
LEARNING ENGLISH AT HOME: EXPLORING INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This study seeks to, first, explore Indonesian EFL students' experiences in online learning during Covid-19 Pandemic; second, reveal how the online learning impacted on their learning of the four language skills; and third, enlist their preferred modes of learning in the aftermath of the pandemic. Drawing on a qualitative design and phenomenological approach, the data were collected through online interviews with purposely selected 12 English department students of a state Islamic university in Indonesia and analyzed using Thematic Analysis technique. The findings showed that the majority of the students had unpleasant experiences in online learning due to internet access problems, lack of interaction, stress and demotivation, and difficulty in understanding the lesson. The online learning provided more opportunities for them to develop their reading, listening, and writing skills but significantly reduced the space for practicing speaking. Most of the students preferred going back face-to-face classroom learning in the aftermath of the pandemic. Few preferred a combination of offline and online learning. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that online learning trained them to be a more independent learner, raised awareness of the use of technology for language learning, and offered a mode learning that was flexible, handy, rich of sources, and selectable to their learning needs.

Keywords: Covid-19, EFL, experience, Indonesian, online learning

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Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic impacted on many aspects of human life. Education is one of those that were fundamentally affected. Particularly, social distancing policies imposed in many countries to minimize the spread of the pandemic while keeping the education process running resulted in sudden implementation of online learning. A great number of studies have been conducted in many different parts of the world to explore students' and teachers' experiences in it. Many came up with a list of problems experienced by both students and teachers. Among the major problems shared across different contexts of study are unstable internet connection, lack of interaction, information technology incompetency, and psychological problems (Van & Thi, 2021; Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosaria, 2021; Heng & Song 2021; Bordoloi, Das & Das, 2021; Aboagye, Yawson, & Appiah 2021; Bacher-Hicks, Goodman, & Mulhern, 2021; Yulianti & Mukminin, 2021).

Pertaining to the impact, Indonesian education is no exception. Since mid-2020, the government of the Republic of Indonesia has issued social distancing and movement restriction policies. The policies resulted in the closing of schools and universities and introduction of online learning with emergency curricula. Studies on online learning in Indonesia also reported similar problems outlined above (Irawan, Dwisona, & Lestari, 2020; Susilana, Hutagalung, & Sutisna, 2020; Rulandari, 2020).

Despite the abundance of the studies, most of them, however, looked at the impacts of online learning on education in general. While, general accounts may be beneficial for an overall understanding of the phenomena, they could possibly overlook important specific variables that distinguish one context to another. Therefore, exploring the issue in a particular context is as important as a general overview. However, so far, only few such studies are available.

In the area of EFL teaching and learning, the phenomenon of studies on the impact of online learning that were drawn in EFL contexts but resulted in overarching reports is also common. So far, only few studies, i.e. Karataş and Tuncer (2020), has particularly explored how online learning impacted on EFL students' learning of the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing). The study reported that the participating Turkish EFL students perceived the lack of interaction in online significantly reduced the opportunity to practice and improve their English speaking skill. Such a context specific phenomenon may be common across different online EFL learning contexts, but seemed to have been overlooked. In the Indonesian context, such a study is still absent. In light of the above mentioned scarcity, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Indonesian EFL learners experience online learning during Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How does online learning impact their English learning?
3. What are their preferred modes of learning in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

This section presents some concepts central to online learning and online language learning as well as studies that have been conducted on it. The review presents the definition, types, and advantages and disadvantages of online learning, and then proceeds to online language learning and research on this type of language learning.

