

Research Article

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New Trend in Education after COVID-19 Attack: EFL Higher Students' Experiences in Hybrid Environment in a Private University

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Abstract

After being attacked by COVID-19 a few years ago, Indonesia's education system has embraced a new trend which is the hybrid learning environment. It happens since traditional face-to-face teaching and learning were forbidden by the Indonesian government during COVID-19 pandemic. Alternatively, virtual teaching and learning were implemented. Interestingly, the habit of integrating technology in education continues after the pandemic by the implementation of hybrid learning and teaching environments. This qualitative research with a case study approach is aiming at exploring EFL higher students' experiences in a hybrid environment. Six students were taken by the researchers by applying purposive sampling to participate in this research. The main method of data collection is through open-ended interviews. This approach aims to provide a thorough understanding of the experience of EFL higher students in a hybrid environment following the pandemic. The interview data were recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and divided into several themes. Furthermore, a member checking was done by the researchers to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. This research reveals two main themes that highlight the benefits and drawbacks of a hybrid environment. Furthermore, suggestions and recommendations were offered to all related parties.

Keywords: Hybrid Environment, COVID-19, EFL Higher Students.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) infection in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 has rapidly spread around China and many other countries in the world [1], [2], [3]. This situation has driven the world into new ways of living. The rapid spread of the coronavirus has prompted governments around the world to enforce city-wide quarantines to protect the lives of their citizens.

Amidst the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, the government has prompted all its ministries to engage in work and educational activities remotely from home. In the context of education, the Indonesian Ministry of Education requested all their teachers and lecturers to teach from their own houses since teaching and learning processes in public spaces (schools and universities) were not yet allowed. Thus, all educators should therefore integrate their teaching and learning process with modern technology through online or e-learning by using either applications or websites.

Interestingly, even after the pandemic has ended, many educators continue to adopt the practice of incorporating technology in the classroom, particularly in a hybrid learning environment. The purpose of integration of technology in the process of teaching and learning was mainly because technology gives the accessibility of learning for everyone almost anywhere in the world in a more independent

way [4]. The integration of technology in online learning, basically, was not a new thing in the 21st era. Therefore, many studies have been conducted in order to know the effectiveness; advantages and disadvantages of them when taking into account in teaching and learning process [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [14]. To mention a few, a mixed-method study conducted by Hembrough, & Jordan [5] was trying to create the atmosphere of a digital writing classroom through portable computing devices and tablets to engage their coursework found positive findings. The study revealed tablet initiative generated a writing-intensive, student-centered, and giving new classroom experience.

Another study in the context of online learning has also been conducted by Ma'ruf, Fadilah, Basofi, & Akmal [6] who investigated English students' perceptions of using WhatsApp in paragraph writing class in a public university within qualitative inquiry. The study revealed positive perceptions among the students as there were many beneficial things in integrating WhatsApp in paragraph writing class such as the independence from time and location, perceived progress of vocabulary, and grammatical improvement. Furthermore, Ansari, & Tripathi [14] also conducted a study in the context of online learning to investigate the effectiveness of mobile learning apps in higher education in India. They revealed that mobile learning apps can be very useful in the higher education environment since the students had adequate knowledge and awareness to use mobile technology and the Internet in their educational environment.

Despite numerous studies on hybrid learning conducted by researchers in recent years, there is a lack of published research specifically focusing on Indonesian EFL higher students and their experiences in a hybrid learning environment. Analyzing EFL higher students' experiences in a hybrid environment is undauntedly important because technology has given more access for everyone to learn with its opportunities and challenges for future teaching and learning methodology [15]. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to investigate the experiences of Indonesian EFL higher education students in a hybrid learning setting. The purpose is to expand and enhance the research perspectives in the field of English teaching and learning in Indonesia.

2. Review of Related Literature

Hybrid Learning

Pesen [16] stated that to have an ideal approach as well as the strongest aspect of the classroom, out of the classroom, developing communication skills and knowledge in the teaching and learning process, hybrid learning must be implemented. Therefore, hybrid learning is where the lessons are taught in and out of the classroom. In other words, hybrid learning can be defined as teachers and students coming together virtually through digital platforms. To apply hybrid learning, one must begin with preparation. This involves analysing the competencies of the learners, as well as the learning context and content. Participants themselves ought to oversee the outcomes of the analysis by means of self-directed or autonomous web-based education.

