

THE UTILIZATION OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN ONLINE LEARNING: EFL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to investigate the EFL students' perspectives toward the utilization of digital platforms in online learning. Learning Management System, WhatsApp, and Google Meet are the digital platforms used in the online learning of this research. This descriptive research involved 79 students from three different faculties of a private university in Palembang that selected through purposive sampling technique. The data were collected by administering questionnaires and interviews to the participants via Google Form and WhatsApp Chat. Collecting, classifying, and describing were a set of data analysis procedures used by the researcher. The results revealed that the students perceived the use of the digital platforms in EFL learning positively. The students believed that learning through utilizing the digital platforms had brought positive impacts that lead to the enhancement of their English achievement. Using multi-digital platforms provided an opportunity to experience a more dynamic learning atmosphere that boosts their skill progress and motivation.

Keywords: *digital platforms; online learning; EFL; students' perspective*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of Covid-19 has brought massive impacts on the education system across the globe. The pandemic forces closures of schools and universities to support the social distancing protocol proposed by World Health Organization (WHO). This leads to the shift of the education system from face-to-face learning to online learning to halt the spread of the pandemic (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) is encouraging online learning in educational institutions of all levels (Abidah, Hidayatullah, Simamora, Fehabutar, & Mutakinati, 2020). This type of system is considered as one of the best solutions to continue the education system without exposing students, teachers, and other related individuals to the risk of being infected by Covid-19.

Online learning is viewed as a proper learning system during the pandemic. This type of learning system promotes social distancing that reduces exposure risk to Covid-19. It is a distance education form that provides a learning experience for adults and children, gives learning access to students living in various areas, and offers a learning

opportunity for those that are not able to attend school for any reasons including due to covid-19 (Kim, 2020). It requires adjustments of instructors and students to support online learning success (Ya Ni, 2013).

According to Kim (2020), online learning brought benefits and limitations. For instance, it doesn't need a physical location that leads to a higher participation rate and it offers effective cost due to travel cost decrease. However, it highly depends on the ability of instructors or students, and it is possibly hindered by technical problems. During the pandemic Covid-19, online learning is one of the most realistic and potential learning types used to continue the education process. Therefore, both advantages and disadvantages of online learning need to be taken into account to realize online learning success and progress.

To support the success of online learning, the utilization of proper digital platforms is highly required. Utilizing digital platforms in EFL learning is inevitable since the development of technology has exposed the students to digitalization. Millennials are digital natives that actively using technological tools. Hence, the integration of digital

platforms into EFL learning is potentially beneficial for millennial students. In addition, various digital platforms are possibly integrated into online learning, such as Learning Management System (LMS), Social Networking Applications, and Video Conferencing.

Learning Management System (LMS) is a digital platform commonly used to facilitate teaching and learning activities, especially at the tertiary level. It is employed to support both online and blended learning and functions as a bridge between instructors and learners through providing a well-organized learning medium (Basal, 2016). Edmodo, Moodle, and Quipper are among LMS that widely used by teachers and students all over the world.

Another type of digital platform used as a means of learning is the social networking application. WhatsApp is a popular mobile phone application and web-based social network that integrates various features to communicate among users (Nihayati & Indriani, 2021). It facilitates the users to exchange text messages, voice notes, video, or any other type of data and information. The features of WhatsApp are highly fruitful to promote online teaching and learning activities that require intensive communication and discussion. Thus, it is included as one of mostly used digital platforms in EFL learning.

Direct interaction in form of face-to-face discussion or communication between teachers and students is unavoidable in EFL learning. Video conferencing is a digital platform that accommodates the necessity. Google Meet is one of the video conferencing that is more widely known and used during this pandemic. It facilitates people to conduct online discussions, meetings, and seminars (Hazairin, 2020).