Definition of online learning

Online learning has been referred to with several terms, for example, *virtual learning*, *E-learning*, *online education*, *online instruction* and *distance learning*. According to Rogers, Berg, Boettcher, Howard, Justice and Schenk (2009), those definitions were mostly “based on the delivery of materials over the internet rather than defining online learning from the learner’s perspective” (p.580). They argued that any conception of online learning should consist of two aspects: interaction and support. As such online learning, being conducted using the internet, must be interactive and supportive for different learners. Drawing on these principles, the present study refers to online learning as an activity that “...involves the learner’s use of the internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” (Ally, 2004a, p.17)

Types of online learning

Online learning takes several forms. But, they are mostly performed in two modes, i.e. synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous online learning refers to one that occurs simultaneously, while asynchronous online learning is one in which there is no need for either the teacher or the student to be simultaneously present at the same time (Bansal, 2021). In addition, online learning essentially replicates two general categories of education, i.e. formal and informal learning (Carliner, 2004). Formal online learning is intentional and mainly characterized by stated learning objectives and seeks to achieve predetermined outcomes. Learners’ achievements are assessed and the course designer has a great control over the learning. Examples of this type of online learning are online classrooms and online courses. Mostly, this type of online learning is synchronously conducted (Carliner, 2004). Informal online learning, on the other hand, is characterized by its flexibility and selectability in providing learning for learners in terms of time, place, and method in an asynchronous manner. It has no predetermined objectives, and learners have the control over the learning and the outcomes they want to achieve. The forms of this type of online learning are knowledge management and performance support (Carliner, 2004).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online learning

Just like other modes of learning, online learning comes with advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages are financial affordability, flexibility of scheduling, ease of resources sharing, adjustability to individual needs, self-discipline, and self-motivation (Zaki, 2022). The disadvantages include lack of interaction with teachers and other students, high possibility of connection problems, psychological and psychological health caused by lack of interaction and lack of movement for a long time, lack of teacher control, lack of motivation, and environmental disturbances (Zaki, 2022).

Online Language Learning

The growth of online language learning has been closely linked to the development of computer technology and the internet. The impetus for online language learning was the introduction of computers into language learning in the 1960s which was then termed as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Warschauer (2000) suggests that the development of CALL can be divided into three stages which are characterized by the sophistication of the technology

used and pedagogical paradigm it was attached to. The first phase is termed *Behaviouristic CALL* (Warschauer & Healey, 1998) which was popular from 1970s to early 1980s. As the term implies, this mode of CALL drew on behavioristic view of language learning and contained grammar and drills presented in various computer tutorial systems. The second phase was called *Communicative CALL* which was based on the principles of *Communicative Approach*. This mode of CALL stressed more on usage of the language than learning the forms. Computer programs of this type of CALL facilitated learners' creativity in generating and discovering genuine language both independently or in groups. The third phase is called *Integrative CALL*. This type of CALL uses networked computers and incorporates the multimedia (Warschauer & Healey, 1998) and, later, the internet.

The evolution of Integrative CALL, furthermore, made it possible for mass forms of online learning, including online language courses. The Open University in the United Kingdom, for example, started such a course in 1995 (Hockly, 2015). Nowadays, online language learning comes in many forms, such as formal courses, virtual worlds, and language learning communities, of which language learners can suit their choice with their individual language learning needs. Technologically, CALL has currently evolved into *Mobile Assisted Learning Learning* (MALL) which provides a wider flexibility for language learners to learn from anywhere and at any time using their mobile gadgets.

Research on online EFL learning during Covid-19 pandemic

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, a considerable number of studies on the impacts of online learning on students' foreign language learning, especially in EFL contexts, have been conducted and yielded mixed findings. For example, study by Mahyooob (2020) on Saudi Arabian university EFL learners showed that, due to technical and communication problems, the students were not satisfied with the progress they made with their English. University EFL learners in Kosovo (Rakaj, 2022), Vietnam (Pham, Luu, Mai, Thai, & Ngo, 2022). However, study by Jiang, Namaziandost, Azizi, and Razmi, (2022) reported that online learning brought positive effects on Iranian EFL students' motivation, anxiety, and attitude in EFL learning. Similar findings were also reported on Chinese EFL learners (Zou, Huang, Ma, & Qiu, 2021). Furthermore, Thai and Afgan EFL students in Sukman and Mhunkongdee (2021) and Rahim and Chandran (2021) respectively indicated positive attitude toward online learning and preferred face-to-face classroom learning.

