

Barriers of Teaching English Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: Voices of English Teachers in Indonesian Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

The present study aims to explore a dozen barriers of teaching English in Indonesian secondary Schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative study documents the teaching experiences of English teachers at Indonesian Junior high schools. By employing a purposive sampling technique, the writer collected data through semi-structured interviews with three English teachers in Indonesian secondary Schools. The result of the study evidence that the barriers of teaching English encountered by them amidst the COVID-19 pandemic cover the difficulties of controlling learning activities among students, the difficulties of providing feedback of English materials because of the distance, the constraints of signal and quota, the difficulties of identifying the progress of students' learning at once and the students' boredom during joining online class, ineffective assessment of English materials through e-learning, lack of preparation among English teachers and students in using e-learning, the difficulties in meeting students' need, lack of training, support and technical expertise. This study has offered an implication of promoting successful English learning by providing innovative teaching media for English teachers and the need of better engagement among students in joining English class amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Barriers; COVID-19; English Teachers; Indonesian Secondary Schools*

1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 virus has been announced by the World Health Organization (WHO) at the beginning of 2020. Up to the present time, the spread of COVID-19 has influenced a number of sectors on human's life particularly in education sector. In order to reduce its spread, several levels of education including schools have closed and limited their school programs on site (Davis & Phillips, 2021). In addition, the educational institutions especially schools are not supposed to conduct face-to-face teaching and learning activities since there is a social distancing policy. It is, therefore, crucial to

conduct e-learning in teaching for the sake of safety among students and teachers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

E-learning can benefit for supporting future planning and development in English teaching and learning activities (Lei & So, 2021). Through E-learning, teachers can deliver materials using technology like internet or other network media. Besides, E-learning can promote flexibility in teaching and learning activities both in time and location (Dhawan, 2020a). Surprisingly, the flexibility of E-learning makes the students feel free learn using technology and social media amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. They can make use of various social media

and tools such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, video, google meet, zoom and so on (Wahyuningsih, 2018b, 2018a; Wahyuningsih & Dewi, 2019).

Regarding teaching English at Junior High schools, English teachers have some barriers in offline class. These cover the lack of chance to make use of target language outside the classrooms and facilities. Moreover, the number of languages and dialects used by students may become one of the barriers when learning English especially in speaking (Quinn, 2011; Wahyuningsih, 2019). Different from the offline teaching that the main barriers of teaching English focuses on the lack of opportunity of using English among students and the various languages and dialects like Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese used by students, the English teaching and learning activities in online class could be different in terms of location, process, techniques, method and strategies of teaching. It surely has different barriers between teaching English in offline and online class during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although a number of previous studies have explored the theme of teaching activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the studies emphasize on teaching strategies, media, and teacher's reflection during the COVID-19 pandemic and rarely focuses on the barriers of teaching English in more detail particularly in Junior high school context. The study conducted by (Syahdan et al., 2021) has discussed media and strategies in teaching English during the pandemic without exploring more the main barriers felt by the teachers. Further, another study conducted by (Wulandari et al., 2021) has explored preparation of lesson plan among teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with the two previous studies, the study conducted by (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021) has focused on English teachers' perspectives

on challenges, suggestions and materials of online teaching. However, the main barriers of teaching English for students in junior high schools have not been documented in detail. For this reason, the purpose of this study is to explore the main barriers encountered by English teachers in Indonesian secondary schools and possible solutions that need to be taken into account to overcome these barriers.

2. METHOD

This study anchors in qualitative research. The data of this study were gathered from semi-structured interviews to three English teachers at Indonesian Junior High schools. Two female English teachers teaching at a private Indonesian secondary school for 6 years and a male English teacher is teaching at a state Indonesian junior high school for 36 years. The selection of these three participants was based on the personal relationship between the writer and the participants. The writer was given the permission so that the participants were getting involved in this study. For this reason, the writer hopefully can build better communication so that the relevant data about the barriers of teaching English amidst the COVID-19 pandemic are obtained in detail.

The data were gathered for a week started at the beginning of August, 2021. Using semi-structured interviews, the writer convinced the confidentiality of the identities among the participants by making sure that their names were anonymized. The interviews process was conducted using WhatsApp media. The writer then transcribed the interview of recording data to promote the process of data reduction and coding. To conduct analysis in more detail, the writer read the transcription of the interview data repeatedly to get the main findings. In addition, the data analysis procedure has followed the steps of Widodo (2014) with the procedures including

listening to a recording repeatedly, transcribing in proper format, interpreting the data by interpreting each participant's words and sentences, communicating whether the data match the participant's intent; and building data credibility by obtaining feedback from participants regarding the data representation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

[Capital Letter, Times New Roman, 12, Bold]

Based on the interview, it denotes that some English teachers in Indonesian junior high schools have encountered a dozen barriers in teaching English amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, they use e-learning during teaching English amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These barriers include the difficulties of controlling learning activities among students, the difficulties of providing feedback of English materials because of the distance, the constraints of signal and quota, the difficulties of identifying the progress of students' learning at once and the students' boredom during joining online class, ineffective assessment of English materials through e-learning, lack of preparation among English teachers and students in using E-learning, the difficulties in meeting students' need, lack of training, support and technical expertise.

