

EFL Postgraduate Students' Perspectives towards Online Learning after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explain the EFL postgraduate students' perspectives towards online learning after the global emergency status for COVID-19 was declared over by the World Health Organization (WHO). This study is a case study research using a qualitative approach. The data from this study were taken from EFL postgraduate students from one of the universities in Semarang. Data collection techniques were carried out by means of in-depth interviews. The results of this study are useful for explaining students' perspectives of the conditions of online learning at the university after the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the results of this study explained how teaching and learning process in online learning occurred in online learning class. Finally, this study also explained the interactions occurred in the classroom during online learning. Different perspectives were found in this study. However, most of the students have positive perspectives on online learning class even though the global emergency status for COVID-19 pandemic was over. The results of this study can provide beneficial information for lecturers, students and educational stakeholders on how to provide effective online learning in Indonesia after COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: EFL Postgraduate students, Online Learning, Perspective

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide COVID-19 Pandemic is being caused by the pandemic of the Coronavirus Novel 2019 (2019-nCoV), which is still spreading and has caused the first global health crisis of the new millennium following the Spanish Flu Pandemic in 1918 (Hasanah et al., 2020). Global human life has been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has become a separate phenomenon that has changed the order of life in the world. In fact, this crisis has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Mahase, 2020). Then, the term, "new world order", appears in our lives. All fields were affected, including education. In the world of

education, the pandemic of COVID-19 required us to continue learning wherever, whenever and under any circumstances we were. Teachers and students were required to upgrade themselves and maximized all existing limitations to be able to learn.

Indonesia is one of the countries that has felt the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. All educational institutions were also closed and learning had to be done at home. Then, the term online learning became familiar in Indonesia. All teachers and students in Indonesia were forced to conduct online learning with all the limitations they had. This was because online learning was indeed a very timely solution when all activities outside the home were limited so that learning also had to be done from their respective homes. Therefore, online learning was the best solution at that time.

Online learning is considered as a newer learning way for the students. Online learning is learning that utilizes access to technology to get a learning experience from the teacher or lecturer even though teacher or lecturer and students are far from one another (Benson, 2002; Conrad, 2002; Carliner, 2004). Bates (2016) explains that online learning is a part of distance learning in which programs or courses are deliberately planned ahead to be presented entirely online. Here, he adds that the faculty will employ pedagogical strategies for teaching, exercise, assessment, and student contract that are special to learning in a virtual circumstance. Furthermore, Moore et. al. (2011) stated that the authors and researchers are unsure about the differentiations between distance learning, electronic learning and online learning. These three learning methods lead to one thing, namely when students and teachers cannot study in the same place. Therefore, Conrad (2002) and Benson (2002) state that online learning is the latest and improved version of distance learning. This learning utilizes technology as a tool to transfer knowledge from teachers or lecturers to students in different places. Online learning has become very popular since the emergence of COVID-19.

Many studies were then carried out by many researchers related to students' and teachers' perspectives on this online learning. Perspective itself is an internal process that people recognize when they select and organize external stimuli. According to Aw (2010), when a person's senses capture these stimuli, their feelings and thoughts will naturally affect these stimuli. Perspective is a certain point of view that is used to see a phenomenon or a way of looking at a problem that occurs (Martono, 2010). Not only looking at the situation, the learning perspective is a place where students learn, broaden their horizons, and become a new foundation for preparing for the

future. From a student perspective, student experience can help them broaden their insights and perspectives on the world of work.

Baber (2020) looked at how Indian and South Korean students felt about online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. He discovered that students had positive perceptions of elements of online learning such engagement, motivation, course design, instructor expertise, and facilitation. As a result, they felt that the learning outcome satisfied their needs.

On the other hand, Nambiar (2020) carried out an online survey to find out how instructors and students felt about taking online classes during Covid-19. The results demonstrate the necessity of timely, high-quality interactions between students and professors as well as the availability of technical assistance. The study also stressed the importance of developing a structured and user-friendly environment for online learning. The study's conclusion stressed the significance of providing teachers with proper technological training regarding how to run online classes.

In addition, Zboun and Farrah (2021) conducted a study which observed students' perspectives of online language learning during Corona pandemic in Hebron University, Palestine. The results of this study also revealed that students had difficulties with online learning and preferred in-person instruction. From their perspectives, the drawbacks of online learning outweigh the benefits. The biggest obstacles to online learning were bad internet access, poor engagement, low motivation, low participation, and low understanding. However, they found that online learning was simple to obtain, practical, and simple to review for tests.

