PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING ENGLISH FOR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Abstract

The Indonesian government had announced a large scale of social and physical distancing since the COVID-19 Pandemic occurred in Indonesia in March 2020. It leads to the restriction of educational institutions, particularly formal secondary and elementary schools. Teachers, parents, and students are encouraged to adapt well to the situation. The Indonesian government has released a new temporary learning policy during Pandemic for elementary school students, called the emergency curriculum. It urges elementary school students to learn at home through teacher supervision via online platforms. It is not simple to educate and teach children at home, mainly teaching English for parents busy with their jobs. By employing an ethnographic study in an early childhood education institution in Bogor, this research investigates the online learning and blended learning process during the COVID-19 Pandemic, specifically learning English. The advantages, challenges, and weaknesses of the English teaching-learning process will be explored and related. Recommendation for further studies and other learning management processes during Pandemic will be encouraged as the significance of the research.

Keywords*: Pandemic, pre-school, learning, restriction, English, childhood*

Sari

Pemerintah Indonesia telah mengumumkan pembatasan sosial dan fisik secara besar-besaran sejak kasus pandemi COVID-19 terjadi di Indonesia pada Maret 2020. Hal itu berujung pada pembatasan institusi pendidikan, khususnya sekolah menengah formal dan sekolah dasar. Guru, orang tua, dan siswa didorong untuk beradaptasi dengan baik dengan situasi tersebut. Pemerintah Indonesia telah merilis kebijakan pembelajaran

sementara selama pandemi untuk siswa sekolah dasar, yang disebut kurikulum darurat. Ia mengimbau siswa sekolah dasar untuk belajar di rumah melalui pengawasan guru dengan menggunakan *platform* online. Mendidik dan mengajar anak di rumah bukanlah perkara mudah, terutama mengajar bahasa Inggris, bagi orang tua yang sibuk bekerja. Dengan menggunakan studi etnografi selama satu tahun di sebuah lembaga pendidikan anak usia dini di Bogor, penelitian ini menyelidiki proses pembelajaran online dan *blended learning* selama Pandemi COVID-19, terutama dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Kelebihan, tantangan, dan kelemahan proses belajar-mengajar akan digali beserta situasi-situasi terkait yang mengiringinya. Rekomendasi untuk penelitian dan proses manajemen pembelajaran lebih lanjut selama pandemi bagi anak-anak pra-sekolah juga akan disajikan sebagai signifikansi penelitian.

kata kunci*: pendemi, pembatasan, belajar, bahasa Inggris, usia dini*

Introduction

COVID-19 Pandemic has caused Indonesian students and teachers to adapt to a new model of learning and teaching from home through various online platforms (Efriana, 2021; Lie et al., 2020; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). This situation seems not a big deal for schools in the city centers, and they have gotten accustomed to the online learning method. However, it is not that simple to convert from traditional into blended or fully online learning to the schools that primarily utilize conventional learning methods with face-to-face teacher supervision. Moreover, pre-school education that requires more complex teachers' supervision should adapt to this situation due to pre-school student's characters whose concentration is easy to distract. Atmodiwirjo in Gunarsa (2008) stated that teaching early childhood students are different from teaching adult students. The statement means that besides teaching children singing, writing, reading, counting, coloring, teachers should also educate their moral values, problem-solving, and character building.

Researches regarding English as a Foreign language (EFL) and online learning generally during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia had shown typical implications

and problems encountered during online learning due to literacy loss (Bao, Qu, R, & Hogan, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020), psychological distress (Baloran, 2020; Hasan & Bao, 2020; Qin et al., 2021), financial difficulties and internet access (Allo, 2020), teachers and students literacy on learning technology (Mulyanti, Purnama, & Pawinanto, 2020), and learning management and control (Jin, Lin, Zhao, Yu, & Su, 2021; Lin, Jin, Zhao, Yu, & Su, 2021). The mentioned researches primarily conducted in the formal elementary, secondary, and higher education institution settings. Quite a few discussed similar cases in a pre-school setting, whereas education itself is not only for adults. Casey & Carter (2016) perceived that one aspect that is frequently not addressed is choosing the specific needs of the individual child's contexts to the teaching methodology and philosophy used and embraced. Instead, a particular teaching style is frequently considered good enough to meet all children's needs, and for a majority of children, this may be true.

