Delving Perceptions and Challenges of the Online ELT: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

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Abstract

Online learning has evolved into a necessity due to the pandemic-induced transformation of education. In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), online learning has brought significant changes affecting how lecturers teach and students learn. The perceptions and challenges of online ELT learning are important considerations in designing future, successful online ELT learning atmospheres. The present qualitative research with a case study design was conducted to draw from the lessons learned in dealing with the perceptions and challenges in online ELT learning. The required data were collected using document reviews, unstructured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, and the samples were 6 lecturers and 90 students of the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. The current research yielded that lecturers and students perceived that ELT online learning has provided flexible and accessible learning, and they could enrich their self-confidence. Besides, they considered that it encouraged self-directed and reflective learning as it has a structural learning presentation. The present research also revealed that online ELT learning challenged the lecturers to manage an online engagement and provide effective, online feedback so that bored, distracted and disengaged students could be involved. Moreover, the lecturers should assure the objectivity of the online assessment, and the technological gap should be carefully taken into account. Future online ELT learning should then be carefully managed by taking into account both the perceptions and challenges so that more engaging classrooms can be created.

Keywords: online ELT; lessons learned; pandemic; perceptions; challenges

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, online learning is an unavoidable mode of learning as the Covid-19 pandemic has already brought about significant changes in all sectors of our lives, specifically in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). In Indonesian contexts of ELT, lecturers who were used to being in their comfort zone doing face-to-face classroom interaction have lately been required to transform their ELT contexts. In addition, lecturers who usually use their effective language of instruction directly might face more challenges in managing their online ELT during the pandemic. They were busy finding the best online teaching platform

in their online ELT contexts, as the pandemic does not allow them to interact with their students directly. Some choose synchronous online teaching, while others direct their teaching to asynchronous online learning platforms. After the pandemic, Indonesian ELT contexts have transformed into well-managed online ELT learning.

After the pandemic, lecturers and students were also encouraged to use the benefits of technology by creating online learning that would provide more opportunities for them to practice the language. Besides, Banks & Barlex (2014) argue that online learning should be able to provide an impact to improve students' digital literacy. Thus, online instruction should be delivered in the form of student-oriented instructions that are easy to understand. It should be as close as their language proficiency level (Heugh et al., 2019), and lecturers should mind their talks (Hall, 2011). Lecturers should understand their language proficiency so instructional language can be delivered. Shank & Sitze (2004) add that some beneficial reasons for using online learning included faster delivery, cost savings, and enhanced communication and collaboration.

Before the pandemic, technology in higher education ELT contexts was limited to the entry-level, where information was provided through the use of information and communication technology (ICT) (Balula & Moreira, 2014). After the pandemic, lecturers are forced to become tech-savvy in delivering the teaching and learning process. They should be able to use ICT and the specific purpose of each tool, and they should adapt the platform to meet the ELT contexts. Besides, Conrad & Donaldson (2004) mention that lecturers should facilitate knowledge acquisition in online learning, so the students become independent. The situation necessitates lecturers to develop online learning, which can effectively and instructively use the instruction because face-to-face teaching vis-à-vis is quite different regarding the chances of elaborating the instructional language. It should be done in a more interesting and stimulating virtual language environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2007) to engage students and make them active and responsive.

Many lecturers still need to remember that it is not the technology, nor is the platform, that is essential to determine the success of ELT; it is the pedagogy. Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011) emphasize that lecturers should consider technology as tools that help them pedagogically provide teaching resources and enhanced learning experiences. Technology should benefit ELT contexts, so the debate about whether technology is a friend or foe of learning (Felder & Brent, 2016) could be displaced. Lecturers should try to manage active online learning that could engage the students. An online active learning management with application might increase learners' achievements (Korbuakaew et al., 2022). Besides, simple and easy-to-understand language of instruction is an important factor in a successful online ELT (Budiarta et al., 2023)

In ELT contexts of higher education, online learning is necessary to transform future adult learning (Bach et al., 2007; McAvinia, 2016). An online learning environment that emphasizes the importance of interaction and the interrelation of pedagogy and technology should be built upon a solid foundation (Weller, 2002). Basko & Hartman (2017) figured out that lecturers should strive to establish a feeling of presence within the virtual classroom when utilizing online learning. It can be done by using synchronous learning using video conferencing. It was supported by Hakami (2020), who found that using virtual platforms could promote active learning. This showed that purposeful interaction in online learning

was important (Mehall, 2020). Z and the millennial generation also benefited from online learning, enabling them to be involved in teaching and learning (Yu, 2020). The research signified that it might be a choice that could vary the teaching-learning process.

