



Students' Engagement in EFL Online Classrooms during COVID-19 Pandemic: Voices from An Indonesian Private University

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Received: 6 Juni 2022
Revised: 12 Juni 2022
Accepted: 23 Juni 2022

Abstract

Indonesian education implemented online learning, including EFL online learning, since March 2020. But, the online implementation faced some challenges. One of them was the students' learning engagement. That was why this study was interested in exploring the students' engagement in their EFL online classrooms during COVID-19 pandemic. This study used a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate the students' learning engagement. The participants of this study were forty students of an English education department in a private university in East Java. Then, the researcher used three research instruments for collecting the data, such as questionnaires, class observation, and interview. The questionnaires related to the students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement were administered to the students through Google Form. For the class observation, the researcher joined two online classes. Besides, the researcher also interviewed the lecturer of those two online classes. After the data of questionnaires were tabulated and the class observation data and the interview data were transcribed and coded, the researcher could know the results of this study. The results told that the students had low behavioural, emotional, and cognitive learning engagement during their online learning. Hopefully, the results of this study can give the new consideration for EFL teachers in selecting the teaching strategies and online platform when teaching English remotely.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, EFL Classrooms, Students' Engagement

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How to Cite: Zuhriyah, M. (2022). Students' Engagement in EFL Online Classrooms during COVID-19 Pandemic: Voices from An Indonesian Private University. *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 8(10), 238-247. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6796317>

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the education minister of Indonesia announced the Indonesian government policy about learning from and teaching from home due to the increase of the COVID-19 spread. The education system shifted from face-to-face in the class into full online learning on various online learning platforms and tools. This policy was issued to protect the Indonesian nations from the attack of COVID-19 disease. Therefore, all the education institutions held the online learning including in the teaching and learning of English since then.

The unexpected change in this education system must be quickly responded by the teachers and educators (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Metscher, Tramantano, & Wong, 2021; Moser, Wei, & Brenner, 2021; Urbietta & Peñalver, 2021). However, the implementation of online learning is difficult enough. The



students and the teachers faced various challenges during the online learning in the pandemic of COVID-19 (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021; Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020; Rinekso, Muslim, & Lesagia, 2021; Saputra, Ayudhia, & Muswari, 2022; Tukan, 2020). Those studies explained that the challenges that the students and the teachers got were about the students' less responses, lack of interaction, unstable internet connection and the teacher-students' less feedbacks.

Additionally, several studies have investigated the students' learning engagement during the EFL online learning because of COVID-19 pandemic. One of them is a study by Yundayani et al. (2021) investigating the EFL students' cognitive engagement in their remote learning in the higher education during COVID-19 pandemic. It is followed by Agustina et al. (2021) who explored the EFL students' online learning engagement consisting of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement in junior high school level. Then, Suharti, Suherdi, & Setyarini (2021) conducted a study to investigate the EFL students' learning engagement in their online class. Their study was carried out in vocational schools in Indonesia. Furthermore, Amin & Zulfitri (2022) conducted their research in state islamic universities in Aceh to find out the EFL students' learning engagement during their online classes. Unfortunately, there were still scarce studies investigating the EFL students' learning engagement in their online classes during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Indonesian private universities. Therefore, this present study had the purpose to describe the EFL students' learning engagement in their online classes in a private university in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study was carried out to describe the students' learning engagement in their EFL class. Because of it, the researcher implemented a descriptive qualitative research design. In order to understand everything that the research subjects undergo, a qualitative study is conducted (Moleong, 2012). Furthermore, Sani et al. (2018) state that the qualitative study will provide the understanding of the social phenomenon based on the participants' view. Meanwhile, the systematic description of the facts and the research participants' characteristics can be reached by conducting a descriptive study (Sani et al., 2018). Because the purpose of this present study was to describe the students' engagement in their EFL online class, the descriptive qualitative research design was used.