However, every human grows up with diverse cultures and family backgrounds. Thus, pedagogic activities should be contextual, holistic, and interconnected with the student's experiences and daily activities (Johnson, 2002). These concepts are well-known as the communicative teaching and learning (CTL) method. In terms of teaching English, Richards carried out a concept of English teaching strategy that is almost the same as the CTL, called communicative language teaching (CLT), found in the late 1960s and 1970s. Richards defined CLT as language learning that focused on considering how speakers use language in different communication contexts (Richards, 2001). The pre-schools teachers considered as a very first 'formal' teacher for almost every child ought to understand this concept since education reflects the sincerity in seeking knowledge and practicing knowledge, education that has succeeded in building courage in upholding the truth and patience in carrying out the struggle to build civilization (Syihabuddin, 2020).

The teaching-learning strategies and philosophy principles above are relevant to apply in various teaching-learning contexts for children, including teaching English. English is compulsory throughout secondary schools in Indonesia (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Based on the researcher's observations, most English exercises or textbooks for secondary school students in Indonesia focused on grammar, vocabulary, and reading

with some lessons for improving English writing and speaking. Meanwhile, English books for children or pre-school students mainly focused on vocabulary learning through colorful pictures. Before Pandemic, the teachers usually utilized the drilling method to mention the pictures or tools loudly then the students follow what they said. They also encourage pre-school students to memorize vocabularies.

Meanwhile, in a pandemic situation, teaching English to pre-school students can be more complicated. The students could not meet the teachers directly, and they face many obstacles in learning English vocabularies, particularly in terms of pronunciation technically. Besides, the students no longer feel learning situations that make them happy, excited, and motivated with their classmates. Consequently, pre-school students perceive that English learning is not an exciting and encouraging activity anymore, and the teachers could not reach the learning outcome they arranged in the curriculum.

By the time children enter School at the age of 4 or 5, most have achieved near adult-like mastery of the sounds and grammar of their native language(s) and can communicate with others effectively (Blakemore, 2011). Therefore, language learning, including EFL, can develop their communication and social skills, and online or distance learning should not be a barrier for them to develop their communication skills. Looking at these problems in EFL teaching for pre-school students that has not been widely researched and discussed, this research aims to explore the process of English teaching and learning for pre-school students in an Early Childhood education institution (PAUD) Assyifa Bogor during COVID-19 Pandemic. Strengths and weaknesses of the English teaching-learning process will be explored as well as situations related to it. The researcher would also recommend further studies and other learning management processes during Pandemic for pre-school students. Hopefully, this research gives some crucial and valuable insights for EFL researchers, practitioners, and pre-school policymakers to deal with their students' English teaching and learning system, particularly during pandemic situations.

Methods

With the research objectives and significances described previously, the researcher conducted this study employing ethnographic research. Fraenkel et al. defined ethnographic research that utilizes various approaches to obtain a holistic picture of a particular group, society, setting, institution, or situation (Fraenkel, Jack R, Wallen, Norman E, Hyun, 2012). They further continued, "the emphasis in ethnographic research is on documenting or portraying the everyday experiences of individuals by observing and interviewing them and relevant others" (Fraenkel, Jack R, Wallen, Norman E, Hyun, 2012). Looking at the complexity of the study, the researcher decided to conduct it with ethnographic research to present holistic information regarding the problem.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

According to Angrosino (as cited in Sangasubana, 2011), three strategies for collecting data in ethnography are observation, interviewing, and archival research. In relevance to it, Fraenkel et al. (2012) claimed that the critical tools in all ethnographic studies are in-depth interviews and continual, ongoing participant observation of a situation. Thus, refers to the statements of theories above, the researcher would collect and analyze the data in this research with in-depth interview and observation technique. The period for conducting this research is one year, started from April 2020 until April 2021.