The difficulties of controlling learning activities among students

Most of English teachers in Indonesia have utilized e-learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, there were a number of differences including in terms of implementation and assessment in online class and face-to-face learning. In online class, English teachers found difficulties in controlling students' learning activities in which they cannot monitor directly towards the students' progress. In addition, they felt

that some students in secondary school were less active and busy to their own activities at home. However, it should be noted that both English teachers and students have altered the behaviors, their learning and teaching styles, ways of assessment, and so on when using e-learning during the COVID-Pandemic. Indeed, this has given some benefits like flexibility, low cost, and so forth. On the other hand, this has brought frustrations both for teachers and students during the teaching and learning process (Gherheş et al., 2021). This was evidenced by the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1

It is not easy to teach English using e-learning for students in junior high school. We need new adaptation in terms of teaching method, assessment and so on. For students, it may not easy since they never use e-learning before so that they also need to adopt it during the teaching and learning process. Moreover, I felt difficulties in monitoring students' behavior and activities directly during my class using e-learning (Teacher 1, 2021).

The same thing was stated by teacher 2 regarding the problem of controlling student's activities in online class:

Excerpt 2

There is a difference when teaching face-to-face learning and online class. I have found difficulties especially in controlling students' behavior in my class when using e-learning directly (Teacher 2, 2021).

Having a look at these elaborations, it seems that both English teachers and students apparently needs adaptation in teaching and learning process using e-learning which may be different from face-to-face learning. Indeed, English teachers have difficulties in controlling and monitoring the process of teaching and

learning activities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The difficulties of providing feedback of English materials

Although e-learning has some benefits like flexibility and low cost, it also has a dozen barriers including the difficulties of providing feedback of English materials because of the distance of students and English lecturers. Unlike face-to-face learning in which English teachers can provide feedback directly in teaching and learning activities, in e-learning most English teachers felt difficult in giving feedback regarding English materials such as grammar, writing, and listening to the students' progress. They cannot monitor whether students do their assignments by themselves or not. Besides, students may lose their concentration and forget deadlines of various tasks during the online class. It may be caused by doing other activities such as playing games and so forth. Consequently, during using e-learning, it seems that it does not have the same result as face-to-face learning (Gherheş et al., 2021). The difficulties of providing feedback in teaching English using e-learning are evidenced by the following excerpts:

Excerpt 3

Unlike in face-to-face learning in which I can provide feedback directly in teaching English such as reading texts. I can correct and evaluate if my students pronounce words incorrectly. In e-learning, I can give feedback directly to them especially in reading and speaking skills" (Teacher 3, 2021).

The same statements were uttered by teacher 2:

Excerpt 4

Honestly, I prefer teaching in face-to-face class to e-learning. I felt difficult in giving feedback to my students in listening skills in e-learning. Unlike in face-to-face learning

where I can provide feedback directly in listening materials and correct the students if they cannot answer the questions directly, in e-learning class, I cannot do like that (Teacher 2, 2021).

The constraints of signal and quota

It has already been known that e-learning needs internet connection. Therefore, most English teachers in Indonesian junior high schools argue that they have problem regarding the constraints of signal and quota among their students. Indeed, some students live in rural areas where they often encounter limitations like bad internet connection. This finding is in accordance with Wang et al., (2021) and Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, (2020) advocating that poor internet connection are often encountered by both teachers and students in online class particularly for those living in rural areas. As has been reported by teacher 1 and teacher 3 regarding their problem of poor signal of internet during e-learning:

Excerpt 5

Internet connection is badly needed in online class. As a matter of fact, some of my students live in rural areas where they had poor internet connection. This may hinder our teaching and learning process in English course. In addition, somehow I also had the same problems of having bad internet connection" (Teacher 1, 2021).

The problems of bad signal and internet quota was experienced by teacher 3:

Excerpt 6

Bad connections have become a major problem felt by my students and me. Some students often run out of the quota so that they cannot join e-learning. Indeed, they should wait for their parents buying the internet quota first. This condition may hinder the teaching and learning process amidst the COVID-19 pandemic" (Teacher 3, 2021).