To support the practices of hybrid learning, there is a need for using mobile applications to manage the distance teaching and learning process. These tools include Moodle, Google Docs, Zoom, Learning Management Systems, Youtube etc. As Juma'at and Tafsir [17] claim, mobile applications that promote learning are highly advantageous for students. This encourages a self-paced learning environment in which students can learn where they want and at any time. There are without doubt many applications built to support today's learning as a technology resource, such as the Zoom app, Google Classroom, Google Docs, etc. Therefore, in this field, researchers prioritize the integration of technology in classrooms through the utilization of the Zoom application for virtual presentations.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Technology in English Classroom

One of the crucial factors to improve educational quality in the learning process is the integration of technology [18]. This integration can be recognized by the improvement of the instructors' capabilities, educational structure, educational quality as well as teaching skills [19]. Further, the study conducted by Sung & Liu [20] interestingly reported that the use of mobile devices in education is more

likely preferred by students due to their accessible and portable use. The use of mobile devices has transformed the way people communicate, access, and give information [21]. Further, the growing accessibility and sophistication of educational technologies open up increasing possibilities for students to explore, share, and create content [22]. In addition, Balci [23] Stevenson & Liu [24] and Mills [25] stated some advantages of the integration of technology such as independence from time and location, vocabulary acquisition, offering the possibility to evaluate students' performance, improving the grammar, quality improvement and educational efficiency, and creating an interactive community for discussion.

However, there are still some disadvantages of the integration of technology in teaching and learning activities such as: 1. The issue of time management, 2. Lack of Students' ICT skills, 3. Institutional limitation in technical infrastructure, 4). Lack of interaction as well as the feeling of remoteness. 5). Less effective rather than traditional methodology with respect to giving clearer explanations. 6). Give a negative impact on the communication skills of the students. 7). Probability of plagiarism is higher. [6], [26].

3. Methods

Sample and Data Collection

The researchers employed the qualitative method to collect the data from multiple sources to gain precise information about EFL higher students' experiences in hybrid learning after the pandemic COVID-19. Furthermore, an individual semi-structured interview was the main data collection instrument to gather the data. As this was an exploratory study, an individual semi-structured interview was used as a prominent instrument. Through those techniques, the information on students' experiences in a hybrid environment was more precise. The participants were six (6) students selected as the sample of the study. They came from the English department, faculty of teacher training and education, in a private university in academic year 2021/2022. The samples were selected by a purposive sampling (non-random sampling) as a mandate that the samples' selection refers to a specific time, place, group, community, and person. As Creswell [27] said that the researchers should avoid the sample selection by using a random sampling. In this study, apps-based learning was experienced by students in some courses after of COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the precise information could be gained in this case study. Furthermore, in order to enhance the credibility of the research, the researchers conducted member checking to validate the accuracy of the participants' statements.

The initial phase of the research involved conducting individual interviews with the students to delve into their experiences and gather data. The student's interviews were recorded with their consent. Later, the recordings were transcribed for analysis and categorized into various themes and sub-themes.

Data Analysis

Given that the key aim of the study was to reveal the EFL students' experiences in hybrid learning after COVID-19, it was deemed that the technique of thematic analysis was the best to run the study. Afterward, the codes of thematic were decided for the replies given to each question, with sometimes multiple codes being given to replies. Furthermore, the replies were arranged and inspected for fixes or overlap before the interviews were reviewed with these codes in mind to see if any further data revealed themselves. Then, any new codes that appeared were noted and reviewed in the same treatment, and these made up the themes. Thus, this technique was correlated with the concept of Braun and Clarke [28].

4. Findings and Discussion

To maintain the participants' privacy, six participants in this study have been designated as OS1, OS2, OS3, OS4, OS5, and OS6. Based on the interview section focuses on one major question: What

are Indonesian EFL higher students' Experiences in Hybrid Environment after the COVID-19 attacks? The researchers got two major themes from that question as followed:

Table 1:
Themes and Subthemes

No	Themes	Subthemes
1	Advantages	Independent from space and time
		Increasing speaking ability
2	Disadvantages	Costly
		Bad internet connection

Advantages: Free from space-time and increasing speaking ability

In this theme, our participants explored their perceptions of their experiences in a hybrid environment. One of the main things that the participants mentioned is that they have been using Zoom as an app for virtual presentations in their hybrid learning environment. As per the interview findings, a prevailing number of participants shared their contentment with app-based learning through Zoom for virtual presentations. They found this method enjoyable because it gave them the freedom and flexibility to learn at their own pace and in their own space, relieving them from the stress of traditional classes.

...In the beginning it was not easy to make me accustomed to new ways of learning through Zoom, but later I found it easy since I could manage my time more freely. (OS 1)

... because of it (covid-19) I can do my study everywhere for some meetings which is nice. (OS 2)

The data above shows that the participants considered the virtual presentation as a new experience, as they admitted that they were not yet accustomed to it. However, the participants found it interesting to do the teaching and learning process by virtual presentation. With the integration of technology, the participants could manage their time freely and even they can go back to their hometown as technology could be accessed everywhere (accessible and portable). These data were congruent with the previous research [6], [20], [21], [29], [30], [31] which revealed that the integration of technology makes the students can manage their own time and space. Furthermore, the majority of the participants shared an intriguing insight, expressing that engaging in virtual presentations as a means of learning post-pandemic has notably enhanced their speaking abilities.