The participants of this study were 40 students from the second and the fourth semesters of an English language department in a private university in East Java and one English lecturer. Fortunately those two classes were handled by the same lecturer so the lecturer who became the participant in this study only one lecturer. This lecturer handled the class of paragraph writing course in the second semester and the academic writing course in the fourth semester. Then, the researcher used questionnaires administered to the students, conducted an interview to the English lecturer, and did class observation to collect the data in this study. The questionnaires comprised of five statements related to the students' behavioural learning engagement, five statements about the students' emotional learning engagement, and five statements about the students' cognitive learning

engagement. These questionnaires used four Likert scales, such as always, often, seldom and never. Next, the students filled the questionnaires in the Google Form administered by the researcher. Besides, the researcher interviewed the lecturer via voice notes on WhatsApp. For class observation, the researcher joined the class of those two writing courses on Google Meet. This class observation was held four times in each class.

In analyzing the data, the researcher tabulated the answers from the questionnaires and calculated the frequency of the answer on each questionnaire statement. Then, the researcher transcribed the result of the interview and also displayed the results of observation in the students' online class. The analysis results of those three data collected became the results in this present study.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

Students' behavioural engagement

The researcher administered the questionnaires consisting of five items of statements about the students' behavioural engagement in their online EFL class. Then, the students' responses towards the questionnaires about their behavioural engagement can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Students' behavioural engagement

Statements	Students' Responses			
	Always	Often	Seldom	Never
1. You do what the teacher asks during online learning	20%	75%	5%	0
2. You follow the teacher's instruction during online learning	25%	60%	15%	0
3. You answer what the teacher asks during online learning	15%	50%	35%	0
4. You chat in the learning platform during online learning	10%	10%	70%	10%
5. You are focused and attentive to listen to your teacher during online learning	10%	20%	60%	10%

Based on the data on table 1, it can be known that 20% of the students always do what their teacher asks during online learning, 75% of the students often do what their teacher asks during online learning, and 5% of the students scarcely do what their teacher asks during online learning. Meanwhile, from the statement number 2, the data shows that 25% of the students always follow the teacher's instruction during online learning, 60% of the students often follow the teacher's instruction during online learning, and 15% of the students scarcely follow the teacher's instruction during online learning. Next, in the statement number 3, it can be stated that 15% of the students always answer what their teacher asks during online learning, 50% of the students often answer what their teacher asks during

online learning, and 35% of the students seldom answer what their teacher asks during online learning. In the statement number 4, the data tells us that 10% of the students always chat in the learning platform during online learning, 10% of the students often chat in the learning platform during online learning, 70% of the students seldom chat in the learning platform during online learning, and 10% of the students never chat in the learning platform during online learning. Finally, in the statement number 5, we can know that 10% of the students are always focused and attentive to listen to their teacher during online learning, 20% of the students are often focused and attentive to listen to their teacher during online learning, 60% of the students are seldom focused and attentive to listen to their teacher during online learning, and 10% of the students are never focused and attentive to listen to their teacher during online learning.

Therefore, the data above show us that the students have low engagement in their online class. This data is strengthened by the results of the interview to their teacher who said that her students often did not give the responses when she asked some questions related to the materials being studied. In addition, the teacher also reported that any of her students did not what she asked in her online class. Most of the students did not answer the teacher's call. The teacher added that only eight students of forty students who always submitted assignment in their online class on time. Then, some of the students submitted late and others did not submit their assignment.

The result of class observation also says the same things. Only four students who always responded to the teacher's opening greeting as well as questions' related to the materials that they were learning. Some of them also joined the online class late. Next, most of the students kept silent during their online class. However, they would become responsive when the teacher closed their class. Almost all of them gave the responses to their teacher's closing greeting.

