

A Closer Look at EFL Learners' Problems and Strategies Used in Online Learning

¹Andini Nailatus Sarifah, ²Ahmad Ridho Rojabi*, ³Moch. Imam Machfudi

Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember

***Corresponding Author**

Email: ridhorojabi@uinkhas.ac.id

Abstract

The transition from offline to online mode causes problems in education, especially in vocational high schools. These problems appear since learners are still adapting to the most recent instructional mode; online learning. This study aimed to look at problems of internal as well as external faced by EFL learners in online learning and the strategies to overcome those problems. This qualitative study with phenomenology was carried out. Ten participants from junior high school students were recruited by using a purposive sampling technique. The result showed that intelligence, interest, and motivation become their internal problems. While technology and pedagogical e-learning become external factors. The strategies used by the students were consulting dictionaries for meaning and pronunciation, navigating the course contents, discussing with peers and family, reviewing course materials, engaging in some hobbies, utilizing additional applications, and setting up timetables to study. The present study offers significant contributions to the advancement of online instruction as a whole by providing insightful information.

Keywords: *online learning, external problems, internal problems, qualitative study, strategies*

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems turned to online learning to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and students continue to participate in online delivery instructions. Education that is supported by Internet connections is referred to as online learning or virtual learning. (Bartley & Golek, 2004; Bentley et al., 2012; Nguyen, 2015; Wang & Wang, 2020). During online learning, students can receive synchronous or asynchronous learning by using some learning platforms or tools to facilitate them with flexibility and live interaction (Dhawan, 2020; Singh & Thurman, 2019). Thus, by conducting online learning, teachers and students can interact virtually as they did in face-to-face classrooms,

The virtual classroom can be a solution to replace face-to-face interaction which offers accessibility and flexibility (Bower et al., 2015; Rojabi, 2020; Rojabi et al., 2024; Rojabi & Femilia, 2023). Virtual learning facilitates feedback, forum discussion, and comment tools. It is powerful in the classroom since instructors can directly observe students' behavior and they can give feedback on their performances. The instructors are helped by the technology to easily monitor the student's attitude and performance. Online learning benefited the process of learning and instruction. The most crucial of these is its accessibility and cost-effectiveness. The successful execution of the procedure for instructing and learning is demonstrated by the instructor's capacity to closely observe all learners and to provide immediate feedback on their actions. This would have been

difficult in an in-person educational activity, however in a virtual classroom, the instructor was assisted by technology to help them monitor students easier. Online learning also has advantages for instructors of EFL, such as the ability to foster students' critical thinking, student engagement, motivation, and learner autonomy (Rojabi et al., 2022; Rojabi, et al., 2023; Rojabi, et al., 2023; Zayapragassarazan, 2020).

Two types of online learning models can be implemented in virtual classrooms. The instructors can use synchronous or asynchronous options for students' needs in online learning. Synchronous communication provides real-time interaction and communication like live online discussion or videoconference (Rojabi et al., 2022; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006), while asynchronous occurs in a delayed time and does not have real-time access, it provides a more flexible time that learners can re-access the content on online learning platforms (Hrastinski, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Rojabi, 2021).

It is required for instructors to understand the student's learning styles since everyone has their own characteristics. In online learning, incorporating technology and course content is critical to providing an effective atmosphere (Islam et al., 2015). Online learning was something new for EFL learners, particularly in the Indonesian context. Thus, students and instructors need to adapt to this environment by adopting engaging tools or platforms for the teaching and learning process. Mahmud (2017) confirms difficulties in receiving knowledge during the teaching and learning process dealing with their learning disability. Learning disability emerges when students have difficulties grasping information due to internal and external factors. In the educational dictionary.

A study previously discussed the drawbacks of online learning experienced by learners. The learners are having difficulty enrolling in online classes. This study identified five drawbacks divided into five distinct groups: learning style and cultural challenges, pedagogical e-learning, technology, technical training, and time management challenges (Islam et al., 2015). Another study focused on the issues and obstacles of e-learning or online learning. Dealing with technological challenges, developing an innovative model of community-based and collaborative learning, and developing innovative facilities for e-learning are the issues and obstacles (Rana et al., 2014).

