

An Investigation on The Use of Social Strategies in Online EFL Learning

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the use of social strategies in English as A Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This was inspired by the learning condition that has been changing from face-to-face atmosphere to the online-based due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This changing situation requires teachers and students to be more aware of applying suitable strategies in online learning mode, especially social strategies. Using the descriptive qualitative approach, this study was conducted on the fourth semester EFL students in a private university. To elicit the required data, set of online questionnaires was disseminated to 50 participants to obtain information on social strategies use in online EFL learning. The result of the descriptive analysis showed that average students exhibited a high frequency of using social strategies in their learning processes. In asynchronous learning, students preferred doing '*collaboration and discussion*' to assess their completed task. The strategies of '*using tools to improve interaction and communication as well as asking for clarification*' were more influential in synchronous learning in which technology effected the use of social strategies in the online class participation. Therefore, it becomes crystal clear that social strategies are deemed effective to aid online EFL learning. Further suggestions regarding the use of social strategies are also accessible at the end of this article.

Keywords: Social Strategy; Synchronous Learning; Asynchronous Learning; EFL Context

Abstrak: Penelitian ini berfokus pada penggunaan strategi sosial dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Hal ini terinspirasi dari kondisi pembelajaran yang berubah dari tatap muka menjadi berbasis online akibat pandemi Covid-19. Situasi yang berubah ini menuntut dosen dan mahasiswa untuk lebih sadar menerapkan strategi yang cocok dalam mode pembelajaran online, terutama strategi sosial. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian dilakukan pada mahasiswa EFL semester empat di sebuah universitas swasta. Untuk memperoleh data, kuesioner online disebarluaskan kepada 50 peserta untuk mendapatkan gambaran penggunaan strategi sosial dalam pembelajaran EFL online. Hasil analisis deskriptif menunjukkan bahwa rata-rata siswa menunjukkan frekuensi penggunaan strategi sosial yang tinggi. Dalam pembelajaran asinkron, siswa lebih suka melakukan 'kolaborasi dan diskusi' untuk menilai penyelesaian tugas mereka. Kemudian, strategi 'menggunakan alat untuk meningkatkan interaksi dan komunikasi serta meminta klarifikasi' sangat berpengaruh dalam pembelajaran sinkron di mana teknologi mempengaruhi penggunaan strategi sosial dalam partisipasi kelas online. Oleh karena itu, menjadi sangat jelas bahwa strategi sosial dianggap efektif untuk membantu pembelajaran EFL online. Akhirnya, saran juga dapat diakses di akhir artikel ini.

Kata kunci: Strategi Sosial; Pembelajaran Sinkron; Pembelajaran Asinkron; Konteks EFL

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous universities extensively have enforced moving the process of teaching and learning from offline to on-screen and internet-based. In several developing countries, including Indonesia, online-based learning is only used in non-regular classes or when the lecturers are unable to attend face-to-face classes. However, currently the use of technology becomes an alternative solution and has high flexibility in today's learning. Responding to the current condition, both of synchronous and asynchronous tools are hired to

continue learning and ensure interactions among teachers and students at anywhere and anytime (C. K. Chang, 2010; Riordan & Murray, 2010; Shahabadi & Uplane, 2015). It has indubitably impacted across sundry of scientific fields, including the field of English as A Foreign and Second Language (EFL and ESL) learning (Livingston & Condie, 2006; Beach et al., 2020).

Unlike offline-based learning, teachers must be capable of preparing various things to support online learning, one of which is by considering the suitable language learning strategies (LLSs) applied in EFL online mode (Conte & Serratosa, 2020). This is to encourage students and assist them to be autonomous and active in their daily language learning endeavours given that the dimensions of social presence in online learning are low (Tu, 2001). Thus, online-based learning, being the preferred LLSs, has become an urgent focus among researchers and EFL practitioners (Su et al., 2019), since it has become the norm in the current school setting.

According to that issue, this study timely investigated the use of social strategies in EFL online based learning by the students. This investigation is prominent research in EFL learning because students require communication and interaction abilities for successful language learning. Likewise, this study will demonstrate the appropriate use of LLSs to encourage students in language learning (Rebecca L. Oxford, 2017). In language learning, social strategy is one of the six strategies categorized by *Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* which focuses on *cooperating with others, asking questions and empathising other people*. The relevant studies revealed that the appropriate demonstration of social strategy is able to effectually boost the students' online teamwork and interaction (Akiyama & Saito, 2016; Hadwin et al., 2018).

