

The challenges in teaching english online to young learners: Teachers' voices

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Abstract

Teaching and learning activities had shifted to online classes due to Covid-19 pandemic outbreaks. Hence, primary school teachers in Indonesia encountered several challenges with the unexpected changes in English face-to-face classroom interaction to online learning with digital platforms. This study explored the challenges faced by four Indonesian EFL primary school teachers in implementing online learning and teachers' solutions to the challenges. A qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was used as the research design, and the data collection was obtained through observation and interview. This study showed that teachers found online English Language Teaching (ELT) activities more difficult than face-to-face classrooms due to some challenges. The technical issue became the first challenge faced by the teachers since both teachers and students needed an internet connection and device management. Secondly, most teachers found it difficult to implement various teaching methods in online learning. The other reasons were that enhancing students' engagement required more effort, and assessing students' English development took more work than in the face-to-face classroom. The implication of this research is for teachers and students as it may help them address and generate new insights about the challenges and solutions in online classrooms. Furthermore, it highlights specific areas for future research.

Keywords: E-Learning, English for Young Learners, Online English Teaching, Online Classroom

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has widely spread out around the world. This unexpected condition affects many economic, social, political, religious and incredibly educational sectors (Sjølie et al., 2022). Moreover, this pandemic caused enormous disruption in the education system worldwide (Esteban Jr. and Cruz, 2021) including in Indonesia. This global pandemic situation changes the implementation of learning activities. The government strictly limited people's movement to avoid more extensive virus transmission. These were supported by other rules such as working from home for employees, praying from home, and homeschooling students from beginning kindergarten to higher education (Halverson and Graham, 2019). (Gunn et al., 2023) argued that with so many

teachers and students moving to online instruction, conversations have centered upon online instruction (i.e., technological and internet suitability, student independence and self-directed learning).

The present status of the Covid-19 epidemic needs to be revised. Learning from home is still practised in the majority of Indonesian schools. (Adebayo et al., 2023) pointed out that the pandemic also affected teachers. Within short notice, teachers were expected to take on new responsibilities in ensuring that students could continue learning during the lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers that use online learning and various learning platforms gain a wealth of fresh learning experiences and information. However, many teachers who live in distant places with inadequate resources and facilities cannot carry out ideal learning activities. Previous research on learning difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic found that teachers used an unattended assignment system most of the time (Steiner and Woo, 2021). Students come to school to obtain homework from their teachers, which they do at home. Students return to school the next day to hand in their assignments (Alarfaj et al., 2022).

Given the uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture decided to introduce learning from home for all levels of education in Indonesia. This policy thus becomes adaptable when conditions change throughout its execution. Some regions are reintroducing face-to-face learning sooner, with the primary prerequisites being the implementation of very tight health regulations and the immunization of teachers. Realizing online learning and teaching brings various problems, including skill, knowledge, habits, infrastructure, technology, time, cost and many more (Yuzulia, 2021). Moreover, Rasmitadila et al., 2020 stated that using technical tools, such as minimum facility and availability of online systems, poses challenges in implementing online learning. Additionally, the transformation of face-to-face classrooms with traditional instructional methods to online learning, with its complexities and limitation, has raised the problems of increasing students' engagement.

The transition from face-to-face to online classrooms makes it difficult and complex for teachers (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). As we noted, primary school students have short attention spans and can easily get distracted, so keeping them focused on the learning process is crucial. Unlike in the face-to-face classroom, where the students and the teachers have physical interactions that can make learning activity fun and exciting, online learning makes it more difficult. In contrast, implementing online learning seems more complicated than a face-to-face classroom because, in online learning, teachers have limited interaction and need help to create various activities to engage the students. Some previous studies have explored the challenges faced by high school teachers and students in the teaching and learning process (Daar and Nasar, 2021; Manurung, 2021; Rosalina et al., 2020; Yulianto and Majid Mujtahid, 2021). They found that teachers and students find some difficulties in terms of media and learning sources, teaching and learning activities, and classroom management. Those previous studies explored challenges faced by high school teachers. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the challenges primary school teachers face since primary school students have limited knowledge of technology and are not emotionally ready. To fill the gap, this current study will investigate the challenges primary school teachers face during online learning in the pandemic and teachers' solutions to cope with the challenges.

METHOD

Research Method

This present study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by primary school teachers. In order to address the issue, qualitative design is applied in this study as it was aimed at gathering in-depth data related to the new phenomenon, for instance, the challenges primary school teachers face in conducting online learning during the pandemic. A qualitative study designed to get a better understanding of individual participants' viewpoints, ideas, and attitudes (Creswell, 2017).