Based on the previously mentioned, classroom interaction in which students sit and listen to the language of instruction delivered by an English lecturer standing before the class might have yet to come to reality soon. Yoon (2020) mentioned that the global pandemic should be used to develop students' learning. On the other hand, the pandemic required educators to reflect on their teaching daily to meet the students' needs so that learning could occur (Eisenbach et al., 2020). Cheng (2020) also stressed the importance of attending to the students' physical and mental well-being while conducting an online instruction, as well as managing the proper quantity of teaching material and instructional duration. The students' readiness for online learning is highly dependent on their learning motivation, and it should be considered (Mahayanti et al., 2023).

Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar, nowadays, has already applied online learning in blended learning in some courses by applying the available platforms. By employing online collaborations and engaging in home-based study, blended learning provided students with the opportunity to develop their language skills (Tuilan, 2023). Conversely, difficulties arose for lecturers and learners alike as they acclimated to the digital landscape of education. Moreover, there are negative perspectives on the use of technology, which make educators unable to see the advantages of using technology (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007). Their need for more self-confidence and training might cause it. They also faced technical problems that were not found in face-to-face learning environments (Harmer, 2007).

As what has been previously expounded, the pandemic has significantly transformed numerous facets of existence, including the realm of education. Universities were closed, and the teaching and learning process was carried out in a virtual learning environment using platforms that both lecturers and students agreed upon. Many lessons learned dealing with the perceptions and challenges during the pandemic could be delved into creating future best practices in online ELT. As there was rarely research that mentioned online ELT learning, particularly in Indonesian higher education contexts or Bali, the researcher was interested in conducting this study. The present research mainly focused on figuring out the lessons learned dealing with the perceptions and challenges in online ELT learning during the pandemic. The purpose of this research was to generate valuable findings that may be applied in future educational instruction.

METHOD

The present research employed qualitative research with a case study design to determine the lessons learned dealing with the perceptions and challenges when they were involved in the online ELT during the pandemic. The qualitative research described by Creswell (2009) states that concerning social or human issues, qualitative research is carried out to investigate and comprehend groups or individuals. Stake in Creswell (2012) states that case studies focus on a program or activity. In a case study, observation is carried out carefully and entirely on a person or a situation (Kothari, 2004). This research used evaluative case studies because this research is aimed at evaluating a practice (Stenhouse in Nunan 1992).

The students of the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar were chosen as the samples of the present evaluative case study. The students of this study program varied in terms of origins. Geographically, 67% of students were from Bali province, and the other 33% were from different provinces in Indonesia. In addition, they mostly come from middle-class economic backgrounds. Ninety (90) students were taken as samples in this case study. They were spread and were considered the representatives of the second, fourth, and sixth semesters. In this case study, six lecturers were chosen as the samples. These samples were important data sources as they would be expected to assist the data collection process.

The researchers used three types of instruments: documents, unstructured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews that were compiled validly and reliably. The researchers collected data by reviewing documents related to online ELT learning, such as online learning platforms, assignments, and the results of mid and final-semester tests. The samples were subsequently requested to respond to an unstructured online questionnaire in support of the document review findings. It was done by sending an unstructured online questionnaire link to the cell phones of lecturers and students. Subsequently, the researchers deliberately chose 15 samples to participate in semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Acquiring more comprehensive data regarding the implementation of online ELT learning within the English Language Education Study Program was of utmost importance. The collected data were subsequently transcribed, categorized, interpreted, and the conclusions of this study were reached. The data obtained from document reviews, unstructured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews were merged and examined. Finally, data triangulation was conducted to thoroughly evaluate the data in order to achieve valid and reliable research findings.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

FINDING

The present qualitative research with a case study design was mainly intended to determine the lessons learned, particularly the perceptions and challenges in online ELT learning during the pandemic. To obtain the required data, the instruments utilized in this study were meticulously designed and implemented. Three research instruments were formulated for the purpose of gathering data for the current case study. They were document reviews, unstructured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. After administering the research instruments, the crucial findings that addressed the research problems were ultimately acquired. The findings of this case study research were presented in the following elaboration, which was initiated with samples' descriptions.

First, the researcher would like to present the samples' description, which can be used later in the discussion. As has been aforementioned, the samples were from middle-class economic backgrounds. Thus, all of this study's students had smartphones to assist them during online ELT learning. In addition, 49% of the samples had laptops or computers that could be used to support their online learning. In addition, almost all the samples were also equipped with a sufficient internet connection though 8% of samples still had an unstable, insufficient internet connection. However, they tried their best to solve the solution

by placing themselves where the internet connection had stable internet access. The samples were also categorized as digital natives who were digitally literate.