Students' emotional engagement

The questionnaires given to the students also contained five statements related to the students' emotional engagement. The results of these questionnaires can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Students' emotional engagement

Statements	Students' Responses			
	Always	Often	Seldom	Never
1. You feel happy and enthusiastic during online learning	5%	5%	80%	10%
2. You are curious during online learning	5%	5%	80%	10%
3. You enjoy learning using the technology during online learning	10%	10%	70%	10%
4. You are confident during online learning	5%	15%	75%	5%
5. You are optimistic during online learning	5%	5%	80%	10%

Table 2 shows us that most of the students had less emotional engagement in their online class. The detail explanation can be described as follows. The first statement responses tell that 5% of the students always feel happy and enthusiastic during online learning, 5% of the students often feel happy and enthusiastic during online learning, 80% of the students always feel happy and enthusiastic during online learning, and 10% of the students never feel happy and enthusiastic during online learning. In addition, the second statement responses show that 5% of the students are always curious during online learning, 5% of the students are often curious during online learning, 80% of the students are seldom curious during online learning, and 10% of the students are never curious during online learning. Afterwards, 10% of the students always enjoy learning using the technology during online learning, 10% of the students often enjoy learning using the technology during online learning, 70% of the students seldom enjoy learning using the technology during online learning, and 10% of the students never enjoy learning using the technology during online learning. Next, in the statement number 4, it can be known that 5% of the students are always confident during online learning, 15% of the students are often confident during online learning, 75% of the students are seldom confident during online learning, and 5% of the students are never confident during online learning. Then, in statement number five, the students gave their responses that 5% of them are always optimistic during online learning, 5% of them are often optimistic during online learning, 80% of them are seldom optimistic during online learning, and 10% of them are never optimistic during online learning.

The results of the the students' emotional engagement proved that the students had low emotional engagement in EFL online class. This is supported by the results of the interview to the English teacher. The English teacher reported that that students were lack of enthusiasm. The students often ignored their English teacher's calls or questions. It could be seen from their seldom responses to their English teacher's calls or questions. Besides that, the English teacher also argued that only five students who were always curious with her teaching material. These five students always sent private messages through WhatsApp messages to ask for the more explanation about the materials having been studied before in their online class.

The observation results completed the data above. In the class observation, it could be seen that almost all of the students tended to keep silent in their EFL online class. They were not voluntarily participated in the class discussion. The students who talked in the discussion were the students who had been pointed by the English teacher to give responses to their class discussion. When the English teacher did not ask them to be involved in the discussion and did not force them to express their ideas the discussion forum, the class discussion often did not run.

Students' cognitive engagement

The questionnaires given to the students also comprised of five statements related to the students' cognitive engagement. Table 3 presents the results of the students' responses to the questionnaires related to their cognitive engagement.

Table 3. Students' cognitive engagement

Statements	Students' Responses			
	Always	Often	Seldom	Never
1. You can relate the new material to what you already know during online learning	5%	10%	60%	25%
2. You make an extra effort when facing the difficulty during online learning	5%	5%	40%	50%
3. You strive to be focused when you are not interested in the material during online learning	5%	5%	50%	40%
4. You give up when you do not understand the material during online learning	70%	20%	0	10%
5. You ask for explanations when you do not understand the material during online learning	10%	5%	30%	55%

The data in table 3 tells us that the students' cognitive engagement in their EFL online class is also low. The following is the detail explanation related to the data about the students' cognitive engagement during their EFL online class. The first statement responses show that 5% of the students always can relate the new material to what they already know during online learning, 10% of the students often can relate the new material to what they already know during online learning, 60% of the students seldom can relate the new material to what they already know during online learning, and 25% of the students never can relate the new material to what they already know during online learning. Meanwhile, the students' responses to the statement number 2 report that 5% of the students always make an extra effort when facing the difficulty during online learning, 5% of the students often make an extra effort when facing the difficulty during online learning, 40% of the students seldom make an extra effort when facing the difficulty during online learning, and 50% of the students never make an extra effort when facing the difficulty during online learning. Then, the third statement responses show that 5% of the students always strive to be focused when you are not interested in the material during online learning, 5% of the students often strive to be focused when you are not interested in the material during online learning, 50% of the students seldom strive to be focused when you are not interested in the material during online learning, and 40% of the students never strive to be focused when you are not interested in the material during online learning. Afterwards, the responses to the statement number four tell us that 70% of the students always give up when they do not understand the material during online learning, 20% of the students often give up when they do not understand the material during online learning, and 10% of the students never give up when they do not understand the material during online learning. In statement number 5, the students gave the responses that 10% of them always ask for explanations when you do not understand the material during online learning, 5% of them often ask for explanations when you do not understand the material during online

learning, 30% of them seldom ask for explanations when you do not understand the material during online learning, and 55% of them never ask for explanations when you do not understand the material during online learning.