Data Collection

The data were collected through observation and interviews. Observation is a primary method for obtaining data in qualitative research. However, the interview is one of the most widely used primary data collection methods (Ary et al., 2009). Interviews in the qualitative study will be beneficial to obtain information or interpretation that is unable to get in observation.

As the questions or format can be modified during interview, semi-structure interview is used to gather the data. In this study, the researcher observed the online classroom using Google Meet and interviewed each participant. This study focused on English language teaching for primary school students in grades 1–4 at SD Muslim Cendekia Batu. Participants were four English teachers from SD Muslim Cendekia Batu. All teachers received professional training in an undergraduate English language teaching program. The participants were asked to share their detailed explanations of the teaching procedure, the tools they used to carry out the online classroom, the materials, the worksheet and the quiz. They were also asked to deliver the challenge of online learning and the solutions to those problems.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the present study employed three stages as described by (Ary et al., 2009). The first is organizing and familiarizing. In this stage, the researcher read the note from the interview. Second, coding and reducing were employed to develop concepts from the raw data. Third, the researcher interpreted and represented the data from the interview of four participants in the study.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	27	24	28	24
School Name	SD Muslim Cendekia	SD Muslim Cendekia	SD Muslim Cendekia	SD Muslim Cendekia
Public/Private School	Private School	Private School	Private School	Private School
Class	First Grade	Second Grade	Fourth Grade	Third Grade
Teaching Experience	Five Years	Two Years	Four Years	Three Years
Education Background	English Education	English Education	English Education	English Education

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on observation and interviews, the researchers found various challenges primary school English teachers face during online teaching. The challenges were technical issues, teaching methods, classroom management, and assessment. Then these findings also included the way the teachers cope with those challenges.

1. Technical Issues

Table 2 described that most of the teachers faced the basic challenge of online learning called technical issues. Online learning requires stable internet connection and long preparation as well. It was found that some students are not ready to join the classroom due to this technical issue, as we know that young learners aged 7–9 years old still need assistance from their parents to ensure that the device and internet connection are ready. Therefore, some students were late joining the classroom, and other students suddenly left the class and returned to the class again. It made the students get distracted and do not join the class well. They could also be excited to join the classroom initially, but their mood suddenly changed because of the poor internet connection. They would miss the teacher's instruction and the lesson in the class.

They would miss the teacher's instruction and the lesson in the class. Without a friend sitting next to them to check what the teacher's said, they could get lost quickly. Hence, the teacher must repeat the instruction and keep the class on track. It is relevant to participants' statement:

Table 2. Technical Issue

Responder	Challenge	Solution
R1	Teachers' and students' internet connection can be unstable, and that affects both teachers and students' feeling during the activity.	Always check the internet connection and make sure the connection is stable.
R2	More time is wasted to prepare the lesson and check the students readiness.	The teacher and the students must be ready at least 15 minutes before the lesson starts.
R3	Activities tend to take longer when teaching online as we found some technical problems, and for checking all the students can see and hear the teacher.	Teaching online must be well prepared. Some technical must be overcome before the lesson begin.
R4	A poor connection can distract the teacher and the students, and they cannot join the class well.	Check the internet connection and always keep the class on track.

"Internet connection has the main role in online learning. We totally need high-speed connection to make learning activity run well" *"To teach English online really needs more preparation. I must prepare the device, media and stable internet connection. I also have to make sure my students join the class on time to avoid some distraction during class"*

2. Teaching Methods

Table 3 showed that teaching methods in online learning are difficult. Unlike in the face-to-face classroom, where the teachers can apply various teaching methodologies to deliver the lesson and create some exciting activities, the online classroom has limited space to engage students in the learning activity. The teachers also encountered the difficulties in teaching the new vocabulary.

Table 3. Teaching Method

Responder	Challenge	Solution
R1	It is difficult to use various teaching methods like in the offline classroom.	Teacher must use many alternative teaching media.
R2	Teaching online needs more media to make the students understand the materials especially introducing new vocabulary.	Teachers should prepare many engaging media to help students understand the materials.
R3	Engaging students in the learning activity is totally hard. Students don't talk enough, while the teacher talks much.	It is important to involve all students in the learning activity by asking them one by one and check their understanding.
R4	Teaching online with limited space makes the teacher cannot express and explore movement freely.	It will helpful if teacher use song and video to attract students' attention.

