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Voices of Indonesian EFL Learners on Synchronous Learning amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

To ensure that the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic runs smoothly, all universities in Indonesia have implemented online learning. However, based on the observations made, online learning, especially when carried out synchronously, appears to still be not as optimal as offline learning. This study aims to find out the voices of Indonesian EFL learners on synchronous learning during the covid-19 pandemic. Designed as descriptive qualitative, this study examined 50 students who voluntarily participated as the sampled group. In collecting the data, the researchers used a self-written reflection and questionnaire with four scales that were distributed using Google Form to the participants. The questionnaire was related to respectful attitude, benefits, and obstacles of synchronous learning. All collected data was then analyzed using the sequential explanatory processes. The result of data analysis revealed that Indonesia EFL learners still showed a good respectful attitude during the synchronous learning process, although they agreed that learning synchronously faces a few obstacles, such as unsupported devices and unfavorable learning environments. In addition, they also feel that the teaching and learning process synchronously during the COVID-19 pandemic provided them with several benefits, especially those related to safety, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Keywords: EFL learners; synchronous learning; COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Since the first case of Coronavirus Virus 2019 (COVID-19) was announced by President of Indonesia Joko Widodo in early March 2020, Indonesia has faced an unprecedented pandemic era. Many sectors of life are paralyzed, including the education sector. Here, enforcement of physical distancing makes things difficult for students during teaching and learning activities. Restrictions on physical gatherings, both at school, on campus, and in other places are felt to have become obstacles in the learning process (Bhamani et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020). Here, the government is obliged to find solutions for the continuity of education so that the learning process does not cease.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the health and safety of students, teachers, and education personnel are of utmost importance. Therefore, to suppress the spread of COVID-19, teaching and learning activities no longer take place face-to-face in schools, but through distance learning. During this pandemic, an online system of learning is conducted as an alternative way; therefore, all educational levels adopted various kinds of teaching-learning methods, one of which is e-learning.

E-learning plays a crucial role during this COVID-19 pandemic. E-learning systems can assist learning providers to manage, plan, deliver and track the learning and teaching process. It aims to help instructors, schools, and universities facilitate student learning during periods of universities and school outbreaks. In addition, most of these systems are free, which can help ensure continuous learning during this Coronavirus pandemic.

However, the provision and usage of online learning materials in an e-learning system is becoming the fundamental challenge for many universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The e-learning system is an important source of information, given its ubiquity, low cost, ease of use, and interactive character (Almaiah et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018). Al-Khalifa (2010) and Dalsgaard (2006) mentioned that one approach to e-learning is the use of the learning management system (LMS). Thus, e-learning refers to offering, organizing and managing e-learning activities within a system, such as student enrolment, exams, assignments, course descriptions, lesson plans, messages, syllabus, and basic course materials (Dalsgaard, 2006; Obiakor et al., 2021). The e-

learning system has several fantastic features that would be valuable for use during this Coronavirus pandemic. Using this system at this time might well be more practical; for example, through an e-learning system, students may text or engage in some learning activity with teachers on a computer or a mobile device from their home. In addition, students can easily get learning content in their mobile devices because they can be connected to mobile networks or local wireless networks. Converting from traditional learning will enable learner's access to e-learning anytime and present several benefits, such as increase of effectiveness and efficiency of learning services through improved connectivity with teachers and better access to learning materials (Almaiah et al., 2020; Mikre, 2011).

During online learning, synchronous and asynchronous methods are two main approaches to teaching available in distance education. Synchronous types are recorded on a live e-learning system that requires lecturers and students at the same time to be at the computer, although in different places (Aldrich, 2009; Mikre, 2011; Welsh et al., 2003). Meanwhile, asynchronous e-learning goes on an e-learning system where learning material is readily available and accessed from anywhere and anytime (Negash & Wilcox, 2008; Welsh et al., 2003).

Synchronous learning is regular face-to-face learning online or in real-time (online) networks (Chen et al., 2005; Hrastinski, 2008; Ng, 2007). Synchronous learning, on the other hand, refers to learning/teaching that takes place simultaneously via an electronic mode. Synchronous voice or text chat rooms provide an opportunity for teacher-student and student-student interaction. Apart from chat, video-conferencing facilitates face-to-face communication (Hampel, 2006; Martin et al., 2012). Web conferences through surveys, polls, and question-answer sessions can be more interactive than video conferencing.