To have initial findings, the researchers reviewed the teaching and learning process documents that were used by the lecturers. The summary of the document review on the semester course planning, learning materials, projects and mid- and final-term results could be seen in the following table.

Table 1. The Summary of Document Review

Review	Descriptions
Asynchronous Platforms	They used WhatsApp, Google Classroom and Schoology
Synchronous Platforms	They used Zoom and Google Meet.
Learning Materials	The learning materials were well-structured and in line with the course planning.
Assignment Submission	There were 94% of students who submitted the assigned projects, and the average scores were 81.
Mid-term Results	All students completed the minimum passing grade, and the average scores were 79.
Final-term Results	All students completed the minimum passing grade, and the average scores were 83.

Based on the results of the document review, it was found that lecturers used different online learning platforms, which have been agreed upon by the lecturers and students. They used three different online asynchronous learning platforms: two lecturers used WhatsApp groups; three, Google Classroom; and one, Schoology. For the synchronous platforms, all lecturers combined their online learning with video conferencing, such as Zoom and Google Meet. The learning materials were also well-arranged and aligned with the course planning. According to the assignment submission, almost 94% of the samples submitted the assignments based on the due date, which showed their efforts. The mid and final-term results, which were tabulated, clearly showed significant improvements in their understanding of the learning materials taught in online ELT. All students have achieved the minimum passing grade in the study program (i.e. 70 points).

The results of the unstructured questionnaire clearly elaborated on how the lecturers and students perceived online ELT learning and the challenges that they faced when they joined online ELT learning. They can be summed up in the following table.

Table 2. The Summary of Unstructured Questionnaire Results

Item	Responses
Online Learning Readiness	I have a laptop or smartphone which connects to the internet.
	I have a stable internet connection.
	I have installed Zoom and Google Meet.
	I have installed WhatsApp, Google Classroom and Schoology.
Online Teaching and Learning Process	I love using video conferences while learning.
	I can understand the lecturers' material presentation.
	I can easily understand the materials in online learning.

	I can learn wherever and whenever on online platforms.
	I have wider access to the materials.
	I feel confident during the online learning.
	I become independent during online learning.
	I usually engage in online learning.
	The learning material is well-structured.
	The learning material is easy to understand.
Online Assessment	The online assessment is much more enjoyable.
	The lecturers did not provide comprehensive feedback.
	The assessment is not objective.

The unstructured questionnaire revealed how the online ELT learning was conducted and assessed. The students' online learning readiness was also identified based on the results of the questionnaire.

The table showed that the students were ready to get involved in online ELT learning. The students mentioned that the online ELT learning, which was carried out by combining WhatsApp, Google Classroom, or Schoology and Zoom or Google Meet, made their learning much clearer, especially when the lecturers elaborated on the learning materials. They also mentioned that video conferencing effectively enriched their understanding of the lecturers' explanations. The samples also considered that the discussion, preceded by the presentation of the learning material using video conferences, increased their understanding. They felt that the online learning that they experienced nourished their self-confidence. Self-directed and reflective characteristics also emerged after the implementation of online ELT learning. Almost all samples have shared beneficial online learning characteristics: flexibility and accessibility. They also enjoyed the online assessment even though it sometimes lacked feedback and objectivity of the results.

According to the one-to-one semi-structured interview results, the researcher found that the samples were active and confident during the online discussion.

When I joined the online discussion, I became confident. I can ask or answer questions and share my opinions freely.

The students felt they could join the online ELT learning without being afraid to express themselves during the online discussion. In addition, the students considered that they could easily understand the learning materials as they were well structured and presented.

Our lecturers provided well-structured learning materials, and their presentation on the learning material was also easy to understand.

Both lecturers and students emphasized that the structure of the online learning material was easy to understand because before the learning practices were carried out, online ELT learning was usually preceded by virtual face-to-face interaction through video conferences. The video conference was also used to carry out synchronous online discussions.

In addition, the lecturers were challenged when they were required to engage the students during online learning.

> *Sometimes, I need to work hard to engage my students. I should try to simplify my explanation or start the class using games to engage them.*

Besides, another challenge that should be considered is the technological gaps between lecturers and students and within students.

> *When I required the students to explore the learning materials on different sites or when we played online games using unfamiliar apps, they should be carefully guided.*

The lecturers should work harder when they would like to introduce new apps during online learning to create much more exciting learning atmospheres.