Many studies revealed positive impacts of digital platform utilization on EFL learning. Tumskiy (2019) mentions several benefits of digital platform use, namely free space and time barriers, flexible use, various assessment, and modern design. Digital platforms eliminated space and time barriers. The platform facilitates students to learn anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, the platforms enable the teacher to adjust the setting and content of the platform. It is a friendly user and adaptable. Moreover, it provides various assessment forms that facilitate the teachers to create many types of assessments. At last, the platform has a modern design. Thus, the students are fond of using it.

Dealing with it, research conducted by Cakrawati in 2017 showed that the students had positive perceptions towards the implementation of Edmodo and Quipper in EFL learning. The students believed that the platforms contributed to effective and efficient EFL learning. The students also stated that the platforms facilitated language skill progress, vocabulary acquisition, and understanding development of the lesson.

In line with it, Ahmed (2019) investigated the effectiveness of WhatsApp use to enhance EFL learners' reading and writing skills. Based on findings, the use of WhatsApp in EFL learning assisted the learners to improve reading and writing skills. WhatsApp was also perceived as a motivating pedagogical tool that helps the learner to experience an enjoyable learning atmosphere.

Concerning it, the result of research conducted by Lawson and Comber in 2014 indicated that the use of videoconferencing in teaching and learning activities promoted independent learning. The learning platform encouraged students' center learning.

More various studies have been conducted regarding the utilization of LMS in EFL online learning (Basal, 2016; Putri & Sari, 2020; Tumskiy, 2019; Wulandari & Budiyanto, 2017). Moreover, many researchers have investigated issues on the implementation of WhatsApp in EFL online learning (Ahmed, 2019; Ayuningtyas, 2018; Hamad, 2017; Nihayati & Indriani, 2021; Suadi 2021). Furthermore, several studies also examined the application of video conferencing in EFL online learning (Lawson & Comber, 2014; Putra, 2021; Setyawan, Aznam, Paidi, Citrawati, & Kusdianto, 2020).

The previous research mostly focused on the investigations of a single digital platform use in English learning. However, students generally have different learning interests, needs, and challenges that are frequently unable to be accommodated by a single digital platform use. Therefore, this research investigated students' perspectives toward the utilization of multiple digital platforms, namely Moodle-based LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet in EFL online learning.

This information brings fruitful insights that potentially contribute to the effective utilization of multiple digital platforms in EFL learning that leads to students' greater learning success. For instance, the students' perspectives help instructors to

consider, select, and apply suitable multiple digital platforms in EFL learning. The proper consideration, selection, and application of digital platforms support effective teaching and learning activities and facilitate students to gain better understanding and achievement.

METHOD

A qualitative approach in terms of descriptive design was employed in this research. The purpose of descriptive design is to explain the phenomena with the features. It therefore mostly focuses on responding to questions “what” (Nassaji, 2015). This type of descriptive study enables the researcher to describe students’ perspectives on the utilization of digital platforms in EFL learning.

The total number of seventy-nine second-semester students of Business and Accounting, Science and Technology, Humanities and Education Faculties of a private university in Palembang were involved as participants of this study. The participants were selected through the purposive sampling technique. To select the participants by using this sampling technique, the researcher relied on judgments with certain considerations and for specific purposes (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

The participants of this research were chosen based on several criteria. First, the participants were second-semester students taking an online English *MKWU* Course. Next, the participants were taught by the same lecturer and discussed the same materials. At last, the participants were using the same digital platforms in learning English that comprised Moodle Based LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet. The students used the three digital platforms in learning English during one semester.

The teaching and learning activities were generally conducted through three phases with similar strategies and digital platforms. In the beginning, the lecturer asked the students to record their attendance and download the material provided on LMS. Next, the lecturer and students discussed the material on the WhatsApp group. Question and answer were the main strategies used in this phase. The lecturer activated students’ prior knowledge and introduced the topic of the lesson through discussion on the WhatsApp group. Finally, the lecturer explained the material and conducted a deep discussion with the students on Google Meet. For instance, conducting role play, conversation,

and presentation was sort of speaking activities normally facilitated by utilizing Google Meet.