Last but not least, Sujarwo et. al. (2020) analyzed University students' perspective on online learning in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. The study's results demonstrate that before the pandemic, pupils did not use internet learning because instruction took place in traditional classroom settings. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, students are enthusiastic in embracing online learning since it is flexible and accessible from anywhere. The most popular app among professors and students was WhatsApp. They came to the conclusion that, notwithstanding the covid-19 epidemic, the students' perspective on online learning had a favorable effect. However, now WHO has announced that the global emergency status of COVID-19 has ended (World Health Organization, 2023). Many schools and universities in Indonesia, and even the world, are again holding face-to-face learning. However, Universitas Negeri Semarang, especially for EFL Postgraduate students, still conducts online learning. It is

interesting to know how the perspective of EFL postgraduate students at Semarang State University views this even though the global emergency status of COVID-19 has ended.

Based on the review above, this study was conducted to explain EFL postgraduate students' perspectives towards online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was conducted to explain students' perspectives of the conditions of online learning at the university. Furthermore, this study aimed to explain how teaching and learning process in online learning occurred in online learning class. Finally, it also explained the interactions occurred in the classroom during online learning. Different perspectives were found in this study.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach. It applied a descriptive design since the goal of this research was to describe individuals' or groups' experiences with a specific event (Merriam, 1998). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with research subjects. According to Cohen et. al. (2011), in-depth interview is suitable for the study since it provides participants and researchers to learn about real experiences and different points of view. The interview was assisted by an interview protocol which contained general questions related to online learning which were given to postgraduate students after the global emergency of COVID-19 was declared over by WHO. Although this protocol was used, unstructured responses were used to allow participants to express certain feelings, opinions, situations or actions they had related to their online learning experience. The data were then qualitatively examined by describing the phenomena that emerged while the research was being conducted in the field. The subjects of this study were 2nd semester Postgraduate students of the Language Education study program, Postgraduate School, Universitas Negeri Semarang, which consisted of classes A and B. Fourteen students were randomly selected from both of the classes as research subjects.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two key themes emerged from the participants' in-depth interviews about their experiences participating in online learning after WHO proclaimed the worldwide emergency situation for COVID-19 to be over. The two key themes were online learning conditions and interaction in online learning class. The first key theme explained how teaching and learning process in online learning occurred in their class. The second key theme explained the interactions occurred in the

classroom during online learning. In the section that follows, each theme's findings are discussed.

Online Learning Conditions

In this theme, research subjects were asked several questions regarding the conditions of online learning in their class. There are several interview items that were asked on this theme, namely as follows.

- What devices or tools do you use for online learning?

Student A: *I usually use my laptop or smartphone.*

Student B: *I use laptop.*

Student C: *I use my mobile phone or laptop.*

The results of the interview said that most of them used their laptop or mobile phone to join online learning. These results are in accordance with research by Gamage and Perera (2021) which states that students preferred to use laptops and smartphones instead of other devices like desktops and tablets. Additionally, the results of this interview are also in accordance with a study conducted by Al Shammari (2021) which states students preferred to use their laptops when they are studying online. Comparatively to other devices, this research demonstrates that students are more aware of the functionalities given by laptops. The portability of a laptop is one of its key characteristics. Even Al Shammari (2021) argues that it is accurate to claim that other technologies, such as smartphones and tablets, also support mobility. However, a number of studies have shown that laptops offer students greater learning and engagement value when compared to smartphones and tablets, in addition to not being as disruptive or harmful as smartphones (Albó et al., 2019; Tossel et al., 2015; Al Shammari, 2021). However, laptops outperform these gadgets in terms of screen size, usability, and particularly as information gathering tools (Sage et al., 2020; Al Shammari, 2021).

- What applications are suitable for lecturers to use in teaching during online learning?

Student A: *I think Zoom and Google meet are suitable.*

Student D: *Zoom, Google Meet and Google classroom are suitable.*

Student M: *Zoom, WhatsApp, and Learning Management System (LMS) are suitable.*

Student N: *I think Zoom is suitable.*

The results of the interview for this question said that most of students prefer to use the *Zoom* platform than other platforms. Even though several other platforms are also mentioned,

such as *Google meet*, *Google Classroom*, and *WhatsApp*, *Zoom* remains the choice that research subjects almost always say. This is in line with Gamage and Perera (2021) which state that *Zoom* is preferred over other platforms such as *Google Meet*, *Blackboard* and *MS Teams*. There are some reasons to choose *Zoom*. Jacques et. al. (2020) explained that why many students preferred to use *Zoom* over other platforms because of its ease of use and accessibility. This also fits with the fact that graduate students always use *Zoom* as their platform when they have classes. However, some platforms are also used as support when they get assignments and have to submit assignments. Those platforms are *WhatsApp* and LMS from campus.