DISCUSSION

Data collected through document review, unstructured online questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, one by one, are then analyzed. This analysis is directed to answer the formulated research problems. As previously discussed, this study aims to determine the perceptions and challenges of implementing online ELT learning in the context of higher education during the pandemic. The discussion of research results is explained as follows:

The Perceptions of Online ELT Learning

The first research problem, which was researched in the present case study, was focused on discovering perceptions towards implementing online learning in the ELT context. Implementing online learning in ELT higher education contexts was quite different for young or teenage learners. The characteristics of adult learners also affected the perceptions concerning online ELT. This was important for future learning, so it might affect the choice of applying online or offline ELT learning. Based on the previously mentioned research findings, it can be concluded that the perceptions towards implementing online ELT learning were focused on four points: flexibility and accessibility, self-confidence, self-directed and reflective learning, and structural learning presentation. These points can be elaborated as follows.

First, implementing online ELT learning has been perceived as the nature of online learning in which students have flexibility and accessibility (Ally, 2008; Harmer, 2007; Long, 2004; Moore, 2009). It was flexible and accessible because students could access online learning whenever and wherever they wanted to learn or re-learn the learning material (Budiarta & Santosa, 2020). This was also supported by Dieterich & Hamsher (2020), who mentioned that the inherent flexibility and accessibility of online ELT programs and courses may prove beneficial to students. Online assessment also creates a convenient and flexible atmosphere (Laily et al., 2023). Additionally, career transitions found this particularly attractive as it enabled them to fulfill various obligations such as caring for their families, fulfilling work requirements, and attending to personal matters while simultaneously obtaining a teaching credential. Flexibility and accessibility were outstanding natures that tech-savvy students needed when dealing with hectic hours during the pandemic. Thus, this nature helped them a lot during the ELT context.

The second perception was self-confidence. Both lecturers and students considered that self-confidence improved significantly. It can be seen when the students are actively involved in online ELT learning. They tried to put questions and answers or even freely

expressed their opinion during online discussions, using video conferences and chat rooms to show their confidence (Yang et al., 2019). Increasing self-confidence among students could direct them towards purposeful interaction in online ELT learning (Mehall, 2020). Students might not show this action while in the middle of offline classroom interaction. Haverback (2020) added that during online learning, they should be confident during the pandemic, try to adapt self-efficacy theory, and virtually collaborate during ELT contexts to be well-prepared. In addition, for teacher candidates, learning technology infusion was very important to increase their self-confidence, especially when they dealt with their students in the future (Buss et al., 2017). This is possible since online ELT learning offers students a secure setting in which to investigate and exchange ideas. Developing a sense of community is crucial for attaining academic goals and bolstering self-confidence. (Finkelstein, 2006).

Successful online learning might be indicated by self-directed and reflective learning. Since self-directed and reflective learning became important in online ELT learning, lecturers should design online learning that enables students to actively develop and reflect on their own learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Macdonald, 2008). The content of online ELT learning should support the students in actively developing and enriching themselves during the pandemic. This was important because adult learners tended to pursue their goals and mirror their strengths and weaknesses (Harasim, 2017). Appropriate online learning enabled them to increase their independent learning, finally directing their learning. They were also invited to reflect on their learning to achieve the previously determined learning objectives, so online ELT learning should be varied to increase their reflective learning (Bonk & Zhang, 2008).

Based on the research findings, it was thoughtfully considered that structural learning presentation was a very important aspect of online ELT learning. Moore (2009) elaborates that in presenting the learning material, the online platform should be made as the learning occurs in the real classroom. In other words, it is organized with clear step-by-step teaching. It was important to consider engaging learning material in designing online ELT learning material. It fulfilled the criteria of online ELT learning material (Krajcso & Frimmel, 2017) so that students could understand the learning material comprehensively. Baldwin & Ching (2019) also mentioned that online learning material should be accessible from any devices that might be used by the students, including their mobile. Accessible online learning material that has been well, structurally prepared, and developed could help students learn. The students also agreed that online ELT learning should be initiated by clearly presenting the learning material before it was continued to the practice parts of the learning. Their understanding of online learning was much better when lecturers initiated the online ELT learning by presenting an explanation through video conference.

