STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN SYNCHRONOUS-ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING IN A STATE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

English synchronous-online class is online-based learning that enables teachers and students to communicate simultaneously during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the new situation poses some challenges that do not always render excitement for learners. Moreover, speaking English as a foreign language often becomes a barrier for most students. Therefore, the expectations have not been met whether a synchronous-online class is effectively applied or not. From the concerns, the researcher investigated students' possible challenges and strategies in the class. The researcher conducted a survey using observation, questionnaires, and interviews. There were 43 participants and 6 interviewees from eleventh-grade students. The result of this research denotes that most of the respondents (81.3%) showed negative perceptions in their English synchronous-online class. The challenges found by the researcher consist of technical, situational, and language challenges. Students revealed that each of them had different abilities to follow an online course synchronously due to their former backgrounds and experiences. However, the students have strategies to improve their performances in the changing situation. The strategies encompass self-control, external control, and academic strategy. Furthermore, most of the students preferred to have an asynchronous-online class due to its flexibility.

Keywords: challenge, speaking, strategy, synchronous-online learning

Introduction

English synchronous-online learning is a modern learning that enables teachers and students to conduct interactive language learning through online digital platforms such as video meetings. In accordance with the coming of COVID-19 pandemic, students and teachers are challenged to enforce a learning method that suits the situation nowadays. Some of the platforms commonly used by the teachers to conduct real-time teaching are online video meetings by *Zoom* or *Google Meet*. On the other hand, online learning does not always render excitement for students, especially during the pandemic situation. Online learning has not been practiced effectively because students are not sufficiently prepared to balance their study,

work, and family in a synchronous-online environment (Dhawan, 2020). the same situation also happens in Indonesia as revealed by Angdhiri (2020) who reported that the home-learning program was more stressful compared to the face-to-face classroom. Therefore, they need additional support to deal with some technical problems and instructional goals compared to their performances in the face-to-face classroom. Besides that, learning English as a foreign language itself has also become a challenge for most senior high school students especially to speak in a direct conversation during the lesson. The feeling of tension might appear when the students are asked to have oral communication using a foreign language during the class (Oteri & Al-Otaibi, 2019).

To actualize the quality of distance learning, most of teachers expect students to participate synchronously and perform as good as what they have in the offline classroom. In fact, some students do not feel comfortable enough to have a synchronous-online mode through video meetings. Although the previous studies have investigated problems in online learning, those studies have not comprehensively covered the synchronous activity in English classes that coincided with the pandemic context and their strategies to deal with the situation. Due to these several challenges, strategies are the ones that should be generated by the students to survive with the current conditions. Moreover, the language learning challenges faced by the students in an online setting might be different from the face-to-face meetings. Therefore, this research tries to find out the challenges faced by the students in their synchronous English learning during online classes and how they overcome them.

Synchronous-online Learning

According to Hughes (2014), synchronous learning enables teachers and students to have real-time learning processes and plenty of interaction using some online platforms such as video meetings. In this research, synchronous-online learning is encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic situation using some video meeting platforms. Practically, synchronous online video enables teachers and students to have better communication and responses in their presence (Mouton, 2020). On the other hand, synchronous learning might be challenging since it requires students' full-time availability.

Online English Learning Challenges

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the education system faces some changes related to the digital transformation of instructional delivery as a result of the changes from conventional classroom to online learning. It comes together with several logistic challenges and also attitude changes from the students that might cause negative effects on students' performance as a result of their anxiety (Ribeiro, 2020). According to Gillett-Swan (2017), challenges in an online class are associated with the student's inability to enrol in the online learning process that causes anxiety with the use of technology, the zone of comfort, the number of assignments, and the presence of peer interactions. In line with the theory, Kebritchi et al. (2017) classifies four issues of challenges in conducting an online class associated with "learners' expectations, learners' readiness, learners' identity, and learners' participation" in online courses. The above issues are important to be

considered by both students and teachers to evaluate their challenges during online learning in the pandemic situation.