However, based on the results of the researchers' survey on online learning, especially that carried out synchronously, it has not been fully optimal because of some obstacles; for instance: (1) The location of the house is not covered by the internet network, including minimal student internet quotas, (2) The learning media used by the teachers is dominantly monotonous and makes the students feel bored or bored. Then, (3) the dominant learning is not yet interactive, (4) the

character or behavior of the students is difficult to monitor, (5) the learning tends to be online assignments, (6) the assignments given by the students pile up. Another obstacle, (7) the absorption of subject matter is very minimal.

As an attempt to close the observable research gaps, the present study examines how Indonesian EFL learners see the synchronous learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure the objectives, this study is guided under three research questions: (1) how is Indonesian EFL students' respectful attitude during synchronous learning? (2) What are the benefits for Indonesian EFL students provided by synchronous learning? And (3) what are the obstacles encountered by Indonesian EFL students in synchronous learning?

RESEARCH METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative research method to explore the research problem. Qualitative research is the appropriate method dominantly used for this study. The method concerns the comprehensive elaboration of the nature of the phenomenon. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research uses a scientific background and involves various methods such as interviews, observations, and documents. Qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups related to social problems, which is used to interpret, study, or gain a deeper understanding of certain aspects of beliefs, attitudes, or human behavior (Creswell et al., 2007)

Participants

There were 50 participants of Hamzanwadi University from three different semesters (second, fourth, and sixth) in the English department who voluntarily participated in this study. Those participants were taken through a purposive sampling technique (Balcázar et al., 2001; Gonçalves et al., 2012; Tobita, 1996). The participating students were available at the time this study was conducted and fitted the criteria of the research, such as being students of an English department and having experience in online learning activities.

Instruments and Data Collection

Because the data collection process was still in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the main instrument used was a questionnaire (Kim, 2020; König et

al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020). The questionnaire comprises 30 statements related to synchronous learning activities, especially attitudes, benefits, and obstacles.

Before collecting the data, first, the researchers constructed a questionnaire related to (1) respectful attitude, (2) the obstacles, and (3) the benefits of synchronous learning during the pandemic COVID-19. The questionnaire had four scales (Boateng et al., 2018; Suárez Álvarez et al., 2018; Taghrir et al., 2020). First, to see EFL learners' respectful attitude on synchronous learning, the researchers used a scale (never, seldom, often, always), while the researchers used a scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) to see the obstacles and benefits on synchronous learning. The questionnaire was also equipped with a comment space at the end of each item so the participants can write their reasons or feeling related to those three primary concerns of this study.

Participants were given the instrument between April and June 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced teaching and learning process to be conducted online. The instrument was disseminated on the Internet via a Google Form, with a link being shared via WhatsApp, Indonesia's common frequently used messenger application.

Data Analysis Procedures

In analyzing the data, the researchers took advantage of the features in the Google Form where the data collected through the questionnaire could be analyzed automatically using Google Form. The results of the analysis by Google Form are displayed and completed with a chart containing the number and percentage of each item. Here, the researchers only interpreted the results of the data analysis displayed by Google Form.

The data from self-written reflection, on the other hand, was examined using sequential explanatory processes (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). The data from a self-written reflection was first processed before being analyzed. Second, the data was categorized based on key themes that were expressed in the research questions, such as respectful attitude, benefit, and obstacles. Third, the researcher coded, reviewed, analyzed, and integrated the emergent themes, which led to the final data analysis results, which were then used as a

foundation for generating conclusions. To establish the validity and reliability of the study, the author asked two English language lecturers to do individual assessments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaires administered to the participants, every participant had an interesting perception towards synchronous learning during COVID-19. There are 8 participants (16%) and 6 participants (12%) who said never and seldom showed a respectful attitude during synchronous learning. Meanwhile, 13 (26%) and 23 (46%) participants said often and always showed a respectful attitude during synchronous learning. It can be concluded that most of the participants 36 (72%) showed a respectful attitude during synchronous learning. Figure 1 presents the summary of the participants' response.