- What obstacles do you face when you have online learning class?

Student C: *My obstacles are bad network and limited internet data plan.*

Student E: *My obstacles are unstable internet connection, less effective use of mobile phone when it is compared to using a laptop/computer, sometimes online learning requires the completion of more assignments.*

Student G: *Students lack concentration and difficult to control.*

Student H: *My obstacle is unstable internet connection.*

Student I: *My obstacles are internet connection and device availability.*

Student M: *My obstacles are internet connection and internet data plan.*

From the results of this interview, it can be seen that many students have problems with bad internet networks. This result is in accordance with the results of several previous studies (Anggraeni & Pentury, 2020; Maryansyah, 2021; Kurniawan, 2021; Raharjo, 2021; Ikhsanudin, 2021; Anggaira, 2021; Anaktototy, 2021; Nuhasanah, 2021; Nurcholis, 2021; Rullyanti, 2021; Huda, 2021; Angraini, 2021; Zboun & Farah, 2021) which states that many students have problems with bad networks, especially those who are in remote areas. The quality of the internet network in small cities in Indonesia is different from the quality of the internet in big cities. This is due to the uneven development of infrastructure in Indonesia so that they have connectivity problems. In addition, since all courses were held online, many students had a lack of internet quota (Sudarwita, 2020; Maryansyah, 2021; Kurniawan, 2021; Anaktototy, 2021; Nurhasanah, 2021; Rullyanti, 2021; Nurcholis, 2021; Huda, 2021 ; Angraini, 2021). This also makes it difficult for students to concentrate and difficult to control.

- What do you think about learning online after the global emergency status for COVID-19 officially ends?

Student A: *I think it is less effective.*

Student C: *Studying online even though COVID-19 ended because it is considered quite practical and quite helpful.*

Student D: *It can still be implemented to support face-to-face meetings.*

Student E: *Online learning can still be continued, because it provides flexibility, especially for those who live outside the city of study or for those who are still working.*

Student L: *After the emergency was lifted, learning was more effective offline. However, it is possible that online lectures can still be held if the lecturer is unable to attend.*

Student M: *It is quite good because in this technological era, online learning has become a natural learning as another option when offline learning cannot be done.*

Based on the results of this interview, many students want to continue studying online as a support for offline learning. This is in accordance with Huang's study (2016) that mixing online and offline learning is preferred by students. Especially in this era of technological advances, the use of technology in the teaching and learning process is considered a necessity. Several research reports have stated that the use of learning technology in various education areas has been successfully applied even before the pandemic (Conrad, 2002; Benson, 2002; Vergara et al., 2017; Viegas et al., 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to integrate online and offline learning after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

- How is the learning process and absorption of online learning when the global emergency status for COVID-19 has been lifted by WHO?

Student A: *It is effective.*

Student C: *It runs well but students are required to have sufficient independence in participating in online teaching and learning activities.*

Student K: *It is still maximal like offline learning.*

Student L: *Many students do not understand the meaning of lecture material because of the lack of interaction in online learning.*

Student M: *Learning is quite effective as well as absorption of learning as long as we can condition a comfortable atmosphere during class.*

Student N: *Online learning is okay.*

Based on the interview results above, many students felt that the online learning process was going well. This is in line with Sujarwo et. al. (2020) who stated that students could still

absorb material well in online learning. Furthermore, Zheng et. al. (2021) also stated that pre-doctoral students got the same or better grades when they took online learning. However, some students also stated that online learning was ineffective and had to be reduced. This is also in accordance with a study conducted by Sudarwita (2020) which stated that 80% of students said that online learning was not effective and there were only 20% of students who said that online learning was effective. From this, it can be concluded that online learning can be as effective or even more effective than offline learning if these students can condition a comfortable atmosphere during class so that they can stay focused on the material presented.

- What are your expectations regarding the learning model after the global emergency status for COVID-19 has been lifted by WHO?