Disabilities in the learning process are more commonly referred to as learning difficulties or learning disabilities. Learning difficulties are defined as a state in which the acquisition of knowledge is impeded by challenges that hinder the attainment of desired learning results (Mahmud, 2017). To overcome disabilities in language learning, students are required to use language learning strategies. Language learning strategies have been classified by many researchers. However, the majority of their attempts to categorize language learning strategies replicate or are similar to the same classifications for language learning strategies with no substantial distinctions. O'Malley and Chamot identified three types of strategies: meta-cognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995). Furthermore, Oxford developed the Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). This inventory highlights the different kinds of language learning strategies that learners can use. Memorization, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are the six categories of language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990).

Previous research has delved into the difficulties that EFL or ESL students face when learning online. For example, they can use LMS to solve problems during online asynchronous sessions, or they can use videoconferencing to solve problems during online synchronous sessions. However, publications that explore the problems of vocational high school learners in online learning, particularly in Indonesian context and strategies to overcome them are less conducted. Some research studies only focus on the EFL problems in an online course, they do not explore the strategies of students to solve the problems during online sessions. Therefore, an in-depth investigation exploring not only the problems but also the strategies to overcome them in online learning is urgently required. It is then to answer the research questions; 1) What are the internal factors of EFL students' problems in online learning, 2) What are the external factors of EFL students' problems in online learning? 3) What are the strategies to overcome EFL students' problems in online learning?

METHOD

Research Design

This current study used qualitative study with phenomenology. Qualitative studies use a holistic approach that frames phenomena such as attitudes, perceptions, and actions in their natural context. Thus, this current study aimed to capture EFL students' problems in online learning and the strategies used by them to overcome those problems.

Research Setting and Participants

The participants in this research were ten students of the eleventh (11) grade at one of the vocational high schools in Jember, East Java Indonesia by using purposive sampling. Ten participants have similar backgrounds of English proficiency with Javanese and Madurese for their native languages and they all were in the third semester. Upon completion of a written consent form, subjects indicated their voluntary agreement to participate in the study without any form of intimidation; their involvement was entirely of their own free will. Participants can also withdraw their consent for participation at any time. To protect participants' privacy, the names in excerpts are pseudonymized.

Data Collection

Non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used in this study for data collection. The observation was carried out to collect data on problems in online English instruction particularly internal and external problems encountered by students. The semi-structured interview included ten questions designed to elicit information about EFL students' problems as well as strategies used by students and teachers to overcome those problems in online learning. The students were given a virtual interview via WhatsApp video call, and their responses were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis and Data Validity

To ensure content validity, the semi-structured interview was validated by two experts on technology-enhanced language learning from one of the public universities in Jember, East Java, Indonesia. Furthermore, to avoid

miscommunication, the questions were adapted, modified, and translated into Indonesian. The data from the semi-structured interviews were then thematically analyzed and presented in excerpts. Finally, the data were validated using triangulation of methods and data sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Internal Problems Faced by EFL Students

After interviewing students with semi-structured interviews, we analyzed the data through thematic analysis and the themes emerged as follows:

Theme 1: Intelligence

Problems faced by learners were related to intelligence. Intelligence problems in online learning occur when students have difficulty in pronunciation, difficulty in grasping the materials, difficulty in understanding structures, and deficiency in listening comprehension. The students had difficulty pronouncing the words since they found unfamiliar vocabulary and they struggled to pronounce these words as reported by Andi:

"I got difficulty pronouncing words in English since I found unfamiliar vocabulary and it confused me how to pronounce these words" (Andi)

Joni also noted why he got confused to pronounce some words because there were too many similar words but different in pronunciation.

"Too many similar words but different in pronunciation. It confuses me sometimes," (Joni)

Difficulty in understanding course content was also a problem as noted by Mira. She mentioned that she was confused about understanding the course materials because she got less practice during online learning.

"I had less practice during online learning so I sometimes confused about understanding the materials" (Mira)

Understanding structures is also crucial when they get writing assignments, however, some students were confused about understanding these patterns of structures on writing tasks. As noted by Adam as follows:

"When the teacher gave us a writing task, I sometimes was confused with patterns of structures and I don't know how to differentiate the different"

Students also reported their problems when they watched videos provided by the teacher since they did not understand what they heard due to a lack of vocabulary in listening sections as mentioned by Sinta as follows:

"This video provided by the teacher is difficult. I did not catch anything from this" (Sinta).