The other challenges faced by the students during English online learning are due to the barriers of language itself. Learning English as a foreign language has its own challenges for the learners especially when they are doing oral communication in speaking. Those challenges might lead to the emergence of students' anxiety which possibly affects their performance in online learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined language anxiety as "students' feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours" associated with the apprehensions of special characteristics in using the foreign language (p. 128). In line with the research conducted by Damayanti & Listyani (2020), the challenge of learning a foreign language that relates to students' anxiety is particularly associated with oral performance. Additionally, learners might also face some difficulties in performing their languages in public when the process is evaluated.

Language learners might tend to experience situation-specific anxiety because the aspects of the situation in the language learning are different but the anxiety appears consistently over time (Hashemi, 2011). The challenges and anxiety faced by the students in their English online learning might be caused by several reasons. According to Young (1991), foreign language anxiety can be generally categorized into six major factors consisting of interpersonal and personal anxiety, students' perceptions about learning a foreign language, classroom procedures, teaching method, teachers' perceptions about language teaching, and language test.

Learning Strategies in the Pandemic Context

COVID-19 Pandemic has urged all circles to seek some breakthroughs to cope with the new normal situation, including students in their learning process. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are defined as particular actions that were taken by the learners to create the learning process becoming more enjoyable, easier, effective, self-directed, and more adjustable to the new learning process. Learning strategies might help the students to boost their eagerness to follow the learning process effectively. An example of students' strategies to overcome their language anxiety has been revealed by Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004) in their research that there are five-cluster solutions to cope with language anxiety related to "preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation". Hence, students are urged to find their best ways to be able to cope with the situation.

Method

The method used in this research is a survey. The researcher employed quantitative and qualitative data to collect both numeric and text information to solve the research problems. The implementation of concurrent mixed methods enabled the researcher to collect both the qualitative and quantitative data at the same time to confirm the formulated research problems and to support each collected evidence (Creswell, 2003). First, the quantitative research in this study focuses on numeric data collection from a large number of people using questions and responses as the instruments. In addition, qualitative research focuses on the students' experiences and their perspectives related to the subject matter.

The research was conducted in a state senior high school in Yogyakarta in the Academic Year of 2020/2021 and carried out from September until November 2020. The researcher observed the synchronous-online learning activity at school with an English teacher using *Edmodo* and *Zoom* as the learning platforms. The participants of this research are the eleventh-grade students with 43 total number of students. The researcher selected 6 out of 43 students to conduct an online interview after distributing the online questionnaire. Purposive sampling is used to decide the respondents (male and female) among the students of grade XI based on the criteria of the representative sample (Palinkas et al., 2015).

In conducting the research, the researcher used online observations, questionnaires, and online interviews to collect the data based on the synchronous-online English learning process that has been done (Heigham & Crocker, 2009). To analyse the questionnaire, the researcher presented the responses from the participants using percentages for the closed-ended questions. The researcher used a coding process adapted from Creswell (2003) to identify the differences and similarities of the data. After that, the results of the open-ended questions were grouped to be interpreted and supported by the detailed information from the interview. The researcher analysed the qualitative data by reviewing the observation sheet, reading the open-ended answers from the questionnaire, and examining the interview recordings into some paragraphs by using interpretative analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The research findings and discussion highlighted two formulated research problems concerning students' challenges and students' strategies in their synchronous-online English class. The result of this research denotes that most of the respondents (81.3%) showed negative perceptions in their synchronous-online English class due to the challenges and difficulties they faced during the pandemic situation.