Results and Discussion

Before describing this research result, firstly, the researcher would inform the data early childhood education institution observed. PAUD Assyifa is an early childhood education institution located in Bogor district, West Java, Indonesia. The schooling system is a Pre-school for children aged 4,5, and 6 years to prepare their literacy skills before entering elementary schools. The School provides two levels of students; level A as the beginner (first year) and level B as the intermediate-upper intermediate (second year). It gives choices to the parents to send their children to study in there for a year only or two years. Learning system and policy operated under the regulation and the curriculum of the Directorate General of early childhood education and primary and secondary education (Dikdasmen), Indonesian Ministry of Education and Cultural

Affairs. Student's learning books consist of exercise books that combine literacy skills in students through reading, writing (including thickening letters and numbers), coloring, drawing, matching, counting, and making handicrafts. The students also learn to socialize with their peers through playing a variety of games supervised by teachers.

English teaching methods used for children during Pandemic

After a year of in-depth observation (including field notes) during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the researcher encountered that the teaching and learning method employed is blended learning, including in learning English. It means that the students are encouraged to learn at home with their parents using the exercise books from Schools, and occasionally they should learn at School (it could be once a week or twice a week, based on the situation). Occasional meetings in the classroom usually organized to discuss homework and assignments they had finished at home with their parents' assistance.

In typical situations, English is not taught every day as the teachers considered it a foreign language. Teaching English is mainly concerned with mentioning and memorizing vocabularies through pictures in the books or using appropriate equipment. For instance, the teachers showed the types of different flowers when the children were learning to mention the names of various flowers. Besides, they usually drilled the vocabularies several times and let them follow them until they memorize the words well. According to the researcher's field notes, since teachers who teach English do not have academic qualifications in English education, linguistics, or letters, the researcher frequently heard or saw the teachers mispronounced the words, and indeed, their students followed it. However, this EFL teaching technique stimulates the students' motivation and excitement. It can be seen from their enthusiasm when pronouncing the words loudly together.

Meanwhile, during Pandemic, the teachers give the instructions for students to learn English at home with their parents without direct observations using any media or online platforms. Homework instruction or assignments generally informed through parents' Whatsapp group as a media of collective communication between parents and teachers. In another case of learning English, parents occasionally record the English

learning activities of their children and send the videos or audios to the teachers through Whatsapp.

The effectiveness of blended learning method in teaching English for children

Blended learning, particularly in learning English for pre-school students, effectively gives the students time flexibility to learn with their parents even though their motivation is frequently lacking due to solitary circumstances they face during learning at home with their parents. Blakemore (2011) stated that developmental psychology research on the theory of mind has demonstrated that the ability to understand other's mental states develops over the first four or five years of life. It means that pre-school children need a socialization process. They need mates and relatives to communicate as the adults do. In other words, most of them will get bored and tired when learning alone. Based on the information from the teachers, parents may overcome that situation through video-calling their children's classmates during learning at home. Then they can keep communicating with their peers, sharing their home-learning activities, or expressing their ideas to each other, so they will feel that they still have friends and are not alone.

Besides, a monotonous mode of learning with exercise books from the School may cause their boredom. In corresponds to it, Kennedy stated;

> "although reading, writing, and oral language skills and strategies are crucially important to develop, it is important to espouse a broad vision of literacy, which encompasses the cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, cultural-historical, creative and aesthetic dimensions of literacy across the lifespan of the individual" (Kennedy et al., 2012).

From the statement above, the researcher perceives that enhancing literacy in children is better to include various methods, strategies, and modes of learning as literacy covers a broad of dimensions with its related aspects. The researcher perceives that the direct method in teaching English is crucial in every level of students. A language is a communication tool that needs direct interaction through seeing, hearing, speaking, listening, and comprehending. Therefore, pre-school teachers can creatively combine learning modes during Pandemic. One of the direct methods in teaching English

utilizing an uncomplicated online platform is through a zoom-video meeting. Zoom is widely used in today's situation to substitute face-to-face physical meeting as it is possible for the users to see and talk to each other through video, in which they can do it collectively. It is effective as a means of language teaching and learning process as long as the internet connection is strong enough and the supported devices are available. The other platforms with the same function as zoom cloud meeting can be used: Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and many more.

