Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)
Vol. 16, No. 2, May 2022, pp. 226~234
ISSN: 2089-9823 DOI: 10.11591/edulearn.v16i2.20422

Students' experiences and learning objectives: Implications for future online learning

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Nov 18, 2021
Revised Apr 21, 2022
Accepted May 30, 2022

Keywords:

Burnout
English for specific purposes
Higher education
Learning objectives
Online learning

ABSTRACT

Positive online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic remain debatable in the literature where students and instructors have been enforced to shift from conventional face-to-face meetings to virtual learning. This study aims to explore English for specific purposes (ESP) students' experiences during online learning, along with their concerns on learning attainment and personal adaptations. A qualitative case-study method was employed through interviews with students (n=19) from three private universities in Indonesia. The obtained data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Results showed that students of different departments approached ESP differently, but they similarly reported facing difficulties in reaching the learning objectives. They also experienced burnout from excessive online learning and found themselves hardly adapting to various instructors' strategies. These findings revealed the need to revisit online ESP delivery classes in higher education. Implications for the future design of online ESP learning courses and instructor professional development are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The current pandemic stretching beyond 2020 has forced the largely-practised conventional face-to-face learning into virtual classrooms. Higher education institutions are not an exception as they must adapt to timely modifications in compliance with the policy of restricted social interaction [1]. This practice is evident in some higher education institutions in Africa [2], India [3], Indonesia [4], The Netherlands [5], and the United States [6]. A current study by [7] reveals that even a Tourism subject for university students could be carried out virtually and improve students' speaking ability. His study empirically showed that learning objectives were achievable through technology literacy. It can be said that a proper learning management system has taken a significant place in online learning, along with other communication apps and media to support student learning. A similar concept has been documented in Nigeria since 2013 where the advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) should be integrated into current education [2].

However, the delivery of online learning is painstakingly challenging where many studies documented various problems ranging from digital devices and electronic support [8], home conditions [9], to psychological disturbances [10]. Excessive online learning likely leads to the ideation of suicidal actions among students [10]. In higher education, the pressure of online learning even led to non-completion where students could not attain their university degrees [11]. Students did not enjoy online learning, which is lacked

preparation and scope of classroom activities that fit their needs [12]. This is against the contention of online methods where learning must be flexible [13] to support students learning at their own convenient pace [14].

Among the subjects offered in higher education, English for specific purposes (ESP) targets students to learn English as a second foreign language to improve their English competencies in particular domains [15]. It calls for intensive, mutual communications between instructors and students, and also among students [16]. The shift of ESP delivery from conventional classroom meetings to virtual meetings poses more challenges due to the decreased direct connection between teachers and students [17]. This inevitable change has compelled instructors to adapt to online teaching forms [18] and craft the best teaching and learning practices [19], which must concur with the philosophy of ESP that is based on students' needs [20], [21]. Hence, language instructors must be able to engage students in communicative skills to facilitate meaningful learning.

Study shows that students of different departments approach ESP differently. For example, Marine Engineering students improved their English competence better when they were given real-life task-based language needs [22]. This method worked effectively because students could perceive the coherence between the given course and the subjects they learn in their department. Meanwhile, students of Computer Science require specially tailored materials to help them understand grammar complexity [23], which was relevant to their ability in connecting ideas. [24] specifically show different approaches to learning vocabulary practised by science and social science students. These previous studies support the contention that ESP delivery should be coherent with students' needs and abilities.

Therefore, the student's learning goals are one of the non-ESP issues that are tailored to the student's needs. Learning objectives are pivotal because they are the end goals of the knowledge and skills given by the instructors that apply to students' real-life [25]. Learning objectives guide instructors to organize course assessments and learning activities throughout a semester [26], which calls for compatibility to result in significant learning experiences [27]. Instructors' ability to tailor pedagogical techniques will ignite students' higher-order thinking skills that impact their learning experiences [28]. It can be said that the attainment of learning objectives depends on the learning delivery method to make students benefit from the ESP subjects.

However, it has been largely documented that learning objectives are often not achieved during this pandemic. Students reported burnout when too many materials reduce the enjoyment of learning activities [29]. It is problematic when students perceive a discrepancy between their resources and their expectations of success [30]. There is a gap in the literature where much research similarly shows students' online learning problems [31]–[33], but the resolutions to address these drawbacks have been limited [34]. Hence, it is critical to move beyond the exploration of students' perspectives by taking into account their expectations as end-user in higher education. This study is also built on a previous study where ESP instructors' reported minimum support in professional development (PD) that might improve their teaching practices [35]. There are two overarching research questions, those are: i) How are students' experiences with online ESP learning?; and ii) What are students' expectations toward the future of online ESP learning?. The results of our study aim to fill the literature gap where students' expectations inform the design improvement of future online ESP learning and give implications for instructor PD programs.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research design

A qualitative case-study design with interview technique and thematic analysis was used in this study. Qualitative research was employed to help researchers explore the existing phenomena to gain understanding within a specific context [36]. This design fits this study's aims to illustrate students' experiences and expectations of online ESP learning.