Theme 2: Interest

The second factor was enthusiasm. The researcher discovered that the problems with online learning enthusiasm were misreading information and difficulties completing tasks. Since learners were less enthusiastic in questioning the instructor when they had problems comprehending the content as well as the task instructions, they misunderstood the topics and struggled in completing the tasks. Jodi and Sinta explained it as follows:

“What I feel is that I am confused about the materials because there are fewer practices during online learning and I don't understand the teacher's explanation.”
(Jodi)

“Since the online materials are difficult for me to understand, I received many incorrect answers on my work.” (Sinta)

Theme 3: Motivation

The third aspect was motivation. The researcher discovered that the most common motivation issues in online learning were procrastination and a lack of interest. Due to their home circumstances, the students felt lazy and bored while learning online. Students frequently submit tasks as a result of procrastination and a lack of interest and they also have an absence of concentration on the course content during online classes. Mira and Deni explained it as follows:

“It is not conducive to participate in online class at home. Too crowded and I get distractions from surroundings.” (Mira)

“The teacher's explanation in an online class was too short not detailed but too many tasks” (Deni)

The results presented were consistent with Ahmadi's theory. Psychological factors caused the internal factors of difficulties with learning. Intelligence, aptitude, interest, and motivation are the four categories covered. As stated by Ahmadi, intelligence factors are connected with the capacity of learners to address obstacles quickly and effectively grasp educational materials. Furthermore, aptitude factors are capacity that has been retained from birth. Additionally, interest is the condition of paid interest in anything we desire or would like to be involved with to learn deeper. Finally, motivation is used to convey either the achievement or failure of any complex activity. In summary, achievement is attained when learners are committed (Ahmadi & Supriyono, 2008).

The results from the investigation of intelligence factors such as difficulties in pronunciation, particularly in reading, struggling to comprehend concepts, difficulties with grammatical rules, and inadequate absorption in listening corresponded with Akujobi and Chukwu's theory. A number of variables impact students' proficiency in English, including their native languages, media for learning, teaching experiences, diverse cultural backgrounds, large classrooms, and their attitudes toward learning English. The students' difficulty pronouncing regular vocabulary was driven by their mother tongue, while their challenges pronouncing uncommon vocabulary were influenced by their native language (Akujobi & Chukwu, 2012).

The results in terms of struggling to comprehend the concept and insufficient listening comprehension aligned with Akujobi and Chukwu's theory. Learners' acquisition of English is occasionally influenced by the media that they use. The learners exhibited trouble comprehending the concept and demonstrated inadequate listening comprehension. Learners were unwilling to adapt and understand the video on YouTube. The explanation and audio from that video were incomprehensible to the students. In a big class, the students found they were unable to recognize the grammar rules, thus rendering it challenging to construct sentences for the writing task.

Davis' theory was supported by the findings in terms of misreading the information and difficulties accomplishing an assignment in enthusiasm factors. Low-enthusiastic learners are also becoming one of the most difficult problems for instructors to overcome. The students were misinterpreting the content and having difficulty completing tasks since they lacked the curiosity or commitment to ask the instructor queries concerning challenging topics or unclear explanations (Davis, 2016).

The findings of lack of motivation and boredom in motivational variables coincided with Ponmozhi and Thenmozhi's article. Students' lack of motivation, unsupportive atmosphere, classrooms, and organization also contribute to learners' English performance. The results indicate that learners in a virtual learning environment were unmotivated and disengaged. This is a consequence of an absence of enthusiasm and an unpleasant atmosphere at home. Learners' lack of motivation and boredom led individuals to fail to concentrate (Ponmozhi & Thenmozhi, 2017).