Student A: *I hope there will a learning model that is more intensive and effective.*

Student D: *I hope blended learning model can be used.*

Student E: *Online learning is still my hope in learning even though the emergency status of COVID-19 has been lifted.*

Student F: *We need new stimulus to improve the quality education in Indonesia.*

Student G: *We need new innovation.*

Student I: *I hope we can have offline learning.*

Student L: *Blended learning or Hybrid learning, because in the era of the industrial revolution 4.0, online learning is still considered a quite effective distance learning solution for friends who cannot attend campus due to the distance between home and campus which is quite far.*

Based on the results of this interview, many students hope that there will be new innovations to improve the quality of education in the modern era like today. Blended learning and hybrid learning are said to be a new learning model after the global emergency status for COVID-19 has been lifted by WHO. This is in accordance with Huang (2016) which states that students prefer blended learning because they can integrate online learning and offline learning. Furthermore, the study states that online learning is very useful for listening learning and offline learning is very useful for promoting learning world knowledge and helping to increase learner interest in learning English. However, there is a student who wants to return to offline learning after the global emergency status for the COVID-19 pandemic is lifted. This is also in accordance with a study conducted by Sujarwo et. al. (2021) which states that students hope to

be able to study offline after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. They think that offline learning is better than online learning. From this, it can be concluded that a new, more effective learning model needs to be developed in today's modern era. Therefore, mixed learning and hybrid learning can be a solution.

- In your opinion, which is better between face-to-face learning, online learning or blended learning when the global emergency status for COVID-19 has been lifted by WHO?

Student A: *Blended learning can be categorized as a middle way and can be considered as a new civilization in the teaching and learning process.*

Student B: *Blended learning is the best.*

Student D: *For the postgraduate level, it seems that online learning can still be continued.*

Student F: *Face to face is the best.*

Student H: *Face to face learning is the most effective model.*

Student J: *I think blended learning so that it can integrate both of offline learning and online learning.*

Based on the results of interviews on this question, the answers from each student varied. There were eight students who agreed to hold mixed learning when the global emergency status for COVID-19 has been lifted by WHO. Then, there were three students who said that offline learning was more effective. However, there are two students who want to continue studying online. Finally, there was one student who said that the learning model could be adjusted according to the agreement between the student and the lecturer. From here, blended learning is the most popular choice as a solution for integrating online learning and offline learning in this era of technological advances. This is considered important to balance the advantages and disadvantages of online and offline learning. This is in accordance with the results of a study by Huang (2016) which states that blended learning can integrate online learning and offline learning. This is so that they can complement each other.

Interaction in Online Learning Class

In this theme, research subjects were asked several questions regarding the interaction occurred in online learning class. There are several interview items that were asked on this theme, namely as follows.

- How is the interaction with classmates during online learning?

Student E: *As long as learning still uses the discussion method, interaction with classmates can still be established, plus group assignments that provide space for interaction at least with group mates.*

Student F: *It is very less due to lack of emotional closeness because there is no direct conversation.*

Student G: *They are inactive and communicate very little.*

Student K: *It is limited because they did not directly meet for discussion.*

Student L: *There is less interaction because when online learning is over, most of the time there is no interaction with fellow friends. It's different from offline lectures where after the lecture is over students still interact a lot with friends to discuss assignments, group work, or just chat.*

Student M: *It is quite limited, only giving 1 question and occasionally responding to questions from other friends due to limited interaction between classmates.*

Student C: *Good. Although sometimes awkwardness occurs.*

Based on the data from these interviews, many students said that they had limited opportunities to interact with their classmates. This is in line with some previous studies (Adijaya & Santosa, 2018); Sulistyawati, 2020; Al-Mawee et. al., 2021) which states that online learning or distance learning provides less interaction with classmates. Furthermore, Hadisi and Muna (2015) lack of interaction between students causing a lack of close relationships between friends. This can happen because online learning requires good turn-taking in communicating. Communication in online class will be very disturbed if there are several students who speak simultaneously. Then it is also a bit difficult to answer simultaneously because of the different networks. This also causes communication to not take place well between fellow students. However, one student said that they still communicated when they were working on group assignments. It is in line with Baber (2020) who mentioned that the students were flexible to communicate in online learning. However, a student also said that sometimes the awkwardness occurred because they were not used to interacting in class.

- How was your interaction with the teacher during online learning?