2.2. Subjects of the study

Convenience sampling was employed as a part of the non-probability sampling method [37] where clear logistics and resources benefit in terms of travel, cost, and time expenditure [38]. Nineteen participants have been recruited following the inclusion criteria of: i) First-year ESP students; and ii) Having completed at least two semesters (one full-year course) of online learning. This sampling method set a scope and limitation on this study where the results are not generalizable to the population.

2.3. Data collection

Announcements of participant recruitment, which consisted of research objectives, participants' inclusive criteria, and researchers' contacts, were distributed to first-year ESP students in three Indonesian private universities. Students who wished to take part in this study were free to approach the researchers. The selected participants were interviewed through Zoom and Skype and recorded upon participants' consent.

Each interview took 30-40 minutes following a semi-structured interview protocol. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it takes into account the values of Connectivity, Humanness, and Empathy to facilitate authentic and dialogical talk in educational research [39]. The interview protocol was crafted to allow participants elaborate and reflect on their answers [36] and let researchers probe and build further questions based on participants' answers [40].

Hence, the protocol consisted of 14 question items divided into two parts concerning students' experiences and expectations. Among the item samples are 'how are your feelings upon completing about a year of online learning' and 'how do you see the continuity of online learning in the future'. We mostly incorporated how and why to invite participants' genuine opinions and avoid yes/no answers.

2.4. Data analysis

The obtained data were analyzed using thematic analysis to gather similar findings reflecting particular themes to answer the research questions [41]. Six steps of thematic analysis in educational research [42] are applied in this study, which covers: i) Data familiarization: the recorded interviews were transcribed manually to obtain a data corpus. This resulted in the mapping of participants' demography and transcriptions of the whole interview results; ii) Code generation: statements in the transcriptions were analyzed and coded to identify participants' name, age, department, faculty, positive online learning experience, negative online learning experience, online learning methods, online learning objectives, future expectations, and other concerns; iii) Theme search: series of codes resulting from the previous process was considered as sub-themes. Hence, similar sub-themes were grouped to obtain major themes. Four major themes were generated, named in participants' demography, online learning experiences, future expectations, and other concerns; iv) Theme review: the four major themes were reviewed to answer the research questions. At this stage, the relationship between themes was analyzed, for example, how participants' concerns might influence their online learning experience; v) Theme definition: two major themes were defined as the focus of this study, namely: a) online learning experiences, with the sub-themes of positive and negative experiences; and b) future expectations, with the sub-themes of the learning method and compatible learning. An additional theme related to students' concern about the time of online learning was added; vi) Report production: wrapped up the whole analysis results before the writing of findings and discussion parts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 19 students who participated in this study were interviewed in August, 2021. The initial screening of data indicated that all 19 participants were first-year students who completed two semesters of ESP course at their university. All participants were given pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality and integrity of the research. The demographic information of the participants is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demography

Department	Faculty	Age	Gender		Number of participants
			Male	Female	
Accounting	Economics & Business	19	1	0	1
Biology Education	Teacher Training & Education	18	0	2	2
Civil Engineering	Engineering	19	0	1	1
Islamic Education	Islamic Studies	19.5	4	0	4
Islamic Law	Islamic Studies	20	1	0	1
Nursing	Medical Science	20	0	7	7
Psychology	Psychology	19.5	0	3	3
Total					19

The majority of students were around 19 to 20 years old with the youngest student of 18 years old showed in the study cohort. The participants were predominantly female (n=13) where Nursing students dominated close to 40% of students' groups by department. Information on students' departments and faculty would underpin the analysis of this study.