As young learners do not have adequate vocabulary and prior knowledge, teaching vocabulary to young learners in online classrooms might be more challenging. Various alternative teaching media must be well prepared. Therefore, delivering the lesson using media such as YouTube videos, songs, and flashcards requires more effort. Related to the technical issue that might be faced during class, sometimes the video could not be displayed. Then, the teacher must change the media immediately. As a participant said:

"Teaching vocabulary to young learners in online classroom is not easy. I have to prepare some media to introduce the new vocabulary. Different from teaching offline classroom, I found that in online classroom I have to make more effort to teach how to pronounce and write the new vocabulary."

3. Classroom Management

The next problem experienced by the teacher is classroom management. Here, the teachers found that the students were hard to be actively involved in the learning process. The students might face many distractions around them, such as noisy families, a room which is not supported to study, and students' less motivation. Unlike face-to-face classrooms with supporting places and environments to study that helps the students learn better, online classrooms could make the students less focused and get lost easily. Next, it is not easy to give instructions to the students. In online learning, teachers had limited space and difficulty using gestures and movement to help students understand the instruction, like in the face-to-face classroom. However, the teachers also might not be able to see their students' reactions as clearly as in a face-to-face classroom to see if they can understand what the teachers are saying. The participants confirm that:

"I found some students get bored in my online class because we can't have various activities like we can do in the face-to-face classroom so that I have to make my class more fun although we can't create physical activities and direct interaction" "I think most of the students can get distracted easily when joining my online class. Unlike in the classroom where they can be more focus and have direct interaction with teachers and friends, in online class, they tend to have some distractions from their family at home because of their environment is not supported. I can't give instruction as well as in the offline classroom. I need to repeat my instruction over times to make sure my students can join my class and know what they should do next."

Table 4. Classroom Management

Responder	Challenge	Solution
R1	Online learning makes the students easily get distracted by environment around.	Keep the students on the track by giving more questions or interaction
R2	It is hard to give instruction	Write the instruction on the screen and repeat the instruction. It is possible to ask other students to repeat and explain the instruction
R3	The teacher found the students don't get ready to join the class.	Make classroom rule before the class started
R4	Hard to make the students speak and answer the questions given.	Doing personal approach or motivating students. Give additional score to those who can answer the question or being active in the class.

4. Instrument

Table 5 showed that assessment is being another challenge which is encountered by the teachers during online learning. Giving feedback in a limited time could be harder rather than in the face-to-face classroom. Due to some technical issues such as unstable connection and unsupported devices, it could make the teachers did not get much chance to have personal interaction with students. However, evaluating the students' improvement is difficult as the teachers cannot check the students' understanding directly like in the face-to-face classroom. Participants claim that:

"Sometimes, I can't see my students understand the lesson that I delivered at that time. Evaluating students' progress becomes harder than in offline classroom. "When I give some questions to my students, they tend to get help from their parents. I can see their parents or family behind them and join the class"

Table 5. Instrument

Responder	Challenge	Solution
R1	Hard to check students understanding	Always give some questions to make students can actively involve in the classroom.
R2	It is difficult to evaluate the students' progress or improvement	Giving quiz before beginning the class to review the previous lesson
R3	The result of the test can be less accurate	Make test rules before conducting test
R4	Giving feedback to each students can be hard	Have a personal interaction to each student

Discussion

Based on the finding of this study, it can be concluded that although technology has a significant role in teaching English to young learners, especially during this pandemic, it seems challenging for teachers when carrying out online learning. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that online learning is the only solution that can be implemented in this pandemic. As Le et al., 2022 discovered that teachers preferred virtual classrooms and had a positive attitude toward teaching the English language using technology and the internet in this critical situation and that having online classes (at home) rather than traditional ones (at school) is preferable to not having classes. Regardless of the helpful implication of online learning, holding an online classroom was quite challenging. Here are some challenges encountered by the teacher during this implementation.

Firstly, the most common difficulties are technological. Online learning requires stable internet connection and long preparation as well. Some students do not ready to join the classroom due to this technical issue. According to Yuzulia, 2021, most of the challenges encountered by students were terrible network connection, broadband troubles, and being disconnected between sessions. As reported by Daar and Nasar, 2021, the study found that teachers faced challenges due to inadequate infrastructure in their study. Both students and teachers complained about the internet's poor connectivity. Then, it is also supported by Manurung, 2021 found that the finding revealed that the teacher's most dominant challenge in online teaching and learning was the lack of the students' knowledge in using the learning application used by the teachers. To ensure that online learning runs well, the internet connection must be reliable so that professors can deliver the information and students can gain better comprehension. The class will be practical too. Khatoony and Nezhadmehr, 2020 argued that teachers required a speedy internet connection to make learning more interactive and effective. Komsiyah, 2021 also argued that educational institutions must employ technological advances for teaching and learning activities. Therefore, teachers and students must consider preparing the device and internet connection to avoid technical problems to carry out successful online learning.