The first instrument used by the researcher to collect the data of the study was a questionnaire. The researcher adapted the questionnaire composed by Cakrawati in 2017. The questionnaire of this research consists of three parts. Each part has ten items used to investigate students’ perspectives towards the utilization of digital platforms (LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet) in EFL learning. The items cover ten components namely task, material, motivation, skill progress, ideal learning, easy learning, fun learning, communication, discussion, and access. To respond to the questionnaire, four alternative options that comprise Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) were provided for the participants. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants through Google form.

The interview was the second instrument employed to collect the data. The result of the interview provided more comprehensive information and strengthened the data of the questionnaire. Out of 79, 17 students were selected to join the interview. In the interview, the participants were required to answer questions dealing with the general idea, essential benefits, and frequent challenges of learning English by making use of the digital platforms.

Collecting, classifying, and describing are procedures of the data analysis process conducted by the researcher. The procedures were modified from Corder’s Steps cited in Ellis (1994). Based on the procedure, the researcher analyzed the data through the following three main steps. First, the researcher collected the data by using the questionnaire and interview. Second, the responses to the questionnaire and interview were classified into several categories to see the percentage rate of each item. Third, the data were analyzed and described comprehensively by referring to the percentage rate of each category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire related to the students’ responses towards the utilization of a Moodle-based LMS in EFL online learning revealed that 67.1% of the participants expressed their strong agreement with the statement that LMS facilitated the effective submission of tasks. Next,

around 50% of the students agreed that LMS accommodated the provision of various learning materials and facilitated fun learning. Then, 70.9% of the students stated that the use of LMS in ELF learning had motivated them to learn better. After that, about 60% of the students agreed that the application of LMS promoted their English skill development, created an ideal learning atmosphere, and eased learning activities. Meanwhile, various responses were found in items dealing with communication, discussion, and access. Around 45.6% of the students agreed that the use of LMS supported communication and discussion. Vice versa, 39.2% and 40.5% of the students expressed their disagreement with the statements that LMS utilization facilitated communication and discussion. At last, 36.7% of the students strongly agreed that LMS was easy to access from a mobile phone. However, 21.5% disagreed as it was quite difficult for them to access it.

In line with it, the students' responses towards the use of WhatsApp in EFL learning showed that over 40% of the students believed that the implementation of WhatsApp in EFL online learning had facilitated task submission, and supported an ideal learning atmosphere. In conjunction with it, around 50% of the students highly agreed that WhatsApp was an effective medium for facilitating material sharing, easing

learning, conducting discussion, and providing easy mobile access. In agreement with it, 59.5% of the students expressed their agreement with the statement that WhatsApp helped them to develop their English skills. More than 60% of the students also agreed that using WhatsApp in EFL learning motivated them to learn more and made them enjoy studying English. In addition, 69.6% of the students showed their high agreement with the statement that the use of WhatsApp in learning activities had facilitated communication with lecturers or other students effectively.

In addition, students' responses towards the implementation of Google Meet in EFL learning revealed that Over 46.8% of the students admitted that Google Meet was an effective medium for task submission. Furthermore, over 50% of the students agreed that Google Meet supported the material provision, motivation progress, English skill improvement, ideal, easy, and fun learning atmosphere, communication facility, and discussion opportunity. In addition, even though 35.4% of the students agreed that Google Meet was easily accessed via mobile phone, 20.7% and 11% of the students showed their disagreement and highly disagreement on the easy access of Google Meet. The detailed responses of students are presented in the following table 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. *Students' responses on LMS utilization*

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Task	67.1%	27.8%	5.1%	0%
2	Material	46.8%	51.9%	1.3%	0%
3	Motivation	20.3%	70.9%	8.8%	0%
4	Skill progress	21.5%	63.3%	15.2%	0%
5	Ideal Learning	25.3%	60.8%	13.9%	0%
6	Easy Learning	27.8%	60.8%	11.4%	0%
7	Fun Learning	24.1%	58.2%	17.7%	0%
8	Communication	13.9%	45.6%	39.2%	1.3%
9	Discussion	13.9%	45.6%	40.5%	0%
10	Access	36.7%	36.7%	21.5%	5.1%

