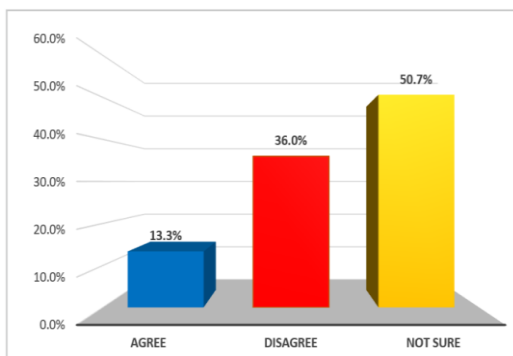

Figure 3. *The effectiveness of online learning*

They felt uncertain that the role played by the lecturers, as perceived, was not significant. Some respondents considered that the lecturers did not assist them fruitfully during the learning process.

> The lecturers rarely explained the material. Most of the lecturers only gave assignments without explaining….even some lecturers who only told students to fill in the absence without any assignments and materials (questionnaire response)

> Most of the lecturers give assignments to students without explaining the lesson first (questionnaire response)

Following the former finding, the respondent expected the lecturers to play more role, compared to face to face learning which influences them in learning mastery, by explaining the materials in detail rather than merely assigned them to do the tasks

> ...understanding English learning is more effective in learning offline and explained directly by the lecturer concerned (Nopri)

On the other hand, the learners found a limitation of expressing what they felt compared with activities in the classroom as they can ask questions and get the points from the lecturers directly, as stated by Teni below.

> For me, it's not an effective way since all of the students can't express more themselves in studying due to limitations (Teni)

A respondent also argued that online learning is not as effective as offline due to poor internet connection. The learning process from home becomes a new challenge because the signal cannot spread quickly to the whole of areas where they live, as it is uttered by Anisah below:

> In my opinion, online learning is less effective than offline learning. Offline learning has a more positive impact on students than online learning. Because online learning is very dependent on signals. If the signal is bad, the learning material is left behind (Anisah)

It may happen because some students come from remote areas in which internet access is not stable. They further testament to going somewhere to get better internet access during the interview sessions.

> It was always challenging for me (every time I had online classes) I had to go to a hill close to my house or to go to my relatives to get better and stable internet access so I could follow the online class (Nani)

Some participants argued that many online platforms could support their learning process predominantly depending on how the lecturers design and create the method to improve their understanding. Thus, the lecturers need to adapt and add more skills about recent technologies in language teaching.

> Still can understand because many applications can support learning English (questionnaire response)

> It is effective because the learning process is exciting and fun. the lecturers gave a new atmosphere and method to make the class is

comfortable (questionnaire response)

The efficiency of online learning
The online class efficiency tenet shows identical tendencies similar to effectiveness data findings. As it is shown in Figure no. 4, the respondents were primarily unsure (53%), followed by disagreement (28%) and agreement (19%) toward the notion of online class efficiency during the pandemic.
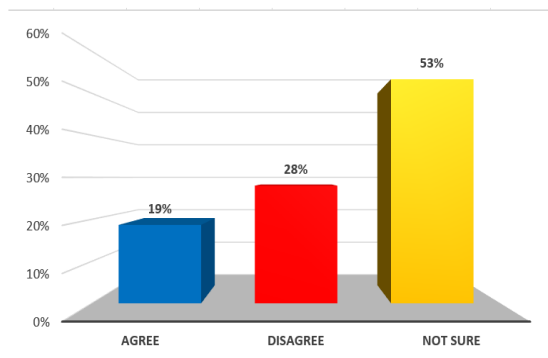

Figure 4. *The efficiency of online learning*

In the online class, students are required to fill in the online attendance list before the class; it can be writing a name list or filling out a google form which cannot guarantee that the students standby until the course finishes. The lecturers might not identify who paid attention to the lectures, including checking whether or not the students understands the lessons. The students could only come to sign the presence list and attend the closing part of the session. This finding is succinctly justified by the respondents' comments below.

Because some students rarely take online classes or are just absent without following the lecture flow (questionnaire response) effective yet not efficient (questionnaire response).

Some participants regarded only learning as money and time-consuming. The learning process took longer than it usually does. Assignments and tasks need to be submitted later in the same day or even more. Consequently, they need to spare more time to understand the material and finish the duty independently. At the same time, students need to add Internet data in expenses allocation during the pandemic, as it is clearly stated.

> …. if it carries longer, so students will have a mental problem such as depression because of lack of sleep, radiation effect from electronic media or finance such as when internet data runs out, but the class goes normal, so it causes stress and lack of communication impacts of less confidence (Nopri)

The concept of online learning still cannot achieve its efficiency, where students need extra effort to benefit from the lessons. The lack of direct communication impacts the student's confidence, which is necessary to ask for help regarding the material and another activity.