Student B: *It is enough.*

Student C: *So far so good, even though most of the interactions were represented by the leader of the class.*

Student E: *Interaction with lecturers can also be established with discussions in online classes and in WhatsApp group.*

Student G: *There are only few students who are active and the rests are passive.*

Student H: *It is good.*

Student J: *It is still as usual.*

Student K: *It is limited because they did not directly meet for discussion.*

Student L: *Less interaction too. After online learning is over, there are no interactions or discussions with co-workers.*

Student M: *Quite limited, because you can only occasionally ask.*

From the results of this interview, several students thought that online learning limited their interactions with their lecturers. This is in accordance with the results of several previous studies (Adijaya & Santosa, 2018); Sulistyawati, 2020; Nambiar, 2020; Al-Mawee et. al., 2021) which states that the interaction between students and teachers or lecturers is very limited in online learning or distance learning. However, some students argued that they could still communicate as usual with their lecturers. In fact, one student said that she could still communicate with the lecturers through online classes and chat on the WhatsApp group. It shows that online learning provides the flexibility to study anywhere and anytime (Sujarwo et al., 2020; Baber, 2020). Therefore, students can communicate with lecturers not only in online classes but they can communicate with other applications outside of online classes.

- How is your participation in class during online learning?

Student A: *Enough even though sometimes the signal is constrained.*

Student C: *I participate as much as possible. Although I do not always follow well because of personal limitations.*

Student E: *I Participate in presentation activities either as a presenter or as an audience, even though you are mostly a passive audience.*

Student F: *I am active in the class based on the policies and rules.*

Student H: *Good.*

Student K: *I am quite active by occasionally asking or responding to questions from lecturers or other friends.*

Student L: *I am quite active by asking friends who are presenting and helping answer questions from other friends.*

Based on the results of this interview, it seemed that students were trying to actively participate in online classes. They carried out presentations in front of other friends. Some of them were also active in asking friends who were presenting and providing assistance to answer questions from other friends. This is different from the results of a study from Sulistyawati (2020) which shows that students were not active in online classes. This is greatly influenced by the different levels of the students. Sulistyawati (2020) examined the perspectives of students at the senior high school level, while this study examines students at the doctoral level. It is still difficult for students at the high school level to become autonomous learners because they are still teenagers who are still unstable. Meanwhile, students at the doctoral level are very mature so they are more responsible for what they are doing.

- Are you motivated to complete the assignments given during online learning?

Student A: *I am less motivated.*

Student B: *I am very motivated.*

Student C: *Absolutely, I am motivated.*

Student I: *I am really motivated because it is part of my responsibility.*

Student M: *I am quite motivated because it is an obligation as a student.*

Based on the results of this interview, it can be seen that most students remain motivated to complete the assignments given by the lecturers because they felt that it was part of the obligations and responsibilities of their studies. It is different from the results of a study conducted by Sulistyawaty (2020) which shows that many students were not motivated to complete their assignments. It is absolutely caused by the different levels of students. It has been mentioned before that students at the doctoral level have more responsibility for the obligations given by their lecturers. It is different from what happened to students at the high school level. They still put aside the obligations that are their responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study show that students have different perspectives regarding implementing online learning after the COVID-19 emergency status was lifted by WHO. Regarding the theme of online learning conditions, all students have a positive perspective regarding the use of devices or tools and applications used during online learning. Almost all students prefer to use laptops compared to other devices or tools. Meanwhile, the Zoom platform

is becoming the most recognized and preferred platform to use during online learning. However, all students had problems as long as they took online learning, namely unstable network constraints and internet data plans.

Different perspectives were found in the continuity of online learning after the COVID-19 emergency status was lifted by WHO. Although almost all agreed that online learning should continue after the COVID-19 emergency status was lifted by WHO, some students chose to make online learning a supporting learning model for face-to-face learning. Some students argue that because online learning is less effective than face-to-face learning. However, in this technological era, a flexible learning model to study anywhere and anytime is needed. Regarding the absorption of learning material, many students think that they can still absorb the material provided by the lecturer. Although a few students stated that they did not understand the delivery of material provided by lecturers in online learning classes. Many students think that they need innovative new learning models that can be applied after the COVID-19 emergency status is lifted, namely by holding hybrid learning. Mixed learning or hybrid learning is considered as a solution to integrate online learning and offline learning.

Regarding the second theme, namely interaction in online learning class, different perspectives were also found in some of the interview questions. Many students thought that they had limited interaction between students and students and students and lecturers in online learning classes. However, few students stated that they could still interact well between students and students and students and lecturers in the online class. In fact, one of the students said she could take advantage of online learning to interact with lecturers outside the classroom via the *WhatsApp* group. Then, almost all students agreed that they remained active in online learning classes and were motivated to complete all of their assignments as a form of obligation and responsibility they had as EFL postgraduate students.

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