Table 2. *Students' responses on WhatsApp utilization*

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Task	43%	46.8%	8.9%	1.3%
2	Material	55.7%	43%	1.3%	0%
3	Motivation	29.1%	62%	8.9%	0%
4	Skill progress	35.4%	59.5%	5.1%	0%
5	Ideal Learning	44.3%	48.1%	7.6%	0%
6	Easy Learning	50.6%	46.8%	2.6%	0%
7	Fun Learning	32.9%	60.8%	6.3%	0%
8	Communication	69.6%	29.1%	1.3%	0%

9	Discussion	59.5%	40.5%	0%	0%
10	Access	59.5%	31.6%	8.9%	0%

Table 3. Students' responses on Google Meet utilization

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Task	21.1%	46.8%	26.6%	5.5%
2	Material	39.2%	54.4%	6.4%	0%
3	Motivation	39.2%	55.7%	5.1%	0%
4	Skill progress	44.3%	50.6%	5.1%	0%
5	Ideal Learning	41.8%	50.6%	7.6%	0%
6	Easy Learning	38%	54.4%	7.6%	0%
7	Fun Learning	35.4%	57%	7.6%	0%
8	Communication	44.3%	53.2%	2.5%	0%
9	Discussion	36.7%	55.7%	7.6%	0%
10	Access	32.9%	35.4%	20.7%	11%

The results of interview

The researcher asked three questions to the 17 participants in the interview. The first question was "What do you think about the utilization of the digital platform in EFL online learning?". In responding to the question, all students agreed that the use of digital platforms in EFL learning was beneficial and important to facilitate teaching and learning activities. In detail, three students stated that "Digital platforms are very important to support communication between students and lecturer and also interaction among students." Next, three students said that "We can improve our skills and knowledge through using digital platforms in learning activities". Then, six students described that "The use of digital platforms help us to learn English well.". At last, five students mentioned that "Digital platforms are very useful. We can understand the material from lecturer better by using the platforms."

The second question of the interview was "What are the essential benefits of utilizing LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet in EFL online learning?". Dealing with the use of LMS, 12 students mentioned that "LMS is the main medium that provides a lot of materials and organizes attendance list, exercise, quiz, and task submission". Furthermore, two students added that "LMS is a good learning medium. We can learn well by using it". In addition, three students stated that "We can see our exercise, quiz, test, and task scores from LMS. So, we can do kind of reflection through it and LMS also helped us to remember doing our task through its reminder."

In answering questions about the important benefits of using WhatsApp in EFL online learning. Nine students stated that "We can communicate well with the lecturer and one another through WhatsApp. We usually chat with our lecturer if we have some questions about the material." Moreover, four students said that "We use WhatsApp group for sharing material and information. It's very effective because we usually check our WhatsApp." Likewise, three students mentioned that "WhatsApp is a good medium for doing discussion and Q & A session." Finally, a student added that "I think

that WhatsApp has many useful features. I can share data, and discuss tasks with my friends by using it."

The students expressed various opinions related to the implementation of Google Meet in EFL online learning. Eight students said that "Google Meet helps us to communicate face-to-face with our lecturers and friends. It's nice to see each other since we never meet directly during this pandemic." Next, seven students stated that "We can understand our lecturer explanation better through Google Meet. We also can discuss together by using it." At last, one student added that "In my opinion, Google Meet makes learning more fun and enjoyable although I am shy to talk directly to my lecturer."

The last question of the interview was "What is the frequent challenge of utilizing the digital platforms in EFL online learning?". Fourteen students responded to this question by saying "Unstable internet connection is the biggest problem when we are studying by using digital platform especially LMS and Google Meet but we can use WhatsApp when LMS and Google Meet are not accessible. WhatsApp doesn't need a lot of mobile data or strong connection." In addition, three other students stated that "During this pandemic, we learn by using digital platforms like LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet but we can't interact freely by using the platforms. It's different from classroom learning."