Students 'comprehension toward the lesson
Figure 5 displays the students ' self-evaluation on their lesson comprehension. Most students place themselves in uncertainty tenet (63%). In contrast, about a quarter of them (27%) argued that they didn't comprehend the lesson, and the most negligible percentage of respondents (11 %) asserted that they could understand the class.
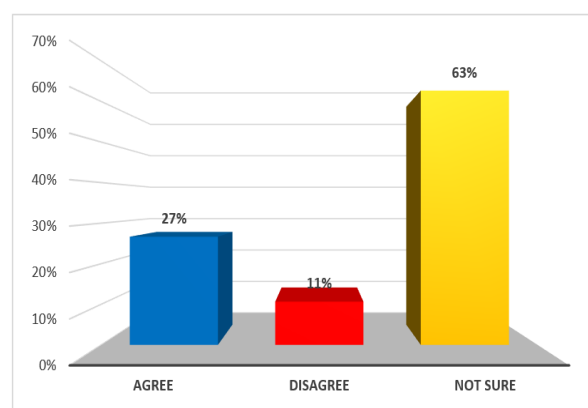

Figure 5. *Students' comprehension toward the lesson*

This minority clustered (10.7%) is represented by some participants who highlighted learning commitment and being independent whatever the online class mode is being carried out or obstacle faced, as stated by one of the respondents below.
Overall, I can understand very well. But of course, there are many obstacles, and coming back to the reasons for whether online learning is effective or not, if we are serious about learning, any difficulties, we can certainly overcome them by looking for other sources for the lesson material we do not understand (questionnaire response).

Students' understanding of the lesson is influenced by the lecturers' method during the learning process. Some students can easily understand all topics without any difficulty. The learning process comes so fresh with new designs and enables them to learn the subject passionately.

> It is the uniqueness of method, where it makes the students are feeling excited and can not wait for what will the lecturers brings for the next meeting (Na)
>
> The lecturers always give the maximum explanation, which is even more than usual, and

also they provide convenience such as the length of submitting tasks and absence (Al).

In contrast, most students are challenged to follow the learning process. They could not easily follow the class or catch the lesson because of multiple reasons, methods, tools and timetables. They argue that offline meetings are more detailed than online meetings.

It's hard, I have no idea about the reason why online classes are too hard for us to follow (Teni)

The explanation given by the lecturer is more detailed if offline learning is carried (Nopri)

….. the direct communication with lecturers and friends, even some of materials were not delivered clearly but many assignments handed; also we do not need to think about obstacles regarding with signals or too extravagant of internet data, and the last the timetable is not scheduled well during online class (Al)

No social interaction because it feels so pseudo-interactions. It's not easy because at least the quality of data must be maximised, especially the time when we need to have a class via zoom, draining the interned data a lot (Fi).

It can be perceived that real-time interaction has become a vital element during the online learning process. They can easily ask for direct inquiry without being interrupted by poor signals that hinder them. Most students inevitably demand direct, intimate interaction to benefit from the studied lesson.

Students' preferences between synchronous and asynchronous approach

For most participants, blending synchronous and asynchronous mode is considerably the best option. As seen from the figure below, more than half of respondents (52%) prefer to select this option, whereas mere synchronous and asynchronous places respectively at 30% and 17 %. This hybrid approach provides flexibility to the students and helps them better understand.
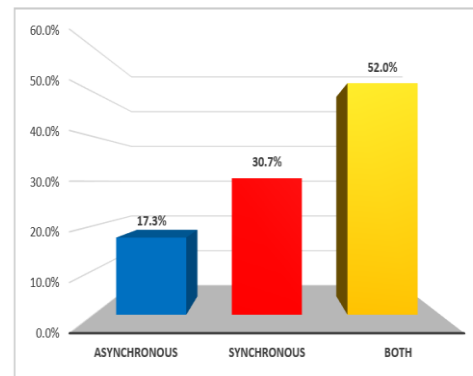

Figure 6. Students' preferences between synchronous and asynchronous approach

Here are the following arguments of the students who prefer to have both methods. By trying to use two methods of Asynchronous and Synchronous learning, students or lecturers can complement the lack of learning methods from one another (questionnaire response)

I prefer direct interaction, but I'm also clueless about it; with the asynchronous learning system, I can at least operate it (questionnaire response)

Let learning be more engaging and not boring (by having) both modes (questionnaire response)

Both are very supportive for doing online learning, but I personally prefer learning in real-time because the material presented will be faster to understand (questionnaire response)

As can be viewed from the commentary above, most students considered that both synchronous and asynchronous methods had each drawback. Synchronous methods tend to consume more internet data if prolongedly applied and require a stable internet connection. This situation is disfavored for the students who reside in remote areas with poor internet connections. Whereas asynchronous the lecturer - student interaction is less intensive, students who demand further explanation or questions that require immediate response cannot be facilitated. In addition, it requires the students to be more independent and be responsible with their learning duty. In addition to this, by utilising and incorporating them. The lack of each learning method can relatively be minimised. Therefore, the learning objective of each lesson can be fairly achieved better, and the students can get the benefit and most of the learning.