Hitherto, the majority of the studies only discuss either an asynchronous or a synchronous to support online learning activity (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2019; Holenko Dlab et al., 2020), yet the current study attempts to explore the more comprehensive picture of social language learning strategy by investigating the learning aspects with no face-to-face contact in a private university. Furthermore, this also examined the two learning aspects such as the students' participations in online class (synchronous learning) and the students' assessment for their task completion (asynchronous learning) based on their online learning style. Different people to interact with, different technology used as well as different skill in using it are the factors why this study becomes decidedly worth-conducting, because each student will show the use of social learning strategy diversely both in an asynchronous and a synchronous learning aspects. Ismiatun et al. (2020) asserted the use of language learning strategy in context promoted students to employ distinct learning strategies to achieve their learning goal and solve the problem in EFL learning.

Social strategies in language learning are classified into set of activities, such as "asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others" (Oxford, 1990) which form social behaviour and communication among others. She then updated the social strategy classification which is guided by metacognitive strategy for individual learner (Oxford, 2017) concerning face-to-face learning. In this study, researchers focus on the use of social strategy classification in online language learning which is actually not discussed in the strategy classification by Oxford. Thus, the researchers attempt to find out how the use of Oxford's social strategies as the main reference in online language learning both synchronously and asynchronously.

The strategy of "*asking questions*" may help students understanding the topic. This strategy aims to either clarification or correction (Oxford, 1990). This basic action enables students obtaining meaningful effect because it stimulates the conversation with input enrichment and indicates the interest of interlocutors. Using the strategy of "*asking questions*" means the conversation's partner pays attention to the content. Moreover, this activity may help improving the language skill production by giving direct feedback. On the other hand, this strategy can verify misunderstood explanations, for example a student wants to check whether the information is correct or incorrect. This activity is really helpful for students whether it is conducted in online or offline classroom. Liu & Yu (2019) developed online learning system by teaching-by-questioning, they highlighted that the strategy successfully promotes the students' reasoning skills and support eloquent formative evaluation for teachers.

The strategy of “*cooperating with others*” can consist of two sets of activities, such as cooperating with peers and cooperating with proficient users of the new language (Oxford, 1990). Cooperating with peers and proficient users mean working together without competition. This activity upholds work in groups where all members have the same spirit to achieve learning goals. According to Martin-Beltrán (2017), working cooperatively with peers becomes an important part of students' lives, providing significant opportunities for language development as well as educational equity implications. She then further reveals that this activity can help students with language, literacy, and identity development. It also provides a fascinating setting for students to play in. In addition to her findings, cooperating with peers can extend the students' understanding of learning opportunities by experimenting with language, trying out new ideas, and building mutual support.

The strategy of “*empathizing with others*” is imperative to engage a conversation because a speaker tries to put her/himself in someone else's condition and this strategy is better to understand other's opinion (Oxford, 1990). Furtherly, “*empathizing with others*” becomes an essential for students when they work in a population. Students will see better things from other people's perspectives as well as are important for growing, sustaining, and empowering the cognitive, affective, and motivational components of empathy (McNaughton, 2016). There are two kinds of activities of social strategy based on Oxford's work, they are developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings. In the context of online learning and communication, the use of non-verbal signs is very worthwhile in social interactions. According to Lee (2019), where he reviewed 88 studies and found out how students apply their social strategies through technology and during distance learning. One of his results is that students use deliberately gesture, like eye contact and hands movements, to aid in meaning negotiation and online social interaction.

Globally, social strategies in online learning have actually been used since the last two decades by language learners. However, its use is very limited because the synchronization of technology to accommodate social interaction in learning is still inadequate and this has been clearly stated by (White, 1995). Along with the development of science and technology, Hauck and Hampel (2008) then found an increase in the use of social strategies in language learning, where they studied 25 foreign students learning online blog. The activities comprise asking questions, providing clarification and supporting for the opinions of others through online media. This apparently does not limit them in socializing even though it is conducted remotely.