Figure 1
Participants' Response on a Respectful Attitude
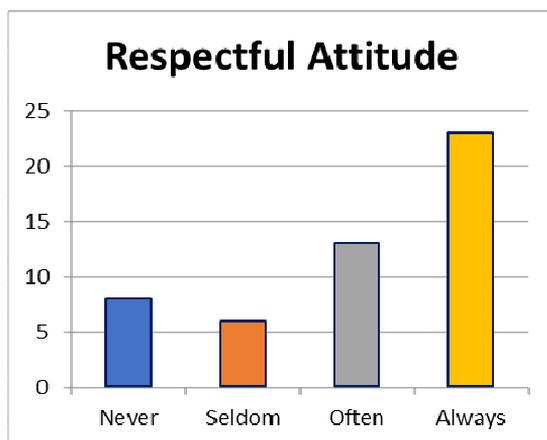
In terms of the benefits of synchronous learning activities, 9 (18%) and 12 (24%), respectively, strongly disagree and disagree that synchronous learning activities are advantageous to them. Despite this, 23 participants (46%) and 6 participants (12%) agree and strongly believe that learning through synchronous activities is useful to them. According to the data, 29 participants

(58%) believe that synchronous learning activities will help them cope during the COVID-19 epidemic. Figure 2 depicts a summary of the participants' responses.

Figure 2
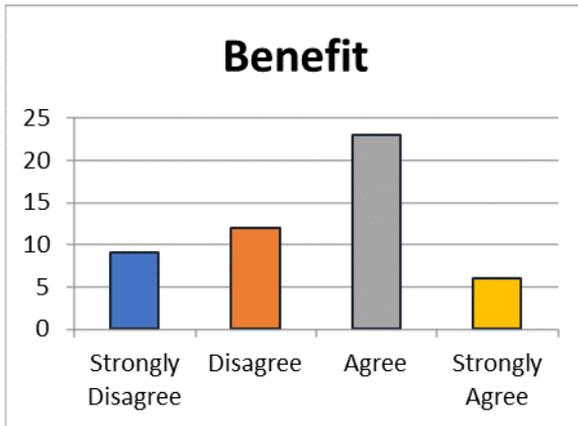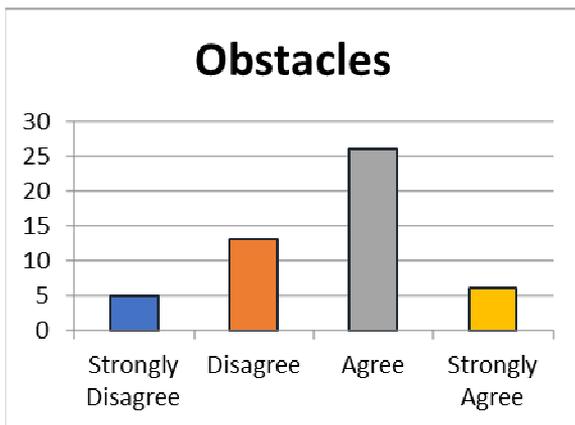*Participants' Response to the Benefit*

Figure 3
Participants' Responses on the Obstacles

Related to the obstacles encountered by the participants during synchronous learning activities, there are 5 participants (10%) and 13 participants (26%) who strongly disagree that synchronous learning brings obstacles. Yet, there are 26 participants (52%) and 6 participants (12%) who found some obstacles during synchronous learning. Based on the data, it can be concluded that 32 participants (64%) still encountered many obstacles in synchronous learning activities. Figure 3 presents the summary of the participants' responses.

In addition, to figure out more detail related to the students' responses on synchronous learning based on their semester level, Figure 4 shows student responses based on their semester to synchronous learning.

Figure 4
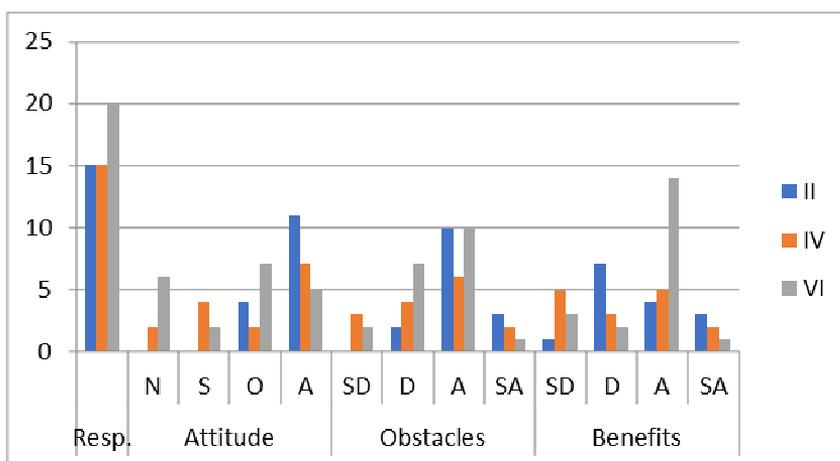*Participants' Responses Based on Semester Level*

Figure 4 depicts the participants' respectful attitudes during the synchronous learning process based on their semester level. Out of 15 participants in semester 2, all of them (100%) demonstrate their respectful attitude during the learning process. Meanwhile, six (40%) of the 15 participants in semester 4 did not demonstrate a respectful attitude during the teaching and learning activities synchronously. Yet, the remaining nine

participants (60%) maintained their respectful attitude. Similarly, of the 20 respondents in semester 6, eight (40%) did not demonstrate a respectful attitude, while 12 (60%) did.

