EFL Students' Barriers to Online Learning during the Covid-19 Outbreak

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Abstract: This study aims to find out the barriers faced by the second and the third grade students at SMPN 2 Wawo during pandemic. This study belongs to descriptive qualitative research with case study method. This study involved 68 students consisting of 4 classes and also two English teachers as the subjects. The open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the students, while the structured interview was conducted with the English teachers to collect the data. Based on the research findings collected through questionnaires and interview, there are five categories of barriers faced by the students in English online learning during pandemic as follows: (a) bad internet connection and lack of access to gadgets, (b) inability to operate online learning applications, (c) lack of financial support to afford internet quotas, (d) students' low motivation and (d) lack of understanding of the subject matters. The statement with the highest percentage is lack of understanding of the subject matter, i.e., 70.29%, and the lowest one is bad internet network and lack of supported facilities, i.e., 53%. By acknowledging and addressing these barriers, educational institutions can develop strategies and policies to enhance the quality of online learning experiences for EFL students.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, students' barriers, online learning

INTRODUCTION

English is an international language. It still becomes the most renowned foreign language in Indonesian schools. It is widely recognized that English is important for Indonesian people as their foreign language and it has been one of the main subjects in Indonesian schools. There could be as many as a billion students learning English around the world at this time. It has been officially taught in Indonesian secondary schools since a long time (Jayanti & Norahmi, 2014).

However, teaching and learning activities do not always run well. Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghabyesus officially stated that the Covid-19 had become a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Mulyanti, et.al., 2020). Due to this case, the Indonesian government declared the closure of all public places including schools to reduce the impact of the spread of the Coronavirus.

However, Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Makarim responded to the government's decision by issuing a new learning policy namely learning from home as outlined in Circular Letter No. 4/2020 on March 24, 2020, regarding studying and learning processes during the spread of the Covid-19. Learning from home is implemented with an online learning system. According to Allen and Seamen (2007), online learning is a learning system without face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. This learning policy permits teaching and learning process still can continue although the teachers and students do not meet at school directly. The teachers and students can continue the teaching and learning process even though they are in different places.

There are many applications and online platforms which can be used to support this learning system, such as whatsapp, telegram, zoom meeting, google meet, google classroom, edmodo, etc. The main devices such as computer, laptop, or android are needed to connect to the internet network to support this online learning approach. However, the online learning system has several difficulties and problems, especially for students at SMPN 2 Wawo who learn

English as a foreign language. Based on the interview result of one of the teachers at SMPN 2 Wawo in the preliminary research, the teacher explained that this online learning system has never been implemented before for learning English at SMPN 2 Wawo. Because of the limited time to prepare for learning, many problems happened to students at SMPN 2 Wawo who have limited knowledge of online learning. The emergence of Coronavirus adds to the problems they have to face in learning English. A study conducted by Ahmad (2016) found a phenomenon that EFL learning, which requires a lot of practice for its application, also experiences obstacles when the learning system is applied. In the listening session, students cannot maximally achieve the materials because they are in distant places with their teachers, and it is often ineffective. In a speaking course with online learning, students face problems in imitating the way of speaking that is exemplified by their teachers. Another problem is the students are faced with the lack of supporting facilities such as a computer or android devices.

English as a foreign language means that English is only used in the classroom. As soon as the students are out of the classroom, they no longer learn and use English as intensively as when they are in the classroom. Students who use English as their foreign language have limited access to learn it outside of the classroom. They do not receive sufficient English stimulants as much as learners who live in an English-speaking country or use English as a second language.

Dhull and Sakshi (2017) state that online learning encompasses a range of technologies such as the worldwide web, email, chat, new groups and texts, audio and video conferencing delivered over computer networks to impart education. Online learning is ordinary learning that is carried out online, so that the principles of learning that are carried out normally and conventionally still apply (Belawati, 2019). Carliner (1999) defines online learning as educational material presented on a computer. Online learning must be supported by the existence of a Learning Management System (LMS) which is in charge of integrating all learning processes in an integrative manner, starting from the curriculum, materials,

processes, and evaluation (Aydin & Tirkes, 2010). Belawati (2019) also states that online learning is not enough to simply transfer teaching material directly into material that is delivered online, but one of the most important things in online learning is how teachers can interact with their students, through appropriate and effective learning instructions so that the learning process itself can run well, and the defined learning outcome can be achieved and owned by students.