In the Indonesian context, studies on how online learning impacts EFL students also showed mixed findings. For example, Lengkanawati, Wirza, and Alicia (2021), Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020), Atmojo and Nugroho, A. (2020), and Famularsih (2020) recorded similar problems and preference for face-to-face classroom learning experienced and opted for by EFL students in other parts of the world reported above. Nonetheless, despite having the same problems, other Indonesian EFL students also showed positive attitudes toward and perceived online learning as a better alternative for face-to-face classroom learning (Anwar, & Wahid 2021; Pasaribu, & Dewi, 2021).

The mixed findings of studies reviewed in this subsection seem to suggest that, first, students' experiences in online learning are, to some extent, context specific in nature. This is indicated by the fact that not all of the EFL students were reported to have unpleasant experiences in online learning. Second, the review also shows that most studies on the issue were focused on general online learning experience. This signifies the need to specifically explore how EFL students experience learning English through online learning which is the objective of the present study.

Methodology

This study sought to explore the students’ experience in online learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic and elicit their preferences of modes of learning for the pandemic aftermath. Given these objectives, the present study draws on qualitative design and a phenomenological approach. This section details the setting, the participants, the data collection and data analysis techniques of the study.

Setting of the study

This study was conducted at the English department of a state university in Indonesia during the implementation of full online learning due to Covid-19 Pandemic. Specifically, It took place in the second semester of the implementation of the online learning policy. As such, at the time of the study, the students had had more than two one-long experiences of online learning through several platforms, mainly *Zoom Meeting*, *Google Meet*, *Learning Management System (LMS)* and *Whatsapp*.

The participants

Twelve students of the English department of various phases of their study trajectory, i.e. semester, voluntarily participated in the study. The recruitment of the participants was initiated by sending an invitation message for participation in the study through several student Whatsapp groups. 25 students responded to the invitation and expressed their willingness to participate. Considering the scope and delimitations of the study, and the representation of participants from across different semesters, 12 of them were selected as the participants of the study. They consisted of 5 male and 7 female students. Before data collection, they were then sent a concern form to fill out and signed ensuring their voluntary participation and protection of their rights as participants of the study. In this report, the participants are denoted with codes. Brief summary of their demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participants’ codes and demographic information*

| No | Code | Gender | Semester |
|----|------------|--------|----------|
| 1 | Student 1 | Male | 2 |
| 2 | Student 2 | Male | 2 |
| 3 | Student 3 | Female | 2 |
| 4 | Student 4 | Male | 2 |
| 5 | Student 5 | Female | 4 |
| 6 | Student 6 | Female | 4 |
| 7 | Student 7 | Female | 4 |
| 8 | Student 8 | Female | 4 |
| 9 | Student 9 | Female | 6 |
| 10 | Student 10 | Male | 6 |
| 11 | Student 11 | Male | 6 |
| 12 | Student 12 | Female | 6 |

Data collection

The data of the present study were collected through online semi-structured interviews with the participants using Google meet online video conference application. The interviews were conducted individually on each of the twelve participants on a schedule that they agreed. The interview questions centered on their experience in online learning and their preferred mode of learning after Covid-19, i.e. online, offline, or a combination of the two. On average the interviews lasted between fifteen to twenty minutes and were audio recorded. As a compensation for their participation that cost them some amount of internet data, with their permission, before the interviews the researcher topped up each of the participants' internet data quota to the amount that was deemed sufficient for the interviews to be effectively conducted.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed following the steps for thematic analysis techniques suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the audio records of the interviews were transcribed verbatim; second, the transcriptions were read for several time for the purposes of familiarization with the data while at the same time assigning initial codes for parts of the data that revealed the information sought in the study; third, data that had the same code were then collated; fourth, the potential themes for the collated codes were identified and data that were relevant to the themes were collated; fifth, the potential themes were checked for the extent to which they fit the entire data set which was then followed by generating a thematic map; seventh, the themes were reviewed and refined for a clearer ones; and sixth, a description for each of the themes were finally developed.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, a member checking technique (Creswell, 2005) was conducted. For this purpose, the participants were asked to evaluate the accuracy findings of the study in written form. This included the accuracy of the interpretations of the accounts from the interviews quoted in the research report and the representativeness of the themes. Some revisions on the report were then made based on the participants' feedback.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study organized following the order of the research questions. Themes identified in the thematic data analysis and relevant interview excerpts are presented to describe the findings.