The utilization of multiple digital platforms in EFL online learning

The findings of the research indicated that the EFL students had positive perspectives toward the utilization of digital platforms in online learning. The results of the questionnaire revealed that most of the students believed that the use of LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet was beneficial to support teaching and learning.

Regarding the task, the students believed that LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet facilitated the submission of the task. LMS enabled the lecturer to set task submission deadlines and provided sufficient file space for task submission. Meanwhile, WhatsApp offered practicality in submitting any file forms to the class

group. In addition, Google Meet facilitated task reports in form of presentations both individual and group. The findings indicated that the students showed solid positive responses toward this category. It implied that the utilization of the digital learning platforms had effectively supported task submission.

In terms of material, most of the students agreed that LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet had been properly used to share the materials related to the lesson. It was easy to access the material through the digital learning platforms. The easy access enabled students to study each topic of the lesson well and understand it better. Greater understanding finally led to the improvement of learning outcomes.

Dealing with motivation, the use of digital platforms in EFL learning was perceived by the students positively. Using the digital platforms helped students to elevate their motivation. For instance, intensive discussion via WhatsApp, direct interaction through Google Meet and various material exposure related to the lesson made the students were getting more motivated to explore deeper to gain a better understanding and higher achievement.

Pertaining to skill progress, the students confirmed that learning through LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet assisted them to develop their language skills. LMS provided material resources that are beneficial for reading skill improvement. Meanwhile, WhatsApp enabled students' interactions and communications and helped them to sharpen their writing skills. In addition, students were able to enhance their listening and speaking skills during studying by using Google Meet.

In conjunction with the learning atmosphere, the students admitted that learning through LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet provided them an experience of having an ideal learning atmosphere where the learning was easy and fun. The students were exposed to various materials through LMS that made it easy to explore the topics easily. The students were also able to interact with one another and with the lecturer without any barrier by making use of WhatsApp. In addition, the students were able to conduct role-play as an alternative fun learning activity through Google Meet.

Concerning communication and discussion, the students agreed that the digital platforms supported interactive and communicative activities. The features of LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet allowed students to communicate and discussed with the lecturer and each other among the students about the topic related to the lesson. The students added that it was more effective to use WhatsApp for written discussion and Google Meet for oral discussion. Meanwhile, LMS was not their main alternative communication and discussion means.

Unstable internet access was one of the most frequent challenges encountered by the students. Limited access to Wi-Fi, bad weather, and lack of mobile data were reasons that contributed to the emergence of the

challenge. The integration of multiple digital platforms is one of the potential alternative solutions for anticipating this challenge. As stated by students in the interview session, when it was hard for them to access digital platforms that require a stable internet network, alternative media were required. WhatsApp was one of the best choices as it does not spend a lot of mobile data and a strong network to access it.

CONCLUSION

The students' perspectives towards the utilization of digital platforms (LMS, WhatsApp, and Google Meet) in EFL online learning were positive. Both the results of the questionnaire and interview revealed similar results. The students believed that the integration of multiple digital platforms had facilitated teaching and learning activities well.

The students believed that learning through making use of LMS helped them to be more discipline through the remainder of the task submission deadline. LMS also provided various materials that can be accessed by the students easily, thus it helped them to understand the material better and motivated them to learn more. Furthermore, the integration of WhatsApp and Google Meet into EFL learning provided interactive communication and discussion between students and lecturers and with one another. Moreover, the implementation of the digital platforms also supported an ideal learning atmosphere that was enjoyable for students. Even though it was frequently challenging to access the platforms, the use of multiple platforms potentially provided useful alternatives that accommodate students with different challenges, necessities, and interests. In short, utilizing digital platforms in EFL learning properly helped students to understand the material well, therefore it leads to better achievement.

This research only focused on investigating students' perspectives. It is suggested that future researchers examine instructors' perspectives dealing with this topic to gain fruitful insight for better application of the digital platforms in EFL learning. In addition, it is also recommended to conduct quantitative research in terms of experimental design to figure out the effectiveness of using digital platforms to improve students' English achievements.

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