In addition, based on the data in Figure 4, the benefits of synchronous learning were more felt by participants in semester six when it came to the benefits acquired through synchronous learning activities. The benefits of the synchronous learning process were felt by 15 of the 20 respondents (75%). Participants in semesters two and four, on the other hand, did not show a significant difference between those who benefited from synchronous learning and those who did not. This can be shown in the fact that both semester two and semester four participants have the same percentage, namely 8 participants (53.33%) do not experience the benefits, while 7 participants (46.67%) do.

While related to the obstacles encountered by the participants, Figure 4 shows that all participants in all levels of the semester mostly agree that teaching and learning activities through synchronous learning give them some obstacles. In this case, the difficulties encountered during synchronous learning were more significant for semester two participants. 13 (86.67%) of the 15 participants in semester two encountered numerous challenges during synchronous learning. Meanwhile, only 2 (13.33%) had no problems with the synchronous learning process. Participants in semester four felt the same way, with 8 (53.33%) of 15 participants reporting difficulties during the learning process, while 7 (46.67%) did not encounter any significant challenges during the learning process. In line with the percentage of semester four participants, the percentage of semester six students is also not particularly high in relation to the difficulties encountered during the synchronous learning process. Of the 20 participants, 11 (55%) experienced difficulties, while 9 (45%) believed that synchronous learning did not present significant difficulties.

DISCUSSION

The objectives of this study are to find out Indonesian EFL learners' views on synchronous learning activities during the covid-19 pandemic. This study focuses on EFL learners' respectful attitudes, benefits, and obstacles during

synchronous learning activities. Based on the results above, although the participants find many obstacles, they still showed their respectful attitudes during teaching and learning activities. Most of the students still have a respecful attitude because Hamzanwadi University has the slogan "Competitive and Religious." Despite the slogan, Hamzanwadi University internalizes respect and responsibility in forming students with character. It is a systematic effort in instilling role models whose orientation is to instill values in life, both in the form of ethics, aesthetics, culture, and religion, which in turn are in a person who can exercise self-control and becomes a complete person and has good character. The "religious" slogan drives the students to always show their respect and responsibility, even though they feel discomfort with what they do. Here, Nawali (2018) states that the values of respect and responsibility are part of religious spirituality and are highly emphasized in Islam. In addition, Lickona (2009) in his book regarding respect and responsibility strengthens the findings. He mentions about respect and responsibility that become the main part of character education and are built based on moral tendencies that become the benchmark of human behavior, where respect means showing good behavior towards self, others, and the environment. Being responsible, on the other hand, is responding and respecting every burden entrusted.

The participants' respectful attitude is also influenced by the attitude of the lecturer, where the lecturer always gives the best and motivates students to always be polite. The lecturers are also always serious in the online learning process as when they learn offline. Here, Furaida (2012) through her study confirmed the finding of this study that there was a significant relationship between the lecturer's personality, motivation, and student interest in learning. In this case, student learning achievement is mostly determined by the personality of the lecturer with a coefficient of determination of 16%, motivation 12.4%, interest in learning 0.81%, and the rest is determined by other factors. Other researchers also agreed that students' attitudes in the learning process are heavily influenced by the attitudes of lecturers (Haider & Jalal, 2018; Hidayati et al., 2020; Lumbantobing, 2020). That is, if the lecturer is polite, responsible, and professional, the students will also show the same thing. Conversely, if the lecturer carrying out his responsibilities and obligations unprofessionally, it will reduce student respect.

This then led to some students behaving disrespectfully when synchronous learning took place. This is based on the lecturers' badly scheduled classes. Online learning that has the principle of anywhere and anytime makes the lecturers sometimes conduct the lecturing at times that are not ideal for students, which discourages the students from activating the camera and actively participating during the learning process. This is also reinforced in research studies by Ahidin, (2020), Febrilia et al (2021), and Kartika (2020) where lecturers who often change class schedules make students on standby in a place conducive to conducting online lecturing, so they do not miss the material. This makes students feel frustrated and not respectful to the teaching and learning activities.