The students' experiences in online learning during Covid-19 pandemic

Almost all the participants narrated their stressful and uncomfortable experiences in online learning. Mainly, they highlighted their inability to fully understand the learning materials and online lectures. Such an experience was shared by 9 out of the 12 participants. They associated the

inability with the prevailing internet connection problems and the nature of online learning that limited their interaction with the lecture and their fellow students. Student 1, 4, and 5, for example, described:

“...learning material becomes quite difficult to understand...it is because students cannot interact directly with the lecturer. Especially if the internet network is bad.” (Student 1).

“The drawback of course is that the learning process does not run well because it is more difficult to understand what lecturers mean in delivering material when the internet network is not good.” (Student 4)

“I found it a little difficult to understand online learning, because there were many obstacles at that time that could make students feel overwhelmed, one of which was an unstable internet network connection.”(Student 5).

Two of the students also mentioned that they felt stressed with the problems they were having with online learning. They recalled that online learning that tended to results in more assignments while observing the outdoor activity restriction impacted on their mental condition. This, furthermore, also impacts on their psychological readiness for online learning. One of the students also described that learning from home, not having to go to classrooms, might put them at ease compared to that in normal situation. However, they also felt that the comfort of learning from home caused demotivation.

“Based on my personal experience when doing lectures online during covid-19, I felt the lack of passion for learning because I was too comfortable with the situation at home so I felt a little lazy when lectures took place.” (Student 11)

In addition, they felt that home is not a conducive place for learning.

“The situation in my house which was never quiet always made it difficult for me to focus on the lesson explained by my lecturer because it was disturbed by the atmosphere behind my cellphone camera.” (Student 7)

“I don’t think I can learn better from home. There are so many distractions. I just cannot focus. Let alone the connection problems.” (Student 12)

Despite all the negative experiences they had in online learning, some of the students also recognized the positive aspects of it. They particularly highlighted the ease and flexibility that online learning offers.

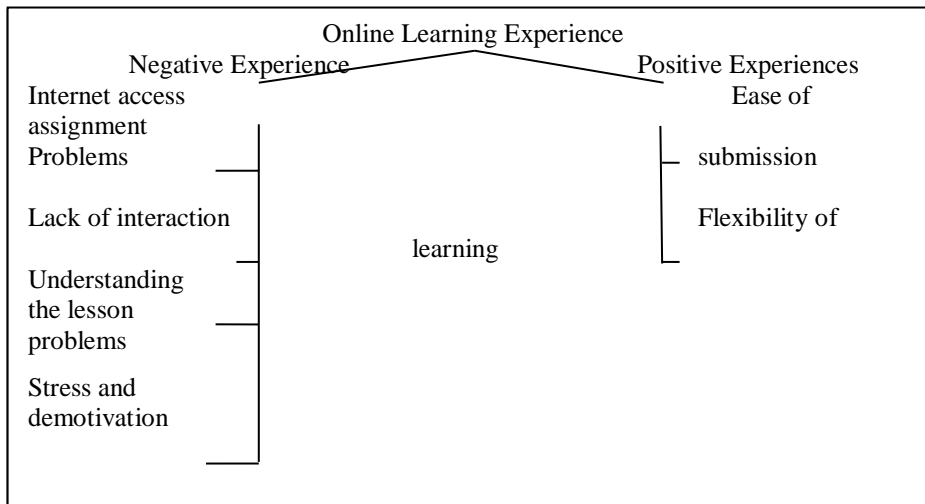
“But online learning it also makes it a little easier for us as students to submit assignments, by only sending them, such as via WA, Google classroom and others.”
(Student 9)