Challenges & Strategies Related to Learners' Expectation

Table 1. Students' Challenges Related to Learners' Expectation

No	Statements	SA (N/%)	A (N/%)	D (N/%)	SD (N/%)
1.	Students face many challenges and difficulties.	10 23.3%	23 53.5%	10 23.3%	0 0 %
2.	Students feel overwhelmed with the situation.	13 30.2 %	28 65.1%	2 4.7%	0 0%
3.	Students do not meet their expectations towards the learning process.	3 7.0%	17 39.5%	20 46.5%	3 7.0%

One of the challenges faced by the students was related to their unfulfilled expectations in their synchronous-online learning. The result denoted that most of the respondents felt overwhelmed with the changing situations. Most of the students believed that learning is a process of material explanations instead of an action of independent exploration. As stated by Henry (2011), the divergences in online learning might happen in communication, information management, and the teacher's role as a mediator.

The main causes of their problems that did not meet their expectations were the number of assignments, the equity of assessments or feedback, and the instructor's role in teaching which needed more time and greater efforts to monitor students' learning progress. Moreover, students could not even understand the explanation clearly due to some communication gaps in a virtual meeting. The main problem of synchronous-online courses was the requirement of having multi-channel attention which would be very complex for students who still learn to speak English as a foreign language (Wang & Reeves, 2007).

To deal with the challenges, students developed strategies such as building a positive mindset, asking personally to the teacher about the materials, and watching video explanations from other sources. Otherwise, some respondents believed that they had met their expectations in the synchronous-online class. Those who had positive perceptions claimed that they had prepared everything well to cope with the situation so that there was no barrier for them to enroll in the synchronous-online class.

Challenges & Strategies Related to Learners' Readiness

Table 2. Students' Challenges Related to Learners' Readiness

No	Statements	SA (N/%)	A (N/%)	D (N/%)	SD (N/%)
4.	Students face difficulties to get adjusted to the new situation.	11 25.6%	20 46.5%	12 27.9%	0 0 %
5.	Students face difficulties to manage their time.	17 39.5 %	18 41.9%	8 18.6%	0 0%
6.	Students face many technical problems due to the lack of supporting facilities.	1 2.3%	3 7.0%	23 53.5%	16 37.2%

The other challenges faced by the students were dealing with their readiness to face the changing situation. The result of the three statements provided in Table 2 showed that the students are not ready to face the transitional stage in the synchronous-online class conducted during the pandemic situation.

The main factors causing unreadiness were unstable internet connection, lack of supporting facilities, and the culture shock of the learn-from-home situation. Even more, students had to do multiple jobs at home to finish both house chores and school assignments at the same time which made the students have difficulty in managing the time.

To cope with the situation, the students tried to adjust themselves to follow the pace of from-home learning. Some students changed their internet provider and gadgets to be able to join the class smoothly. As time went on, the majority of the students had prepared their schedules to maintain their time management. Therefore, the instructors should make sure that all tools work effectively and have significant outcomes for the students in conducting a synchronous-online class by understanding the availability of technical support and students' background condition (Ng, 2017).

Challenges & Strategies Related to Learners' Identity

Table 3. Students' Challenges Related to Learners' Identity

No	Statements	SA (N/%)	A (N/%)	D (N/%)	SD (N/%)
7.	Students face difficulties studying independently.	6 14.0%	29 67.4%	8 18.6%	0 0 %
8.	Students lose their motivation to study independently.	13 30.2 %	19 44.2%	10 23.3%	1 2.3%
9.	Students feel bored and lonely with the monotonous situation.	21 48.8%	11 25.6%	10 23.3%	1 2.3%

Students' identity as a part of the school community is very important to support their social needs in learning. Therefore, losing identity during the learning process might also become one of the students' challenges during remote learning. The three statements in Table 3 measured students' negative perceptions of identity during remote learning which covers their independence, motivation, and feeling. The issues were associated with their identity as a part of the school community. According to Burnett (2003), the most important things to motivate students to communicate actively in synchronous interactions are a social network and a supportive atmosphere. During their learning times at home, students felt bored, lonely, and unable to study independently. The problems were mostly caused by some factors such as the lack of social support and direct communication with their friends which made them lose their sense of identity.