Besides the learning instruction given through Whatsapp, the pre-school teachers may also link Youtube animation channels relevant to the English learning materials. To avoid distraction and children's split-concentration during Youtube videos, they should be controlled and accompanied by their parents. Learning through Youtube animation videos can stimulate learning excitement in children as they usually consisted of musical instruments, so the children may learn to sing. In a nutshell, teachers and parents can get many benefits from their smartphones or other devices with internet access (Wahyuni & Septianasari, 2020) to enhance EFL learning.

Strengths and weaknesses of English blended learning method in Pre-School

In correlation to the situations above, results of observation and interview with some teachers, students, and parents, the researcher has mapped the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning methods in teaching EFL for pre-school students.

Teachers' perceptions

The researcher interviewed three teachers in PAUD Assyifa directly, and the information they had given showed that English blended learning leads students to have a more extended period when learning at home with their parents. The main reason why the learning mode is monotonous is due to the poor internet connection in some of the parents' houses, and it is not possible to conduct EFL learning using direct methods through online video meetings/conferences such as zoom cloud meeting. In terms of students' learning barriers, the teachers said that parents could communicate the students' difficulties during EFL learning at home in the weekly physical meeting (in the classroom).

Students' perceptions

Not all students were interviewed in this research as some of them were shy to express their feelings and opinions. However, the researcher had discussed students' perception of the EFL learning method during Pandemic with four students from class A and six students from class B. 7 students honestly stated that learning from home can be done while watching television and enjoying the learning process. However, they felt uncomfortable since their parents, particularly their mother, frequently get angry or in a bad mood when teaching them the materials from the book. That kind of situation is primarily because the parents should deal with their jobs and operate them via online media.

Parents' perceptions

When the researcher interviewed mothers at School (six out of ten mothers), they said that regular EFL home learning during a pandemic is not easy. They frequently face their children crying when learning with them. Parents assumed that their children often get stress. It probably due to the learning strategies that the mothers use at home are not the same as what the teachers usually conduct at School. Finally, the parents would let their children playing or watching television and procrastinating their assignments. Almost all parents said that those were complicated situations that were testing their patience.

The opinions of the research participants above illustrate that a blended learning method for teaching English to pre-school students could be effective when related parties, particularly teachers and parents, collaborate well in creating comfortable and exciting learning and teaching circumstances. Either online or distance learning may still be fun for children when they obtain and get involved in some fun and festive activities they like, and they can keep communicating with their peers or classmates. Without combining English teaching strategies with various media for pre-school children, the learning outcome is hard to reach as they get bored during the learning process.

Conclusion & recommendation

Besides demands for combining various English learning strategies and media during blended learning in the COVID-19 Pandemic, the pre-teachers should also collaborate with other related parties and policymakers. The collaboration possibly leads them to enhance learning and design more interactive EFL learning situations for pre-school students. Education systems are principally the property of states. Even if authority is developed to semi-autonomous bodies such as religious, ideological, regional-ethnic, or other parent-controlled agencies to deliver schooling, or higher, or specialized education, states typically license, authorize, fund, or certify educational practices (Bianco, 2008).

Creative parents and teachers will learn how to give better and more exciting EFL learning media and circumstances for their children/students. It can be conducted by learning personally from diverse sources of information or through an informal course managed by a skill development institution or organization. Thus, knowledge, skills, and professional development are required in learning management and control during Pandemic to direct them into viable attempts to create better EFL teaching and learning design and reach learning outcomes. In addition, teachers and parents should not get stressed out in dealing with the EFL learning complexities since stressed teachers/mentors/parents will only create stressed students and children that cannot enjoy their learning process. Hopefully, other researchers in the typical or similar concerns related to the EFL learning for children may recommend more diverse learning and teaching strategies for better learning significance and outcome.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest is reported.

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