“Students can learn many things with their gadgets... better than what they get in the class. They can learn new things, for example from Youtube. But it depends on how they use the technology.” (Student 10)

“If there were no Covid-19, we would never really know and experience online learning. I would not know that there are actually so many online resources I can use to learn English.” (Student 6)

Overall, the findings regarding the students’ experiences in online learning presented above can be categorized into two main themes. First, negative experiences that are related to the sub-theme of the problems of internet access, lack of interaction, the problems of understanding the lessons, le learning stress and demotivation. Second, positive experiences that evolve around the sub-themes of ease of assignment submission and flexibility of learning. The following figure depicts the themes and sub-themes.

Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes in the students’ experiences in online learning



How online learning impacts on the students’ English learning

Online learning not only impacts on the students’ learning in general, but also specifically on the students’ English learning. First they highlighted how the absence of face-to-face interaction significantly reduced the opportunity for them to practice English with their colleagues and impact on their learning of the four language skills, i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Online learning exposed them more to listening and reading but limited their chance to speak English.

“On campus I usually practice my English with my friends. Now, I cannot. especially with speaking.” (Student 10)

“During online learning It’s hard to find friends to practice English with. I don’t think

my speaking improves a lot during online learning.” (Student 9)

“We do more listening and reading on online learning....some lectures send videos or ask us to watch youtube videos....materials to read. But I had to do it alone. Of course, I can discuss them with my friends on Whatsapp, but it’s different. We don’t speak English a lot. Not like in offline learning.” (Student 11).

More challenging experiences were particularly shared by lower semester students, i.e. semester 2 and semester 4. This was due to the fact that they already had to do online learning since their first semester. The students experienced uncertainty, anxiety, and lack of confidence as the results of having to adapt to learning English online.

“Imagine, as a first semester student, with minimal knowledge of English I had to study it online. Sometimes, I felt lost...whether I would make it or not....my English. Let alone there are other subject that are not related to English that I had to take.”(Student 2)

“Although I had already had online learning just before I finished my high school...but it was not about learning English. Now, I am an English department student...I will be an English teacher. I mean... can I really master English with online learning?” (Student 3)

“I felt very anxious...stressed the first time we had to do online learning. I never learned English that way before. Yes...there are lecturers, but I cannot ask questions directly on things I don’t understand like in classrooms. I feel more unconfident with my English.” (Student 6).

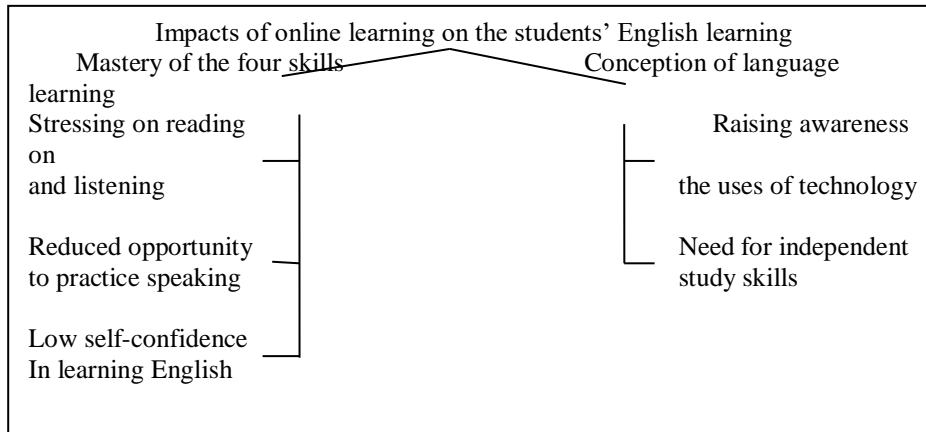
Nonetheless, few of the students also mentioned that online learning made them aware of the other ways to learn English and the need to be able to learn it independently.