The results of the students' low cognitive engagement in their EFL online class in this study is supported by the results of the English teacher's interview. The English teacher told that most of the students did not respond when she asked them to relate their their previous knowledge to the new material that they learned. Eventhough, the English teacher had already explained the material more and given some examples, most of the students still kept silent. The teacher did not know whether they actually understood or not about the material. What could be seen was that they seemed to ignore the material. They showed their less interest in their EFL online material. In addition, the teacher also reported that only few students who wanted to ask more explanation when they got difficulties related to the material studied. They looked not much care of their online class.

The class observation results also told the same things. The students did not have much question about the material being delivered by the teacher but most of them also did not answer when the teacher administered questions related to the material to them. in every meeting, there were always the same students who showed their effort to be able to master the material. But, most of the students were silent. It seemed they gave up learning.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that the students generally disengaged in their EFL online learning. They had less behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. It is in line with the results of the study by Ewing & Cooper (2021) explaining that the students felt less engaged in their online class eventhough the teachers had already made the students' engagement become their priority in their teaching and learning process. But, this present study results was in contrast with the study results by Xu, Chen, & Chen (2020) finding that the teacher's facilitation caused the students' behavioural and cognitive engagement get improvement.

There were many factors causing the students' low behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in their EFL online class. One of them is that the students underwent less interaction with their teachers and their friends during their EFL online class. This condition is supported by the results of the study by Gao, Jiang, & Tang (2020) pointing that the interaction between teachers and students or among students was lack so that the online learning became less effective. Because of the less interaction during their online class, the students became lack of low behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in their EFL online class.

Another factor that influence the students' engagement in their EFL class is that the had the unstable internet connection. Many studies found that the students had a problem related their poor signal when they were in their online classes (Cahyani, Suwastini, Dantes, Jayantini, & Susanthi, 2021; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021; Nugroho, Haghegh, & Triana, 2021; Nugroho, Ilmiani, & Rekha,

2020; Riwayatiningsih & Sulistyani, 2020). It made them suddenly out from the online class. It also made them not know the calls from their teacher. Additionally, it made them seem not to care of their learning material as well as their teachers and their friends. These resulted in their less behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in their EFL online class.

The students' boredom with the teaching and learning process in their EFL class also contributed to their low learning engagement. Zuhriyah & Fajarina (2021) stated that the students felt bored because most of the teachers implemented the same strategies in their online learning. This situation caused the students not to have motivation to join their online class. So that their active participation in their online class became low. According to Lestariyana & Widodo (2018), the students were highly engaged when they felt interested in the materials given. This attraction could be provided by the creativities of the teachers in handling their online class. This kind of creativity was demanded very much in this online learning (Zuhriyah & Fajarina, 2021).

The learning atmosphere that was not enjoyable also could become the factor that cause the students' less engagement in their online learning. Rifiyanti (2020) argued that in this COVID-19 crisis, the teachers should engage the students in their online learning by applying various teaching strategies and several online learning platforms. Besides that, Zuhriyah & Fajarina (2022) also mentioned that applying the combination of teaching strategies and online learning platforms could make the students enjoy in their online class. When the students enjoyed their class, automatically their learning engagement became higher.

CONCLUSION

This results of this study show that the EFL students in an English education department in a private university in East Java had low students' learning engagement during their online classes. Their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive learning engagement became less since the implementation of online learning. These study results can be considerations for the English teachers to select the appropriate teaching strategies and appropriate online learning platforms in handling their EFL online classes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Concerning the research, authorship, and publication of this paper, the author reported no potential conflicts of interest.

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