As we need to do a lot of presentations through Zoom, we need to do a lot of preparation, so that the virtual presentation could be understood by all the participants. (OS 4)

...I do agree that my speaking skill increased significantly among the other skills since through Zoom we only speak and speak. (OS 6)

The data presented in this research indicated that the participants have acknowledged that out of the four major English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), speaking has shown the most significant growth and improvement. This fact is primarily attributed to their role in virtual presentations, where they mostly engage in speaking to explain their material to the entire class. The participants expect the lecturer to leverage virtual learning to enhance not only speaking skills, but also other key English skills. They believe that the lecturer's creativity in combining various teaching methods would be crucial in achieving this goal.

... It will be better if our lecturer could mix the tasks which involve other English skills. (OS 3)

Disadvantages: Costly and Bad Connection.

One could hardly deny that advantages and disadvantages will always come in pairs. Although all the participants acknowledged certain advantages of hybrid learning, there were also several disadvantages. Through this research, a significant finding arises from the participants who highlighted the financial burden and connectivity issues associated with virtual presentations. This data was also congruent with previous studies which revealed that the integration of technology cost the students and having limited infrastructure [23], [24], [25], [6], [32].

...but this kind of activity takes my internet quota to run out in a very short time, and you know I need to buy more and more, otherwise I will be counted as absent from the class. (OS 5)

I need to buy the internet quota more than before. (OS 2)

It comes as no surprise that the hybrid environment requires a significant amount of internet data. This is due to the fact that it involves online meetings, video calls, and various other activities that heavily rely on internet connectivity. In response to this situation, some participants are compelled to seek out additional funds to meet their everyday expenses and also purchase premium, high-quality quotas.

... therefore I need to have more money to fulfill all my stuff and of course the internet quota. (OS 4)

In addition to financial difficulties, the participants faced occasional issues with unstable or poor internet connections despite having purchased a high-quality provider. According to their experience, adverse weather conditions like lightning, heavy rain, etc. are the main culprits behind such occurrences.

Sometimes I still do not understand why my internet was not stable on a friendly afternoon, but sometimes it is because of bad weather. (OS 1)

Finally the findings of this research indicate that the integration of technology in EFL classrooms have its own advantages and disadvantages. Advantages revealed from previous research [6], [20], [21], [23], [24], [25] were congruent with this research. That benefit is free from space-time. It is because the modern technology such as smartphones and laptops are portable and could be brought everywhere and could be used at any time. However, this research has uncovered an intriguing discovery in the hybrid environment: it enhances speaking skills. Our EFL higher students, who are primarily experienced in virtual presentations for their hybrid activity, require significant preparation in order to effectively deliver their materials and articulate their ideas to the entire class in English. As a result, their speaking skills improve considerably compared to other English skills.

Nevertheless, our participants expressed their desire for the lecturer to exhibit more creativity in designing tasks that incorporate various English skills. This would result in an overall improvement in all four English skills. Further, most of the participants cannot deny that having a hybrid environment and virtual presentation was an amazing experience due to its advantages. Therefore, the findings of the present study provide compelling evidence that the incorporation of technology in EFL classrooms can offer significant educational benefits, particularly in a higher education setting.

For the disadvantages, there were at least two disadvantages relevant to the previous research [6], [26] which are technical infrastructure (bad internet connection), and cost to use. In regard to face these issues, our participants have already arranged for a premium and costly service provider for a superior problem mitigation experience. Another drawback is the cost. Our participants have acknowledged that

their university provided some financial support to help them purchase a high-quality provider, by reducing their tuition fees. The university committee has put in place a smart policy aimed at providing support to students facing financial disadvantages, especially those from low-income families. This service is accessible to all individuals who meet the university's specified criteria. Therefore, it can be inferred that our participants are very adept at handling the challenges they encounter.

5. Conclusions

This research has given a detailed explanation of EFL higher students' experiences of their hybrid environment. Even though the implementation of a hybrid environment in this study is still limited to only having virtual presentation as their hybrid activity, data of this research could be concluded that the integration of technology potentially provides EFL higher students significant advantages. Based on the findings, the popularity of modern technology should be well utilized by the lecturers because it is close to the students these days. Indeed, technology could be used positively in the educational field. The results of this research can serve as valuable guidance for educators in deciding whether to implement a hybrid learning approach to teaching and learning English as a foreign language. It is important to note that educators must be well-prepared when designing their hybrid learning environments in order to maximize the success of the participants and minimize the disadvantages, as revealed by this research. Therefore, it is advisable for educators to enhance their creativity when creating and delivering assignments in the hybrid environment. Instead of relying solely on online presentations, educators have the opportunity to incorporate different applications such as Kahoot, Quizizz, and WordWall. By doing so, they can provide a wider range of activities and assignments to enhance hybrid learning. This approach has the potential to not only enhance students' speaking skills but also foster the development of other English language skills.

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