“When I decided to go to the English department I didn’t expect to learn it online. I wanted to learn it face-to-face from the lecturers. But during online learning when the lecturers showed us online resources we can learn English with, I realized what I have missed so far. To be frank, I rarely used my gadget for learning English before.” (Student 7)

“Sure...in online learning I can’t depend on the lecturers. The time is limited. I can’t discuss a lot with my friends. So, I have to be able to study independently.” (Student 8)

It can be summarized that the students’ accounts on the impacts of online learning on their English learning centered on two themes (Figure 2). First, the impacts the felt on their mastery of the four language skills which include the sub-themes of stress on reading and listening, reduced opportunity to practice speaking and Low self-confident in learning English. Second, accounts on how online learning showed them the potential of using technology to assist the in learning English and the need to embrace independent learning suggest changes in the conception of language learning.

Figure 2. Themes and sub-themes on impacts of online learning on the students' English learning



The Students' preferred mode of learning in the aftermath of the Covid-19

When asked whether they prefer to keep going on online learning, going back to classrooms for face-to-face lectures, or a combination of the first and the second, ten of the students confirmed their preference for the second mode of learning. Their reasons centered on the issues of ease of understanding, efficiency, interaction, and learning responsibility.

“Face-to-face learning is more efficient and students understand better what the lecturers explains, they are also understood more quickly without obstacles, student and teacher interactions can take place better, and also reduces the burden on parents about internet quota.” (Student 12)

“With the face-to-face lecture students can interact with their friends and reduce boredom or stress. In addition, students can directly practice and be guided by lecturers directly.” (Student 8)

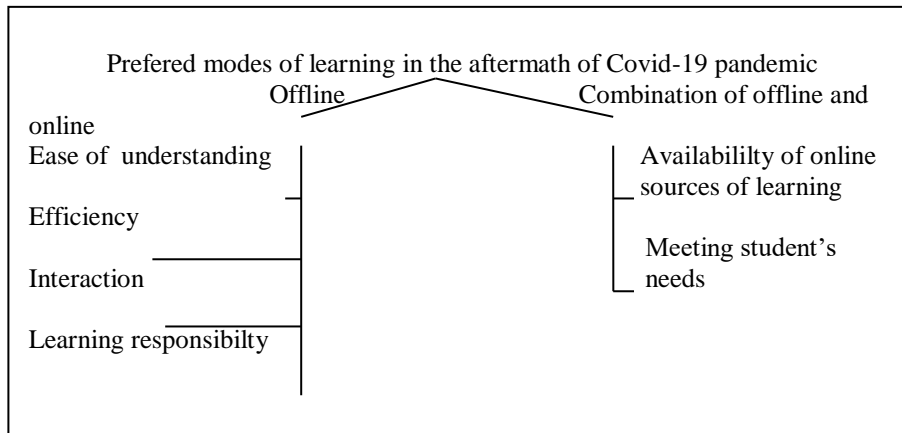
“The face-to-face learning process requires us to come to campus, students will feel more responsible.” (Student 2)

The two students who preferred the combination between offline and online learning mode reflected on their views that learning can be successfully carried out through online media and lecturers were not the only resource for learning. They also suggested that online learning offers greater possibilities to suit learning with student's needs.

In my opinion Covid-19 doesn't make education hard to get. Nowadays, technology and the internet are easier to get and use. Teacher can teach the student with video conference like Zoom, Google meet and so on, the student can talk to each other and discuss about their class topic via group whatsapp and so many way to do it.” (Student 10)

“Lecturers are not the only resources who should provide all materials. There are many websites and applications that provide thousands of worksheets, quizzes, videos, flash cards or online games to support online learning. Students can select some online resources based on their needs and simply combine some media and materials to create interactive activity.” (Student 5)

Figure 3. Themes for reasons for preferred learning mode in the aftermath of Covid-19



Discussion

The problem of access to the internet connection identified in the present study is shared by many other students in many parts of the world, particularly those who live in disadvantaged areas in term of technology infrastructures. Studies by Van and Thi’s (2021) in Vietnam; Barrot, Llenares and Del Rosaria (2021) in the Philippines, Heng and Song (2021) in Cambodia, Bordoloi, Das and Das (2021), and Aboagye, Yawson, and Appiah (2021) in Ghana, for example, show that students living in such a such situation had unpleasant experiences in online learning. In fact, gaps in the intensity of participation in online learning between areas with good and limited internet access in relation to income and geographical position of education institutions were also apparent in a developed country such as the United States (Bacher-Hicks, Goodman, & Mulhern, 2021). This concurrence further weights the vital role of infrastructure and facilities in online learning.