According to Oakley (2000), online learning is a technology-based learning process that can develop students' knowledge and skills. Zhao (2003) stated that online learning is a distance learning process without face to face. Online learning is a new technique that is used in teaching and learning process and can be done wherever and whenever the online class process. However, online learning must be supported by technological means such as computer, laptop, internet network, applications, etc. Riyana (2019) stated that online learning is very different from conventional learning. Online learning emphasizes students to be more focused and observant when receiving and processing the information that is presented online. Therefore, online learning requires students and teachers who can utilize the technology well in operating, interacting or communicating in online classes so that online learning can take place properly and effectively. However, the majority of students who take online learning are difficult to be directed to focus on online learning at this time, because most of them are social media users. Their focus is shifted by social media and the becomes a problems, obstacles or barriers for students in English online learning. There are many types and models of online learning, as long as the teachers can apply the principles of online learning well. According to Hardjito (2002), there are three types or form of online learning, namely: Web course, web-centric course, and web-enhanced course. While, Sahin & Shelley (2020) describe two online learning models, those are synchronous and asynchronous learning.

There are advantages and disadvantages of online learning. According to Sudjana (2005:253), the advantages of online learning are providing flexibility, interactivity, speed, and visualization through the advantages of each media. Tjokro (2009:187) describes the advantages of online learning as follows: (1) It is easier to understand because it employs multimedia tools such as images, text, animation, sound, and videos, (2) much more effective in cost, meaning that there is no need for an instructor, no need for a minimum audience, anywhere, and so on, and (3) it is much more concise, in the sense that it does not include a lot of class formalities, and it jumps right into subjects that are relevant to the needs. According to Arkorfu (2014), these are several disadvantages of online learning: (1) Online learning can make students experience contemplation, isolation, and lack of interaction between students and teachers, (2) online learning method may be less effective than traditional learning methods, (3) students may have good knowledge in academic, but they may not have good skills need to pass on the knowledge they have acquired to others, (4) teachers cannot know the actual abilities and development of their students, (5) online learning may also be led to piracy and plagiarism caused by inadequate selection skills, and ease of copying and pasting, (6) online learning also exacerbates the role of socializing the way of institutions and also the teachers' method as instructors, (7) online learning does not guarantee that all fields or disciplines

can use and master its techniques in education, and (8) online learning can also cause bottlenecks or heavy usage of some websites because many are accessing and using it.

According to Efriana (2021), there are several common or potential problems faced by the students during online learning as follows: (1) The understanding on the subject materials, (2) some students do not have devices such as gadgets or computer as online learning media, if any, they belong to their parents, (3) some students are less enthusiastic to participate in online learning even though they are supported by adequate facilities, such as computers, androids, and the availability of an internet network, (4) A number of students do not have internet access.

According to Rovai (2002), online learning barriers is the difficulties encountered by students in the online learning environment, such as feelings of isolation, lack of self-discipline, and challenges in managing time effectively. Moore et al. (2011) describe online learning barriers as the factors that impede the successful completion of online courses, including technological difficulties, limited access to resources, and the need for self-regulation and time management skills. While, Al-Fraihat et al. (2020) define online learning barriers as the challenges and obstacles specific to the online learning environment, including technological issues (e.g., poor internet connection, lack of digital literacy), social isolation, and limited interaction with instructors and peers. Researchers have discussed about different barriers to online learning. Muilenburg and Berge (2005) suggested that students' barriers to online learning include time interruptions, lack of motivation to use, infrastructure, perceived skills, technical and social skills. Roger (2000) suggested that the barriers to online learning can be classified as internal and external barriers. Internal barriers are connected to technological competence, whereas external barriers are determined by quality of support, lack of instructional support and technology (availability and accessibility). According to the opinion of Garland (1993) the barriers that affect students' diligence in the learning process are divided into four others: (1) situational, (2) institutional, (3) disposition, and (4) epistemologist.

RESEARCH METHOD

According to Creswell (2012:3), research design is plans and procedures for research to detail methods of data collection and analysis. The kind of this research is descriptive qualitative with case study method. The descriptive qualitative research is commonly to describe phenomenon that occurs in the natural setting. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), qualitative methods are research procedures that produce qualitative descriptive data in the form of written and spoken word from people and observed behavior. In addition, Arikunto (2005) states that descriptive research is research that aims to describe a fact about a variable, symptom, or situation. Descriptive research does not aim to test hypothesis, but to find theories in the field. Qualitative research deals with data that are in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers and statistics (Ary, 2010:424). This study focused on investigating EFL students' barriers in English online learning. It is related to the objective of this research which is to find out the students' barriers to online learning during the Covid-19 outbreak by distributing the questionnaire to the students and conduct the interview with two English teachers

to collect the data. The data that had been obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed by using a simple percentage formula below:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:
P : percentage of students' barriers in English online learning
F : the number of frequencies of the respondent's answer
N : the number of respondents

After that, the data were arranged in the form of table and divided into two categories of percentage; agree and disagree. While, the data that obtained from interview will be analyzed through three procedures. Miles, et.al. (2014) describe that the activity in data analysis consists of three procedures as follows: (a) Data reduction, (b) data analysis, and (c) verification/conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Valid percentage of each statement about the students' barriers to online learning during pandemic were presented on the Table below:

No.	Statements	Agree	Disagree
1.	Bad internet network and lack of supported facilities	53 %	47 %
2.	Inability in operating online learning applications	64.71 %	35.29%
3.	Lack of financial support	68.38%	31.62%
4.	Students' low motivation	53.78%	46.22%
5.	Lack of understanding of the subject matter	70.29%	29.71%

First of all, the internet connection is one of the big problems in conducting online class. It is supported by Table above that there are 53% students experienced with bad internet connection and were not supported by adequate online learning facilities. Based on the interview result, the teachers stated that online learning is not optimally carried out because the signal and network connection in their village is not stable (went up and down). It is difficult to access the subject matter delivered through online because the students are in poor network area, so the online learning cannot run smoothly. The second problem of this aspect relied on the lack of supported devices such as laptop, computer or android. Not all of students have their own gadget to support in participating in online learning.

T1: "Online learning was not going well due to several barriers that faced by the students. Not all students have gadget, and the internet network is also not good enough here."

T2: "...they do not have gadgets and also the network is unstable."

The second problem is the lack of ability in mastery online learning applications. Based on Table above, there are 64.71% students are not optimum in participating in English online class because they are uncapable in operating online learning applications. Based on the interview result, the teachers stated that the students are not able to operate or use other applications except WhatsApp.

T1: "...there are several applications that one provided by Google, such as Google Classroom, but it cannot be used because the students rarely use these applications."

T2: "...sometimes I use Google Classroom, but it was not optimal because our students have not been able to use it..."

The next problem of this aspect relied on the internet data. Based on Table above, 68.38% students experienced with the lack of internet quota. Based on the interview result that conducted with their English teachers, students are difficulty in getting internet quota. The teacher stated that the students get a package of internet data that distributed by Indonesian government, but it is not optimally used because the lack of control of their parents. Sometimes they use it to play online games. In addition, most of students come from underprivileged families. They have difficulty in getting internet quota because of unsupported financial condition of their parents. Consequently, the students infrequently joined the online class and rarely submitted their assignments.

T2: "The students cannot afford internet quota. They got the internet package from the government, but it was not optimally used, it was limited to use. Most of their parents work as farmers."

Another problem is less enthusiastic. There are 53.78% students were not enthusiastic in participating in online class. In their opinion, online learning is not interesting, difficult and boring. Based on the interview result, the teacher explained that students are less active in online learning than during face-to-face learning.

T1: "The students' attendance rate has significant difference. It was 90-100% before online learning, and there are only 20-30% students can attend the online class."

The last problem relied on the students' difficulty in understanding the subject matter given by their teachers during online class. There are 70.29% students have difficulty in understanding the learning steps, lesson and assignments during online learning and it has been the statement with the highest percentage. Based on the interview result, the teachers only gave or sent the materials and assignments without giving any clear explanation. Therefore, the students are not independent and only relied on the internet access in doing the tasks and assignments.

T2: "I think that online learning is not effective. There are many barriers. When I conducted online class as an English teacher, sometimes I felt stressed because English really has to be taught intensively to our students here. In terms of students' insight and knowledge, learning resources such as books, then the literacy is still minimal because the lack of students' desire to make progress."

Finally, it can be concluded that barriers faced by students at SMPN 2 Wawo during online learning can be categorized into five categories. They are: bad internet network and lack of supported facilities, inability in operating the applications, lack of financial support, and students' low motivation and lack of understanding of the subject matter. On the table above, the statement that has the highest percentage is lack of understanding of the subject matter, and the lowest one is bad internet network and lack of supported facilities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the barriers faced by EFL students at SMPN 2 Wawo during online learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal five categories of barriers are as follows: (a) bad internet connection and lack of access to gadgets, (b) inability to operate online learning applications, (c) lack of financial support to afford internet quotas, and (d) students' low motivation and (e) lack of understanding of the subject matter.

The students faced challenges with internet connectivity and the availability of necessary devices, hindering their participation and smooth progress in online classes. Insufficient proficiency in operating online learning applications further affected their learning experience. Financial constraints limited their access to internet quotas, resulting in infrequent participation and assignment submissions. Additionally, students exhibited lower motivation levels and encountered difficulties in comprehending the subject matter due to perceived lack of interest and inadequate explanations during online classes.

These findings underscore the need for interventions to address these barriers effectively. Providing stable internet connectivity, ensuring access to devices, offering training in utilizing online learning applications, and extending financial support to students can significantly alleviate the challenges they face. Moreover, designing engaging and interactive online classes with clear explanations can enhance students' motivation and understanding of the subject matter.

By acknowledging and addressing these barriers, educational institutions can develop strategies and policies to enhance the quality of online learning experiences for EFL students. These insights contribute to the ongoing efforts in overcoming the obstacles associated with remote education and ensuring the delivery of quality education during challenging circumstances.

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