Secondly, applying various teaching methods becomes more challenging than in the face-to-face classroom. With limited space and difficulties in giving instruction, enhancing students' engagement in the online classroom becomes challenging. Tao and Gao, 2022 also found the same findings in their study that teachers experienced several problems in promoting online engagement, including a lack of online teaching preparation, an unsupportive school policy, and poor internet connections. According to the survey, many language teachers require remote teaching training and specific rules for online learning. It is noted that young learners have specific characteristics, such as having short concentration and having fun activities. Therefore, teachers must apply a variety of activities in the classroom to keep the class on track. Rasmitadila et al., 2020 pointed out that teachers must use varied instructional methods to encourage students in the online classroom. In fact, without physical interaction and limited communication on screen, having students involved in the class is not easy. They were especially teaching vocabulary and instructing the students. Young learners do not have adequate vocabulary and prior knowledge, which makes the teachers put more effort into introducing the new vocabulary, including teaching how to pronounce and write. Alternative teaching media such as YouTube videos, flashcards, and pictures are always required. Moreover, to

convince the students to know what they should do during the learning process, a repetition, gesture or movement and other students' check can be done (Klusmann et al., 2022).

Thirdly, another challenge is managing the online classroom well and effectively. Students have limited focus and quickly get bored. Online learning makes it difficult to concentrate well and prepare when joining the class. Additionally, they were less active and did not talk enough. Here, teachers always talk much rather than in the face-to-face classroom. It is in line with Ruiz-Alonso-Bartol et al., 2022, who found that the students' high levels of anxiety may be ascribed to a lack of peer connection, a lack of experience with online learning, and the misconception that online settings create less learning than face-to-face settings. Due to lack of motivation and limited interaction, students do not have much confidence to express their ideas and answer the questions given. So that, teachers must give motivation and ask them to be more active in expressing and answering the questions. Therefore, many teachers feel uncomfortable when carrying out online classroom because the class can not be interactive (Nakhriyah and Muzakky, n.d.). On the other hand, teachers felt that online classrooms allow for more student interaction and enhanced relationships between teachers and students.

Fourthly, it is hard to assess students' achievement during online learning with limited interaction and communication on screen. The teachers found themselves in a problem assessing and grading students' improvement. They can not assure themselves that their students understand the lesson. However, giving feedback to each student on screen also can be challenging. It is in line with Yulianto and Majid Mujtahid, 2021 who found that teachers felt that students were late in collecting the task and got difficulties in giving feedback. Then, Jacques et al., 2020 also stated that distance necessarily implies a relationship of trust with students because it is almost impossible to control the conditions under which individual work is carried out. To overcome this problem, the teachers must ensure their students understand the lesson by asking questions at the beginning or closing of class. Taghizadeh and Basirat, 2022 argued that as the students have the learning activities entirely, they will be involved in various interactions. Then Elzainy et al., 2020 also pointed out that the student's performance in class was evaluated based on their enthusiasm, team spirit, interaction with peers and tutors, presenting abilities, and capacity to brainstorm and analyze the phenomenon. Additionally, in this pandemic era, It is crucial to develop assessment test questions to measure students' success in an online format that provides innovation for both teachers who design and students who take the exam. In terms of education, doing online examination can help students become self-sufficient.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the finding of this study, primary school teachers face difficulties in some aspects, such as technical issues, teaching methods, classroom management, and assessment. It is expected for English teachers, especially primary school teachers, to be able to carry out successful learning activities by considering the internet connection, using various teaching methods or learning activities to enhance students' engagement, and giving interaction or feedback to the students during online learning. Although teaching English to young learners online requires more effort and energy in preparing the class and during the implementation, it is a suitable solution for our education system during this pandemic. Teachers can take advantage of the recent technology and improve the students' learning autonomy. Then, the teachers must consider the evaluation of students' improvement. Even though it would be more challenging than in a face-to-face classroom, teachers must carry out a test to get valid and accurate results. Giving feedback and keeping the interaction is vital to enhance students' improvement. This study only explored the participants from the same schools. It is suggested to the next researchers to have the participants from various schools.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

K.A.K conceived of the presented idea. H.I.G developed the theory. W.A. verified the analytical methods and analyzed the data and interpreted it. D. supervised the findings of this work. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

DECLARATION

The authors of this study certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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