The findings of present study on the students’ experience with the lack of interaction and lack of motivation in online learning concurred with Means and Neisler (2021) in their survey of 1.008 of U.S undergraduate students. They found that students of all backgrounds experienced such phenomena. Similar findings were also identified among university students in Turkey (Özüdoğru, 2021) and Nepal (Khatai & Bhatta, 2020). In addition to the lack of motivation, the participants of the present study also voiced that they were experiencing other psychological problems such as stress and anxiety. Other researchers who also found the same problems in their participants suggest the psychological phenomena seemed to result from an accumulation of problems, such as those related to internet access (Bacher-Hicks, Goodman, & Mulhern, 2021), and instant changes from face-to-face interactive learning to socially restricted and isolated online

learning (Garcia et al., 2012). Drawing on this accumulation of problems, the present study's participants' difficulty to understand online lessons, despite their mentions of ease of assignment submission and flexibility of learning, was not unexpected.

The participants of the present study perceived that the nature of online learning that led them more into reading and listening activities had, at the same time, reduced the opportunity for them to practice speaking. In addition, they were also experiencing low self-confidence to learn English. As argued in the introduction of this report, as far as the issue is concerned in the Indonesian context, no similar previous studies have drawn attention to these phenomena. In the global context, so far, only Karataş and Tuncer (2020) have identified that their Turkish EFL learners perceived speaking as the skill that received the least advantage from online learning. Such a scarcity might be due to the foci of other similar studies that were more on the general impacts of online learning.

Concerning the unpleasant experiences they went through in online learning, the majority of the students' preference for going back to face-to-face mode of learning in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic was expectable. The preference also reflected their disbelief on the effectiveness of online learning. However, apart from the issue of internet access and infrastructure, the reasons for their preference that centered on the notions of ease of understanding, efficiency, interaction, and learning responsibility seem to suggest their need for instructor's direct guidance and support and their colleagues' presence in learning. This highlights research findings that, in EFL contexts, instructors are still the main source of learning and classrooms are the place where the students practice their English the most (Jayusna, Asih, & Suhatmad, 2022; Al Bzour & Smadi, 2017). Nonetheless, preference for a combination of offline and online learning voiced by the two students and their accounts on how online learning changed their conceptions about language learning showed the students also saw the positive impacts of online learning.

Conclusion and implications

The present study shows that the EFL students had unpleasant experiences in online learning during Covid-19 pandemic. Their experiences were also shared by other students in general regardless of their majors. However, the study reveals that the students also experienced issues that specifically related to their status as EFL students where lack of interaction both with lecturers and fellow students had limited the opportunity for them to develop their English speaking skills. Furthermore, the unpleasant experiences had led the majority of them to prefer going back to face-to-face classroom learning in the aftermath of the pandemic. However, although small in number, a few of the students saw the positive impacts online learning had had on their perceptions of the role of lecturers and the importance of autonomous learning as well as how the practices of language learning could possibly be conducted online.

Based on the findings and the discussion, the followings are recommended: (1) although all of us do not expect a similar pandemic to happen in the future, it is still important for education authorities to improve infrastructure and facilities that support e-learning. EFL Teachers and students are also suggested to continuously improve and update their information technology literacy. The reason being is the fact the advance of technology suggests that online learning will be a significant part of education in the future. Online learning experiences during Covid-19 pandemic could serve as references for the improvements. 2. Online learning technology that sufficiently

facilitates interactive speaking skill practices needs to be developed and, therefore, research on this issue is highly recommended.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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