3.1. Students' experiences with online ESP learning

Two major findings emanated from the interview results about students' experiences with online ESP learning. Students report different approaches to ESP learning depending on their departments and faculties, while reports on learning objectives showed similarity regardless of their departments, faculties, or the variety of learning methods. It was found that students of science departments (i.e., Biology, Civil Engineering, Nursing) reported abundant materials. This finding is evident in the series of transcripts,

> *"I felt my departments have too many subjects already, and to divide English into Listening, Grammar, and Reading were a lot of works while they would be accounted as the two-credit subject."* (A/Biology/230721/PU1)

> *"Once we needed to come to campus because there was a practicum that couldn't be done virtually. The theories were given online, but I didn't understand them well. It demanded my focus. I thought I should study more about it than (studying) English,"* (R/Civil Engineering/240721/PU1)

> *"I'm afraid (that) too much online learning will affect our quality as a student and future practitioner."* (A/Nursing/270721/PU2)

These transcriptions evidenced that some students were burdened by too many materials. This implies a weakness of online ESP learning, which did not take into account students' conditions in particular departments. In particular, science students benefited less from online ESP courses than that social science students. This finding follows a study by Simonova and Poulova [43] where Engineering students, as samples of science students, would study better through a specifically tailored teaching approach. They could perceive the exact objectives of their learning, and thus, discovered meaningful learning when being supported.

Although our study did not explicate the specific ESP skills to learn, the research subjects from the Science departments reported difficulties in studying multiple language skills instead of their similar objectives. They expressed their concerns and wonder how the division of ESP skills would respond to their learning needs. This finding follows [44] where interaction and communicated expectations are the keys to successful online and blended learning. There is a need for a more explicit explanation of the end goal of ESP learning objectives to ensure students about the benefits of ESP for students in their departments. On the other hand, students of the Social Science departments (i.e., Islamic Education, Islamic Law, Psychology) reported differently. They felt that the given materials were fair, as summarized in the following transcripts.

> *"I'm a member of a non-governmental organisations (NGO) that requires me to travel a lot. Online learning allows me to be multitasking while practising English as I travel."* (A/Accounting/270721/PU3)

> *"Online learning saves time and money, and reduces my anxiety when I have to speak English."* (N/Islamic Education/290721/PU1)

> *"I like online learning for I could do many things in one go. I can join a class while doing assignments. I like watching English videos (because) I don't need to go to the library to study English books."* (N/Islamic Law/070821/PU3)

These statements illustrate that online ESP learning supports the development of Social Science students. These students enjoyed the flexibility of online learning that responded to their different needs. To this end, findings based on students across departments call for logical reasoning on how they potentially learn online ESP differently.

It is noteworthy that Social Science students expressed enjoyment and more advantages of online ESP learning due to practicability, reduced anxiety, and supported multitasking. All of these account for the interplay between the virtual learning environment and social media use that is well-incorporated in higher education [45]. Social Science students have more freedom in integrating their obtained knowledge and their activities to make their learning more meaningful. This finding supports the study by Tseng *et al*. [46] where soft skills were proven effective to improve social science (i.e. Business School) students' achievement during online learning. However, students showed similar views on learning objectives regardless of their departments. The similarities are reflected,

> *"My ESP instructors offered various learning methods, but I didn't feel like it can replace the effectiveness of face-to-face meetings. I learnt a little at the end of the semester."* (D/Islamic Education/280721/PU1)

> *"I thought online was fun, but lately it exhausted me. I concentrated poorly and my English didn't improve."* (F/Psychology/270721/PU2)

> *"The instructors trying to be creative with various learning methods, but I couldn't keep up. It confused me and I thought it's not effective (for learning English)."* (N/ Nursing/300721/PU2)

Students' expression on learnt a little, did not improve and confused hinted that online ESP learning did not achieve the planned learning goals. It was also shown that students' proficiency did not improve despite various learning methods offered by the instructors. This finding is particularly interesting because the learning benefit experienced by social science students did not help them much in achieving their learning objectives. This may be because instructors' readiness in delivering online learning could not resolve the occurring obstacles [47]. Sometimes technology integration fails because the given online materials are not relevant to both teachers' and students' efficacy [48]. It is also evident that students could not keep up with instructors' ongoing exploration of finding the best teaching methods.

Moreover, missing links between the choices of teaching strategies, materials, and techniques may also affect overall language success [17]. Effective online learning calls for an adjustment among those three where every material supports each other. This present study implies that students' enjoyment does not always comply with the learning objectives. This finding lends strong support to the contention that students' achievement is not determined by internal factors alone, but also by external factors, such as the surrounding environment and access to learning resources [46].