Discussion

The finding of this study has yielded five points

that are worth discussing. Firstly, regarding the platform preferences, the respondent prefers to utilise the platform during the class that is practical, economical in terms of data consumption and endows with valuable features that can support the learning objective. This finding is in line with Perry's (2017). It confirms Amin's (Amin & Sundari, 2020) in which friendly user platforms and its accessibility help the students to gain most of the benefit of the lesson as the offline class does. Müller's research (2008) further supports that accessibility and comfort in the online learning environment enable students to become more interested in the study.

Secondly, regarding lecturers' role, most of the respondents still consider lecturers as the centre of learning and demand intensive interaction during online learning teaching. Teachers need to scaffold interactions of student-teacher and student-material to enhance students' learning (Lin, Zheng, & Zhang, 2017). They believe that lecturers should take complete control of the online class, ensure the students' participation, check their understanding of the lesson, and monitor their learning progress. Consequently, when the lecturers lack the assigned tasks formerly mentioned. The students are unlikely to grasp the lesson maximally. This tenet has confirmed Deris, et al. (2012), who pointed out "teachers have a principal role in shaping students' learning experience and ultimately their persistence in learning" (p. 256). It is further revealed that student-lecturer interaction in a class can lead to a decreased sense of belonging. As a result of this tendency, it has been pointed out that feeling disengaged from teachers is one of the causes of attrition from a class.

Thirdly, concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of online learning, the respondents mostly regarded that the class is not entirely effective and efficient as opposed to offline learning due to lack of lecturer role and poor internet connection. This finding has been clarified by Wright's (2017). Some studies indicate that online learning is not as effective as face-to-face traditional instruction (Pickering & Swinnerton, 2019). Despite its great flexibility, lecturers' commitment and poor capability and internet stability can account for the success and effectiveness of the online class in achieving its goal. In line with the above reality, the results of research by Hikmat *et al.* (2020, p. 1) show that learning online in practice courses and online course subjects are less effective.

Fourthly, in the context of students' comprehension of the lessons, most respondents consider that the classes during online learning are more challenging to comprehend. Due to two factors; lecturers 'presence and an internet connection, lecturers' presence have made the lesson more difficult to understand. According to them, some lecturers do not seem to take their lesson preparations as maximally as they could; this has negatively affected the quality of online learning.

It is, therefore, inevitable that most students demand direct, intimate interaction to get most of the lesson, parallel to the theory that interaction between teachers and students leads to student satisfaction and student learning outcomes. Other factors such as peer community, engaging online teachers, confidence and course design prove how online degrees can assist students with successful academic and engaging learning experiences (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Then the internet has contributed significantly to this tenet for some students who reside in remote areas with relatively poor internet connections. They can access or participate in the class when a stable internet connection such as zoom meeting or YouTube live is provided.

Lastly, to date, offline or face to face learning still outperforms and is more preferable to online learning, especially for the students who endow socioeconomic disadvantages and are unable to have proper internet access. It is also discussed by Green (2016) that online learning needs a bigger investment than face to face classes to make it properly designed and implemented. As suggested by Moorhouse (2020) extensive studies that investigate the transition from face-to-face to online learning are equally worthwhile. Therefore, a blended synchronous learning mode presents as the alternative to minimize its drawback and eventually achieve the learning objective.

CONCLUSION

According to the respondents' perception who participated in this study, Online learning should be easily accessed and implemented through the most practical and economic e-learning platforms, particularly in terms of internet data consumption and embedded features that enable the students to learn and comprehend the given lessons maximally.

This study also found that the lecturers occupy a fundamental role during the online teaching-learning process. Most respondents generally consider the lecturers' presence who can control the class as necessary as in the offline class. In

addition to this, the lecturers are highly imperative to acknowledge and embrace the recent technologies in language teaching to minimize the technical issues related to the platform being utilized. Furthermore, students are also expected to foster their internal and external motivation and intention to establish immediate goals and be in charge of individual responsibility towards their learning process and goal during online learning.

Another notable point that is intriguing to discuss is that the mixed-marriage approach between synchronous and asynchronous is regarded as the most effective and efficient option. This approach can facilitate learning style, need and expectation toward the lesson. This study has revealed that students and lecturers are highly advisable to have common ground and commitment to online learning. This can be achieved by having intensive lecturer-student interaction and engagement in pre-during- post-learning activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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