In China, social strategies are widely used in online learning, especially the strategy of “*empathizing with others*”. Research using an ethnographic approach resulted in findings where students in China used gestures more as a strategy in interacting with peers. Information in the classroom is obtained through gestures, emoticons, facial expressions and other forms of appreciation that are internalized by students. In addition, the researcher also does not deny that foreign language skills are also a determining factor in the effectiveness of using social strategies in online learning (Tu, 2001). Then, Nam (2017) examined the social strategies in online language learning. He found that the strategy of “*working collaboratively with peers*” was able to build components in social presence including online communication, interactivity, and student privacy in an online collaborative learning environment. Furthermore, online language learning requires an effective instruction and appropriate social strategy training designed by teachers so that the process can enhance the EFL students' engagement during online learning (Luan et al., 2020).

This condition is actually different from the research conducted by Lai & Gu (2011) by recruiting 279 students to reveal how they perceive the use of social strategies in online learning. Most of the students do not pay much attention to social strategies in online learning because they consider the strategies do not have a significant impact on their language development compared to face-to-face classes. This resulted in decreased motivation to use social strategies. In addition, students find it difficult to elaborate topics that are suitable for online discussion and they are also worried if they make mistakes when socializing online. This has made the use of social strategies in online language learning is less effective to implement.

Then at the beginning of the pandemic, the use of social strategies was also investigated in Vietnam by Dinh & Nguyen (2020) on 186 undergraduate students. Their research show that social strategies are less effective for online learning considering that these activities require various conditions, such as a strong connection, adequate devices and demographics that can be accessed by internet access, so that online participation can be carried out optimally.

Getting various review of related literatures on the use of social strategy in online language learning, research on this issue is still found a lack of online participation both synchronous and asynchronous language activities. Thus, this situation motivates the researchers to fill the gap in the social strategies use in online learning by upholding two online tools. This aims to investigate more comprehensively the use of social strategy in online EFL learning by the students so that teacher and other researcher understand several strategies that students apply to be exist in communication with other students and teachers. Moreover, an evaluation of technology use can be carried out in order to increase the effectiveness of its use in an effort to accommodate their learning needs.

With the foregoing in mind, the following two research questions are addressed in this study:

1. In what extent are the students' synchronous online participation in EFL classroom?
2. In what extent are the students' assessments done for their task completion?

This study aims to investigate the use of social strategies in EFL setting by studying the students' synchronous online participation on *Zoom* or other applications and how they do assessment for their task completion during online learning.

METHODS

The participants in this study were all EFL students enrolled in the fourth semester and have been joining an online learning for two years at a private university in East Java, Indonesia. The 50 participants confirmed being able to be involved in the research activity which the needed information was recorded to explore their experience in using social strategy in online EFL learning. The language skill performed by the participants were varied from the low, medium and high level. To report the results, their real names have been alternated to the pseudonyms.

A qualitative approach was emerged in this study by first identifying the most frequently use of social strategy by the participants during two years-online learning. The online questionnaire from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was adapted 10 items specific to this study and added 9 items which were entirely suitable with the current learning context. To construct the more informative viewpoints regarding the use of social strategy in online EFL learning, the result of questionnaire was analysed descriptively. As well, participants were permitted to provide the digital documentations as the supplementary data, such as e-mail, chatting, videos or photos in the google forms. Moreover, the result of online questionnaires was identified to investigate the use of social strategy in online EFL learning, both synchronous and asynchronous online participation. The frequency of social strategy use was started from 'very high-', 'high-', 'medium-', 'low-' and 'very low'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. The General Frequently Use of Social Strategy

LLS Use/Category	Percentage (%)	Mean Score
Always or almost true of me/Very High	12%	5.84
Generally true of me/ High	38%	19.21
Somewhat true of me/ Medium	35%	17.47
Generally, not true of me/ Low	12%	6.16
Never or almost never true of me/Very Low	3%	1.32

Generally, based on the table 1, it showed that most of the participants applied the social strategies frequently in EFL online learning, both using synchronous and asynchronous tools. From the table, the highest mean score was 19.21 which meant participants showed ‘high’ frequently use of social strategy during online learning activities. In other words, participants were actively getting engaged in social interaction during online learning. They preferred to have interaction and communication both of in real-time activity and discussion forums, such as in using Zoom App, Skype, Google Meet, WhatsApp, Google Classroom, and etc. Oxford (2017) has formerly emphasized that authentic communication becomes a necessary part in language learning. Learning in context also facilitates learners understanding the language and content with technologies, she added.