These descriptions highlight that in fact English teachers and students have challenges in adapting the new system of teaching and learning. It is apparently strengthened by Dhawan (2020a) that there will be a shift of face-to-face learning into online or e-learning in which teachers have altered the teaching approach to adapt new situations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ineffective assessment of English materials through e-learning

Different from face-to-face learning where English teachers can assess the students' work and English skills directly, in e-learning they felt that they could not evaluate or assess the students' work effectively. For instance, in listening task, the students were assigned to listen English materials and then they were asked to answer the questions from the teachers. As a matter of fact, students can share the answer through WhatsApp group or e-mail in which English teachers felt doubt whether the students do their English task by themselves or assisted by others. This may become a challenge for them in assessing their students' work in online class. Another difficulty of providing assessment in e-learning is in speaking skill in which English teachers have difficulties providing feedback like accuracy in pronunciation directly as in face-to-face learning. As has been uttered by Zhai and Gao (2018) that in speaking class, giving corrective feedback is needed for students' accuracy. Likewise, it is crucial in providing feedback on the students' performance of writing (Wahyuningsih, 2020).

In line with conducting assessment, the English teachers at Indonesian junior high school have provided feedback or evaluation to students. This was undertaken by providing questions through the WhatsApp group or zoom then the students can send their answer to the WA group or email. In giving feedback of speaking and

reading skills, they usually use zoom application to know the students' performance directly. Meanwhile, WhatsApp is utilized when they would like to give feedback on writing to the students. This was evidenced by the following excerpts:

Excerpt 7

In assessing students' speaking skill, I can ask my students to make a video then they can upload to WhatsApp group. This is ineffective since I have to watch the videos and provide feedback one by one and send it to WhatsApp group. In assessing writing skill, I ask them to write something and then they upload in WhatsApp group (Teacher 3, 2021)

Excerpts 8

I felt difficult assessing students' listening skill in e-learning. I am not sure whether the students can listen English materials properly or not and I am not sure whether they answer the questions by themselves or assisted by others (Teacher 1, 2021).

Lack of preparation among English teachers and students in using E-learning

In implementing e-learning, a number of preparations are badly needed by both English teachers and students. In this sense, English teachers should prepare everything regarding teaching materials, teaching method and approach, internet connection and so forth. Likewise, students are urged to be ready in joining e-learning by providing better internet connection and others. This is strengthened by (Dhawan, 2020b) highlighting that there is a low-level preparedness among the students regarding the utilization of Learning method and systems. Consequently, the discrepancy between the beliefs and classroom learning caused a lack of effectiveness in teaching and learning process (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021).

The difficulties in meeting students' need

Unlike face-to-face learning where English teachers and students can build social interaction directly, e-learning practices in fact can decrease direct communications and oral interactions. As a result, English teachers felt that they have difficulties in meeting the students' need in e-learning. Lack of direct feedback from teachers and decreased interactions caused more of anxiety, stress and confusion among students (Thanji & Vasantha, 2018). Moreover, e-learning does not provide direct teachers' evaluation and it may cause the students to the possibility of cheating and plagiarism (Rahmawati, 2016).

Lack of training, support and technical expertise

Professional skills in terms of practicing technology and sufficient knowledge in e-learning are crucial. Also, both English teachers and students are urged to acquire them in e-learning practices. As a matter of fact, they seemed to have a lack of training, support and technical expertise that caused e-learning practices have not run well. For instance, English teachers felt that they had difficulties providing direct feedback in English materials like listening and speaking. In addition, students felt they have not been well accomplished by proper directions, training, and technical expertise so that they should independently learn (Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020).

Excerpts 9

The lack of technical expertise and training among teachers and students can be a major obstacle in e-learning. Therefore, it is needed to provide training and sufficient knowledge of e-learning (Teacher 3, 2021).

Numerous solutions can be proposed to overcome these difficulties in e-learning practices. These solutions cover the need of providing better internet connection both for teachers and students and the

importance of providing face-to-face learning twice a week by keeping health protocols. In addition, English teachers need some well preparations in teaching English using e-learning like upgrading their professional English skills and development in e-learning, providing proper teaching method and approach, and giving training to their students in e-learning practices. Indeed, they should design e-learning in such a way that they should be interactive, students-centered, creative and so forth.

Further, English teachers should spend more time in creating proper strategies for providing online directions. Better online directions facilitate evaluation from students, and motivate them to ask questions. More importantly, schools should emphasize on pedagogical awareness and collaborative learning, through online directions.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study reports a dozen barriers of teaching English in Indonesian Junior High Schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the interview, it was found that some English teachers in Indonesian junior high schools have barriers in teaching English amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the difficulties of controlling learning activities among students, the difficulties of providing feedback of English materials because of the distance, the constraints of signal and quota, the difficulties of identifying the progress of students' learning at once and the students' boredom during joining online class, ineffective assessment of English materials through e-learning, lack of preparation among English teachers and students in using E-learning, the difficulties in meeting students' need, lack of training, support and technical expertise. By conducting this study, we could importantly obtain more insights on

some barriers experienced by English teachers in teaching English during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, this study has offered an implication of the need of promoting successful English learning by providing innovative teaching media for English teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need of better engagement among students in joining e-learning.

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