3.2. Students' expectations on future online ESP learning

Two major findings were generated about the modes of future online ESP learning; and the time of lesson delivery. It is of particular interest to this present study that students expressed similar expectations regardless of their departments or faculties. First, most students showed their interest in blended learning, transcribed,

> *"I think onsite (learning) will improve my interaction in English, and I like online (learning) because of its many learning resources."* (N/Psychology/300721/PU3)

> *"Blended learning will be the best because we don't need to have make-up classes in case the instructors are absent."* (N/Biology/120821/PU1)

> *"Online learning helps me a lot with learning materials, but I need a face-to-face meeting to experience real practices."* (N/Nursing/070821/PU2)

These statements summarized students' interest in blended learning as they approached the combination of online and onsite learning positively. It is thus suggested that effective blended learning methods must be planned as students that used to the exposure to online resources will likely approach ground resources differently. This finding contests the study by Kirovska-Simjanoska [18] who found that digital learning is not always more effective than in-class instruction. In her study, the effectiveness of digital learning highly depends on students' initiative and motivation. Our study conversely shows that students showed enthusiasm for the idea of blended learning. They perceived online learning modes to be more relatable to their digital learning resources, and onsite learning modes can support real-life practices. Our finding concurs with a study by Dhyab and Varol [49] where social media is proven effective to support students' learning in the digital era.

It is of particular interest that both Science and Social Science students showed similar interest in blended learning. Students' interest is more critical than the teaching method and delivery for it improves their learning engagement [50]. Specifically denotes that teachers' beliefs, behaviours, and personality precede teaching styles that invite higher students' engagement, which finally impact their learning achievement. For future design, it is important that ESP blended learning also takes into account the surrounding environment to provide students with authentic learning experiences. This analysis is supported by the notion that online learning will not be superior to a face-to-face meetings when the elements of social interactions are not incorporated [51].

Second, students expressed their concerns about the online learning time. These arise from the current practice of online ESP learning that lacked sensitive timing, in which some classes were conducted out of working hours or on weekdays. Among the statements are,

> *"Some instructors had Zoom meetings on weekends, and some evening meetings finished at 10 pm,"* (A/Biology/230721/PU1)

"We had Zoom meetings when it's a public holiday." (R/Civil Engineering/240721/PU1)

The above excerpts showed that some instructors were highly dependent on the borderless feature of online learning. This is against the contention of learners' independency in online learning where they can study at their own convenient pace [52]. Further guidance is thus needed to employ the flexibility of online learning. Specifically, students felt that excessive screen time does no good for their learning. This finding supports the study of [10] who found that students who experienced excessive online learning are prone to suicidal ideations and behaviours. These issues call for preventive actions from the education system to take into account students' mental health when conducting online learning.

This present study similarly expressed objections toward the time management of online learning, which is insensitive to their pastimes. Subjects of this study implied that their lack of enjoyment during ESP learning may negatively impact the lesson's effectiveness. In this case, effective online learning must be enjoyable to bolster students' virtual efficacy, which ultimately improves their achievement [53]. Reports from the subjects of this study showed that when students are under pressure, they felt a reduced supportive learning atmosphere that negatively impacted their learning.

Notable findings on students' mental health should inform ESP instructors and facilitators about the well-being of the learners. This notion follows [54] who state that teachers' positive perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes significantly improve students' learning motivation and well-being. Conversely, this present study evidenced that excessive online learning does not positively improve students' achievement, and triggers burnout and anxiety instead. This finding lends strong support to [52], [55] where online learning does not support students' individual learning needs in the higher education setting. It can be said that quality online learning is not always signified through a longer virtual meeting. Instructors may attempt to involve students' surrounding that closely relates to ESP subjects to result in a more meaningful learning experience, rather than putting on the additional virtual meeting. This analysis concurs that students' achievement may be improved better if instructors can blend online and onsite learning in a correct proportion [56]. Moreover, innovation in e-learning should consider a structured approach to support students' critical thinking rather than exposing them to too many series of online activities [57]. There is a novel conception offered by this study where the interplay of dynamic blended learning between online and onsite methods may boost students' learning experience.

4. CONCLUSION

The subtle differences in students' online ESP learning experiences based on their departments have been revealed in this study. Science students expressed burdens on learning ESP, while social science students contended that their learning was fair. However, students across departments similarly expressed that the learning objectives were not attained regardless of the various learning methods offered by the instructors. Students' expectations on future online ESP learning are also unveiled were students of both departments showed their interest in blended learning as it facilitates mutual interactions. Students also demand more sensitivity toward online learning time. This finding reflects the need of implementing professional learning for ESP instructors regarding effective online learning methods that take into account students' condition and mental health. Overall, this study implies the need for design improvement of online ESP learning that concurs with students' departments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the participants of this present study, and each Director of ESP programs in the three universities for their consent to the data collection. The manuscript and final published article remain as the intellectual property of the authors, and we have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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