Social Strategies in Asynchronous Learning

Table 2. The Questionnaires of Social Strategy in Asynchronous Learning

Online Learning Activity	No	Item
Assessment for Task Completion <i>(Asynchronous from WhatsApp Chat, E-mail, Google Classroom, etc.)</i>	1	I respond as soon as possible to my language partner’s questions.
	2	I reply to other students’ comments on my assignment’s post.
	3	I put comments on other students’ post of their assignments to help them with my suggestions.
	4	I encourage other students to leave comments on my post.
	5	I discuss the writing assignment with my language partner.
	6	I ask my lecturer to provide feedback/comment on my early draft.
	7	I ask my language partner to listen and correct my pronunciation through voice note or video.
	8	I write the conversation scripts of the speaking assignment together with my language partner.
	9	I discuss the reading assignment with my language partner.
	10	I ask my language partner to remind/correct me whenever I make a mistake.

Table 3. The Category Result of LLS Use in Asynchronous Learning

LLS Use	Number of Items										Score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Always or almost true of me/Very High	4	2	4	3	13	4	10	7	12	12	71
Generally true of me/High	25	17	19	13	27	22	19	22	21	30	215
Somewhat true of me/Medium	17	22	15	21	6	18	13	15	14	5	146
Generally, not true of me/Low	3	7	9	10	4	5	5	3	3	3	52
Never or almost never true of me/Very Low	1	2	3	3	0	1	3	3	0	0	16

The main characteristics of social strategy, based on Oxford (1992), are cooperating with peers, asking questions and empathising other people. Majority of the participants confirmed

that they socialized with classmates to complete their learning activity asynchronously. According to LLS use category, the score of 215 reflected that most of participants existed in the ‘high’ category in applying social strategies. The strategies that stand out were attained from the items with the most voters, such as the item number (1) *respond as soon as possible to the language partner’s questions*, number (5) *discuss the writing assignment with the language partner*, and number (10) *ask the language partner to remind/correct whenever make a mistake*. From the participants’ responses, they attempt to utilize technological tools, particularly in the discussion forums, to aid their online learning. Hung & Higgins (2016) highlighted that using technological tools to pursue communication in the learning environment could compensate their weakness of spontaneity in the asynchronous learning such as discussion forums and chatting.

The participants employed the three largest number of ‘assessment for task completion’ in the asynchronous learning which were identified as 1) *asking for clarification* and 2) *cooperating with peer strategies*. Both of the strategies were highly necessary to reach the success in online EFL learning. As stated by Liu & Yu (2019; & Martin-Beltrán (2017) that questioning and working cooperatively promote students’ cognitive and independent thinking during synchronous learning. As an impact, the online learning becomes more alive and active. In addition, they highlighted great opportunities offered by using social strategies for improving the students’ language development and literacy. In the midst of their study, Le et al. (2018) reported their findings that building communication and collaboration through online and technologies turn to be a challenge for language learners, yet they are still able to ensure the successful learning by constructing the encouraging social relationship. By doing so, combining social relationship and collaboration, participants were visible to share their own thoughts with their peers as well as gained the meaningful feedback for their task completion (H. Chang & Windeatt, 2016; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lee, 2002; Whiteside, 2015).

Social Strategies in Synchronous Learning

Table 4. The Questionnaires of Social Strategy in Synchronous Learning

Online Learning Activity	Item
Online Class Participation (<i>Synchronous from Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, etc.</i>)	<i>I prefer keeping the camera on to let the lecturer and other students see me.</i>
	<i>I ask the lecturer to correct my performance directly.</i>
	If I do not understand, I ask the lecturer to explain/repeat his/her explanation.
	<i>I ask the lecturer to verify that I have understood or said something correctly.</i>
	I ask other students to my performance directly.
	If I do not understand, I ask the other students to slow down, repeat, or clarify what was said.
	I give comment to my language partner’s performance directly.
	I type text messages in the chat box for the purpose of effective communication.
I pin the lecturer or other students whenever they are speaking	