The External Problems Faced by EFL Learners

Theme 1: Technology

External issues encountered by EFL students in online learning included: 1) Technology and 2) Pedagogical E-learning. The first was technological advancement. Learners use technologies to acquire information online during their educational experience. technological advances also have drawbacks in their application. This drawback disrupts the online learning process. Due to a lack of resources, learners struggled with technical issues such as the connectivity to the internet and signal strength, as well as uploading their video tasks. Joni and Deni explained it as follows:

"The problem that occurred when taking classes online was having difficulty with the signals." (Joni)

"I live in a suburban area where the internet signal is frequently disrupted; I need to find an adequate internet signal to stay connected to online classes and submit video assignments." (Deni)

Theme 2: Pedagogical e-learning

The other dimension of E-learning is pedagogical E-learning. Learners are unable to make adjustments to the way of instruction demonstrated in YouTube videos. They misunderstood the topic since the instructor failed to clarify it to them. Since the instructor did not have sufficient time to prepare instructional resources,

the instructor typically utilizes a YouTube video. It was reported by the following comment from Clara.

“The teacher frequently used YouTube videos from other people's channels, which I found difficult to understand because I was unfamiliar with it.” (Clara)

The findings presented above seem to agree with Islam et al. (2015). They categorized e-learning challenges into five categories: 1) learning style and culture, 2) pedagogical E-learning, 3) technology, 4) technical training, and 5) time management. They described how technology may indicate issues in online learning. Technology has resulted in technical issues, such as connectivity to the internet. Pedagogical e-learning is another barrier to online learning. Effective pedagogy necessitates that the instructor understands how learners gain knowledge, presents instructional content, and encourages learners to learn. Learners in online courses struggle to integrate the pedagogical of YouTube videos since the explanation provided differs significantly from their instructor. It becomes harder for instructors to assist students in acquiring pedagogical e-learning.. (Islam et al., 2015).

The Strategies to Overcome EFL Learners' Problems

The strategies for overcoming the problems of EFL students in online learning were as follows: 1) consulting a dictionary regarding word meaning and pronunciation, 2) surfing the resources, 3) asking relatives and classmates, 4) reciting materials, 5) setting timetables, 6) executing some hobbies, 7) utilizing additional apps, and 8) using internet packages available.

Theme 1: Consulting to dictionary for word meaning and pronunciation

The first strategy was to consult a dictionary. The student's strategy for overcoming pronunciation difficulties was to consult an internet-based dictionary. The learners used their mobile devices to access an online dictionary to ensure the appropriate pronunciation of difficult words. Moreno commented:

“Whenever I encountered difficulties with pronunciation, I would consult a dictionary to determine what was the correct pronunciation.” (Moreno)

Theme 2: Surfing the resources

The second activity was surfing the resources. The student's strategy for overcoming misreading resources was searching for information on the Internet. Learners not only used blog websites like Brainly.com and Kampung Inggris.com to search for topics they were unfamiliar with, but they also accessed the internet to finish the required tasks. Joan commented as follows:

“To clarify material miscommunication, I frequently browse relevant material.” (Joan)

Theme 3: Consulting with friends and family

The third option was to consult with friends and family. Students' strategies for overcoming misreading materials included consulting friends and family. The learners were either nervous or unwilling to ask their instructor about the difficult

materials. They felt more confident discussing with their friends and family. Dian explained it as follows:

"It is more comfortable to ask my friends when I am confused with the materials and assignments" (Dian)

Theme 4: Revisiting the course material

The fourth strategy was revisiting the course material. The students' strategy for dealing with unclear materials was to reread them. Revisiting the course materials can assist students in discovering the keyword from the instructor's explanation and acquiring a deeper understanding of the course materials. Mira explained it as follows:

"In order to comprehend the subject matter, I also reviewed the material that the instructor had provided rather than simply browsing it." (Mira)

Theme 5: Setting up timetables

The fifth task was to set up timetables. Setting timetables was the learners' strategy for overcoming the difficulty of time management during online learning. When participating in online learning, the students created a timetable to organize their daily routines. It was reported by Brian.