Students preferred to look for their peer support in managing frustration and confusion instead of having such an online cross-group interaction (Szeto, 2014). To maintain socialization, the students stayed connected with each other by texting and having a call to do the assignments together (Nurunnabi et al., 2020). Some students took a private lesson by bringing in a tutor at home. Besides that, they found some entertainment to get out of their boredom and to feel less isolated.

Challenges & Strategies Related to Learners' Participation

Table 4. Students' Challenges Related to Learners' Participation

No	Statements	SA (N/%)	A (N/%)	D (N/%)	SD (N/%)
10.	Students do not participate actively during the online class.	5 11.6%	20 46.5%	15 34.9%	3 7 %
11.	Students prefer to mute the microphone and turn off the camera.	15 34.9%	21 48.8%	7 16.3%	0 0%
12.	Having synchronous-online classes using Zoom is not effective.	10 23.3%	10 23.3%	18 41.9%	5 11.5%
13.	Students prefer to have an asynchronous class rather than a synchronous one.	15 34.9%	20 46.5%	6 14.0%	2 4.7%

Participation is one of the signs measured to identify students' challenges in the online class. The above data denoted that students' participation in the synchronous-online class began to decline. The indicator was shown by the unwillingness to speak or just simply remaining silent during the virtual meeting.

According to Abdullah et al. (2012), student's participation in the learning process was affected by personality, environment, instructor, and peers' influence.

During the synchronous-online class, students preferred to keep silent, turn off the mic and camera, and refuse to share their opinion. Those indicators were in line with the signs of language anxiety mentioned by Young (1991). The main factors which made students not participate actively were the feeling of being unconfident, shy, lazy, and afraid of speaking English due to the uncomfortable situation in speaking English virtually.

Some students revealed that practicing speaking in front of the mirror is one of the strategies they had done to boost their confidence in front of the camera. Besides that, they also set up the room to build a positive learning atmosphere to avoid laziness. In contrast, some respondents believed that having a synchronous-online class was effective enough since it enabled them to have an interactive and real-time discussion.

Foreign Language Anxiety

Table 4. Students' Challenges Related to FLA

No	Statements	SA (N/%)	A (N/%)	D (N/%)	SD (N/%)
14.	Students think that speaking in English is difficult.	10 23.3%	28 65.1%	5 11.6%	0 0 %
15.	Students do not feel confident to speak English in public.	11 25.6%	24 55.8%	8 18.6%	0 0%
16.	Students feel shy to speak English virtually.	12 27.9%	20 46.5%	10 23.3%	1 2.3%
17.	Students feel afraid and nervous to speak English virtually.	14 32.6%	22 51.2%	7 16.3%	0 0%

Language barriers associated with foreign language anxiety also became one of the challenges faced by the students in the synchronous-online class. The students had revealed that there were some causes making them afraid and shy to speak English as classified by Rajitha et al. (2019). The external factors were the lack of grammar and pronunciation skills, the unfamiliarity of using English as a spoken language, and the fear of negative evaluation from teachers and friends. Meanwhile, the internal factors that came within themselves were students' confidence to speak in public and stage fear.

To deal with the language barriers, students tried to learn more about grammar and pronunciation beyond the class session. They might also ask the other students who had been able to speak English fluently to help them learn better. Moreover, some of them thought about some media to practice English in general through movies, music, and games

Conclusion

Based on the findings, most of the students showed negative perceptions towards synchronous-online English class due to the challenges and difficulties they faced during the pandemic situation. The challenges found by the researcher consist of three big problems encompassing the technical challenges, situational challenges, and language anxiety. Three big strategies are found which encompass

self-control, external control, and academic strategy. During the from-home learning, students revealed that each of them had different abilities to follow an online course synchronously regarding their former backgrounds and experiences. Furthermore, most of the students preferred to have an asynchronous-online class instead of the synchronous one due to its flexibility. On the other hand, students who faced low challenges and difficulties had such great preparation and had no barriers in speaking English in public through a virtual platform.

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