Table 5. The Category Result of LLS Use in Synchronous Learning

LLS Use	Number of Items									Score
	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
Always or almost true of me/Very High	2	4	4	5	5	11	2	3	4	40
Generally true of me/High	14	9	15	11	24	26	18	15	18	15

												0
Somewhat true of me/Medium	25	28	22	26	13	12	23	19	18			186
Generally, not true of me/Low	7	9	8	8	7	1	6	12	7			65
Never or almost never true of me/Very Low	2	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	3			9

The table 5 highlighted the category of social strategy that participants used in synchronous learning, such as Zoom, Skype or Google Meet. Item number 11, 12 and 14 were chosen the most by the participants to reflect how social strategies were used in EFL online learning. Participants preferred keeping the camera on to let the lecturer and other students see them. Then, they also asked the lecturer to correct the performance directly and verify whether they have understood or not the materials correctly. This means that, in the online class activity, the participants employed two strategies, namely *'using tools to improve interaction and communication and asking for questions and clarifications'*. In asynchronous learning, participants utilized *'asking for questions and clarifications strategies'* to compensate their weakness of spontaneity; yet in the real-time activity or synchronous, participants used them to fulfil their needs in EFL online learning (Ismiatun et al., 2020). In short, both synchronous and asynchronous, participants tended to promote the strategy of *'asking questions and clarifications'* in diverse mode.

A strategy of *'using tools to improve interaction and communication'* was very prominence on how the technology can impact on the use of social strategy in the online class participation. By using tools, such as turn on the camera, pin the speaker, use the raise hands, or even emoji, also reflect the participants' engagement in the online class. By doing so, among teachers and students are aware of supportive environment in the online learning. Likewise, such condition assist the participants to adjust with the teachers and the online learning environment as well as encouraging them to endure learning (Kaan & Chun, 2018). The result of this study on *'using tools to improve interaction and communication'* have already been supported by the relevant previous studies that utilizing technologies to fulfil the needs in language learning, such as communication and interaction, can increase the learners' communicative competence as well as familiarize them in using synchronous tools (Bosch, 2009; Jin, 2018; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Reinders & White, 2016).

Having communication and interaction in the real-time activity with teacher and classmates provide valuable opportunity for students to enhance their limited exposure on several learning activities, such as sharing the learning problems, gaining the strategies to solve the problems, enhancing the spontaneity and confidence, and having experience to speak. Besides, using several ways of interaction in synchronous learning support the students to achieve an effective communication and facilitate them to acquire knowledge, especially in online language learning (Politis & Politis, 2016). Therefore, being aware is of *'using tools to improve interaction and communication and asking for questions and clarifications'* is highly necessary in EFL online learning so that they can share ideas with teachers and friends as well as evaluate their learning in context simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlighted that learning with technology provides students with the opportunities to keep interacting and getting communication going with teachers and also classmates. Interaction and communication in EFL learning play an essential role in maintaining the language acquisition. Thus, students must be able to utilize technology both in synchronous and asynchronous learning.

In asynchronous learning, students preferred using *'collaboration and discussion'* strategy to work on the set tasks. This strategy is effectively employed by the students to aid their online

language learning. Then, the strategies of ‘using tools to improve interaction and communication as well as asking for questions and clarifications’ are highly significant to be used during online class learning. By operating tools in synchronous learning, such as, turn on the camera, pin the speaker, use the raise hands, or even emoji, reflect the participants’ engagement in the online class. By doing so, teachers and students are aware of the supportive mechanism in online learning.

Similar researches to gauge students’ perceptions and abilities are further required to enhance our findings. Although students are already able to use social strategies in online learning and utilize tools that support learning itself, the teachers’ role as facilitators is crucial in ensuring the appropriate use of learning strategies in any learning context systematically. This is vital in making sure that online learning can be conducted more meaningfully. For language teachers, by finding certain types of social strategy in online learning and its use in different contexts, it can be a reference for teachers to train students with social strategy-based instruction during online teaching and learning. Our research findings are also crucial to increase the students’ awareness in cooperating with peers, asking questions and showing empathy during online learning, and then to build their responsibilities to actively participate in online activities.

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