"Problems with time management that emerge during online education can be resolved through the setting up of a schedule." (Brian)

Theme 6: Engaging in some hobbies

The sixth activity was engaging in some hobbies. To combat lack of motivation and boredom during online learning, students engaged in hobbies like playing video games and streaming YouTube videos. It improves their emotional state and enthusiasm to learn more effectively than before. Mira reported her voice as follows:

"I usually engage in a hobby while enrolled in an online course; examples include drawing, writing something or watching YouTube videos." (Mira)

Theme 7: Utilizing additional applications

The seventh activity was utilizing additional applications. In order to solve the challenge associated with submitting tasks in the context of online learning, the students turned to utilizing alternative applications. Due to the limited capacity of Google Drive for videos, the students uploaded their video tasks using alternative applications like YouTube. Joan described it as follows:

"Video task submission was problematic due to the limited storage space. Finally, I utilize a solution-sending platform, such as YouTube." (Joan)

Theme 8: Using internet packages available

The eighth strategy was the use of internet packages available. Using internet packages was the learners' strategy for overcoming technical issues like internet access and signals during online learning. They used internet service

packages to maintain participation in online learning. In a virtual class, slow connectivity to the internet and an inadequate signal are prevalent occurrences. Here's a comment from Andi.

"Wi-Fi was sometimes inconsistent at times while attending online classes." I utilized my data connection quotas in order to continue participating in the online classes." (Andi)

O'Malley and Chamot identified three fundamental types of strategies. To begin, meta-cognitive strategies encompass learners' actions when discovering strategies for learning. Second, learners employ cognitive strategies to comprehend what is spoken and acquire information. The final socio-affective strategies are adopted by learners to gain insight into the particular topic by communicating with peers and asking questions (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995). Meta-cognitive strategies include activities such as activities of interest, utilizing other applications, and using internet packages. The cognitive strategies of consulting to dictionary, surfing course content, reviewing materials, and setting timetables are classified, whereas the socio-affective strategies of questioning relatives and close friends are classified.

In addition, the findings presented previously were consistent with Oxford's theory. She classifies strategies for learning into six broad categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). To begin, memory strategies assist learners with preserving and accessing information. Second, cognitive strategies allow learners to comprehend and construct new language. Third, compensation strategies enable students to converse in their native language. Fourth, meta-cognitive strategies enable students to take control of their learning by organizing, planning, and evaluating it. Fifth, effective strategies assist students in exercising authority over their emotions, attitudes, motivation, and values. Finally, social strategies assist students in interacting with others.

Memory strategies include repetition of content. During online instruction, students recall vocabulary as well as knowledge presented by their instructor. Cognitive strategies include surfing the content and verifying the content. Internet access provided learners with new knowledge for learning English. Setting plans is classified as a metacognitive strategy. During online learning, the students organize and arrange their timetables in order to take authority over their educational activities. Interests are classified as an effective strategy. Interests can help students increase their motivation and emotions while learning online. Inquiring with relatives and close friends is classified as a social strategy. Students ask family and close friends to help to comprehend the content (Oxford, 1990).

In response to the results, learners engaged alternative applications and internet service providers as solutions to the technical issues they encountered during online learning. The students opted for the strategies as substitutes in the context of online instruction. The alternative can be a solution to help them stay online in an online course. This finding is consistent with the previous study, the teacher facilitated the learners with another low-cost application through WhatsApp as Zoom was less effective in a virtual classroom (Setiani, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The internal factors causing EFL learners to struggle with online learning were classified into three types. Intelligence was the first category. The students experienced difficulties with pronunciation, grasping the concepts, grammar rules, as well as listening comprehension. The second category was curiosity. The students were confused by what was provided and experienced difficulties completing their tasks. Motivation was the final category. During online learning, the learners felt unmotivated and uninterested.

The external factors that contributed to EFL students' struggles with online learning included technology and pedagogical e-learning. Consulting a dictionary, searching the resources, questioning peers, reviewing materials, and arranging timetables were the strategies used by learners of EFL to overcome the internal causes of their difficulties in online learning. Furthermore, the strategies for overcoming the external factors of students' struggles in online learning included using different applications for submitting tasks as well as internet service providers to tackle technical issues such as inadequate connectivity.

The present research had several limitations, it only recruited ten participants from one school (vocational high school), and it was limited to observational data and semi-structured interviews. Further studies need to investigate a similar topic in looking at the problems of EFL students and solutions to those problems with a more in-depth investigation by employing quantitative or mixed-method research approaches. More research can be done at the university level and on more specific skills, such as writing or speaking so that all of the students' problems with English skills can be investigated.

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