> In fact, I prefer to learn online. Lecturers, on the other hand, occasionally rearrange their schedules and hold lectures on the spur of the moment. As a result of my lack of preparation, I was unable to fully participate in the session. So, in order not to be suspected by the lecturers, I usually don't turn on the camera and audio when learning takes place. (P2)

> In my opinion, lecturers who arbitrarily change class schedules and order lectures are suddenly very disturbing. In addition, assignments given without clear instructions also make online learning less interesting. (P31)

It is undeniable that direct learning in the classroom is certainly much better than online learning. However, as stated before, during this COVID-19 pandemic, everyone's health and safety are of utmost importance; so physical distancing must be done, including the teaching and learning process. Based on the data shown in Figure 2, most Indonesian EFL learners agree that synchronous learning provides them with some benefits. This is because synchronous learning is practical and flexible. Throughout synchronous learning, interactions between teachers and students will be more practical because they do not have to travel to meet. The teaching and learning process can take place anywhere as long as it is conducive to learning and can help focus. Abidah et al. (2020) and Beyth-Marom et al. (2005) confirm the findings that learning occurs in a flexible manner in virtual classrooms. That is, once connected to the Internet network, the learning process can be done anywhere and at any time. Because of the flexibility available at this time, virtual classes are very popular among both students and teachers.

In addition, there is no classroom as a place for formal learning. There is no need for extras, such as the need to dress up neatly or appear formally, which shows more flexibility. Here, synchronous learning can reduce the spread of COVID-19 and provide effective learning solutions. (Chen et al., 2005; Park & Bonk, 2007)

> Online learning, in my opinion, is really advantageous to me. For starters, you can save money on boarding fees. Furthermore, online lectures require no preparation such as showering or dressing neatly; only appear neat and dress modestly, and lectures can be completed in bed. (P11)

> Become a student as well as an employee, online learning really helps me to carry out my duties both as a student and as an employee. So I can attend lectures on the sidelines of my activities without having to travel to go to campus. (P44)

In dealing with obstacles to synchronous learning, the participants from all levels of the semester still face some obstacles, as shown in Figure 4. What the students feel is that the device used for synchronous learning does not support it well. Taking part in synchronous learning, students must have devices such as computers, laptops, or smartphones that have good specifications and have a rather large screen for them to see the material clearly, and there are still many students who have fewer sopportive devices, such as smartphone screens, which are too small or not optimal in displaying pictures or materials during the learning process.

And yet, the students also feel disturbed by noise when studying at home. To be able to focus, offline and online learning methods are certainly very different, where offline learning focuses only on the classroom where all focus on the same topic, while online learning has many things that make students unfocused. For instance, the attitude of neighbors, the sound of the vehicle if the student's house being near the road and others so, and also many students don't wear or have headphones.

> When using a cellphone to learn online, you may be interrupted by an incoming call. Because the screen on my cellphone isn't very huge, I can't view the lecturer's PowerPoint presentation very well. (P23)

In fact, I prefer to learn online. Lecturers, on the other hand, occasionally rearrange their schedules and hold lectures on the spur of the moment. As a result of my lack of preparation, I was unable to fully participate in the session. (P16)

I think online learning is not effective because online learning needs good and stabil network. Beside, my house is close to the busy road, the noise of passing vehicles often makes the lecturer's explanation not clear. (P2)

Basically, learning online or offline is not too significantly different for me. However, it is difficult to condition the surrounding environment so that the learning atmosphere at home is conducive. This makes learning unfocused and difficult to catch the lecturer's explanation. (P38)

CONCLUSION

The current study examined the voices of Indonesian EFL learners in relation to how they behave during synchronous learning, what benefits they feel, and the obstacles they encountered during synchronous learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This current study revealed some interesting results. First, the EFL learners still show their respectful attitude, although synchronous learning activities give them unfavorable learning situations. Second, the practical and flexible synchronous learning make most of the participants feel that synchronous learning provides benefits for them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, most of the participants still encountered obstacles during synchronous learning activities—those related to device use, not conducive situations, and unstable networks.

In addition, the present study should be evaluated on the level of its limitations. First, the instruments used in this study are limited; only questionnaires and self-written reflections were used. Therefore, future studies in a similar area should be conducted with a focus on a variety of data instruments (e.g. observation, interview, and survey) in order to tease out more detailed data to substantiate the results of this study. Second, to enrich the data and avoid subjective opinions, future studies are encouraged to consider additional data sources, such as observation, field notes, and focus group discussions to elicit the most reliable data and accurately portray the nuances of the present inquiry.

Acknowledgments

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