The Challenges of Online ELT Learning
Based on what has been aforementioned, the present case study was also intended to discover the challenges that might be faced in implementing online ELT learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research findings of this case study revealed that online ELT learning during the current pandemic faces many challenges that should be taken into account in developing future online learning. This challenge might work with the current situation and online ELT learning. The challenges towards the implementation of online ELT

learning in higher education can be summed up into four points: managing online engagement, providing online feedback, doing the online assessment, and lecturers and students' technological gap.

The first challenge faced towards implementing online ELT learning during the Covid-19 pandemic was managing engagement. Being in a virtual or online learning classroom makes students invisible, so engaging them during online learning will be very challenging. When the students were engaged during the online ELT learning, they might have a lot of opportunities to practice using the language. This would nourish their self-confidence when involved in online learning; besides, they would be strongly willing to participate (Yang et al., 2019). The combination of WhatsApp and LMS platforms and video conferences enabled the students to engage in online learning, especially when the lecturers synchronously presented the learning material and did online discussions. Palloff & Pratt (2007) also mention that students can be engaged during online learning by providing them with collaborative work. In addition, interactive online learning tools could engage adult learners, improving their learning performances (Ha & Im, 2020); visual tools could also engage students (Bonk & Zhang, 2008).

Providing online feedback was another challenging part of online learning. Balula & Moreira (2014) argue that online and offline learning environments consider feedback important. When students are bored, distracted, and disengaged during online ELT learning, delivering online feedback is one way to get them back into online learning. Providing greater feedback and attention to students in online instruction can serve as an efficient online communication mechanism to accomplish teaching objectives (Yao et al., 2020). Providing online feedback was very challenging to make it effective, and the feedback should be delivered individually to reach the intention of the feedback. Finkelstein (2006) adds that feedback delivered to students should be based on the students' involvement during online ELT learning. Appropriate feedback would further improve the teaching and learning process. Students also considered that online feedback could rejuvenate their learning achievement.

Online ELT learning was not only challenging in terms of teaching the students but also doing the online assessment. Johnson in Conrad & Donaldson (2004) state that online assessment is usually ongoing and performance-based. However, carrying out an online assessment took a lot of work because it was very difficult to keep the objectivity of the assessment. In offline learning, lecturers could observe their students while doing the assessment. In the online platform, lecturers needed extra effort, but still, it took more work to personalize the online assessment to avoid cheating. Online assessment can be used as a stimulus to effectively affect the success of online discussions (Wang & Chen, 2017). In addition, an online assessment supports online learning so students can independently develop themselves (Khan & Khan, 2018). This signified that online assessment should be as objective as possible and can be done through a performance-based assessment. Lecturers can also administer online formative assessments, which is important to support and enhance the learning progress as it could monitor students' learning progress (Baleni, 2015).

Finally, the last challenge of implementing online ELT learning during this pandemic was the gap in the technological mastery between digital natives and immigrants. In this study, age was not a determined factor in categorizing digital natives and immigrants, but it

was their competence and experience in using ICT (Creighton, 2018). During the pandemic, all lecturers and students were required to get involved in online learning, which required digital literacy from both lecturers and students. Schaefer et al. (2020) stated that the shift to online learning during this pandemic caused shocking facts for lecturers and students who were not ready yet, so further adaptation was required. Students who were mostly categorized as digital natives could adapt to this situation and easily use their gadgets for online learning; on the other hand, a few senior lecturers, digital immigrants, needed further practice. In online learning, digital natives would rely more on technology to communicate than digital immigrants (Riegel & Mete, 2017). This would raise awareness of how digital natives and immigrants are treated (Howlett & Waemusa, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This qualitative research, with a case study design, was mainly intended to determine the lessons learned in dealing with the perceptions and challenges of online ELT learning. The perceptions towards implementing online ELT learning were focused on four points: flexibility and accessibility, self-confidence, self-directed and reflective learning, and structural learning presentation. The students considered that online ELT learning has already provided them access whenever and wherever they wanted to learn and re-learn. Combining the online ELT learning platform using WhatsApp and LMS and video conference apps also increased their self-confidence during the online learning interaction. The students also felt that they developed independently during the online ELT learning.

The present research was also directed toward inventing the challenges of online ELT learning. Online learning is always challenging for lecturers and students, and the current pandemic has upgraded the challenges that should be faced. Based on the discussions, the challenges faced during online ELT learning were elaborated into four points: managing online engagement, providing online feedback, doing the online assessment, and lecturers' and students' technological gap. Managing the online ELT learning engagement was the toughest challenge, as learning without engagement was nothing. Besides, to keep the students' attention during online learning, providing online feedback was very important to keep motivating them. Another challenge was teaching and conducting the online assessment, as being objective during the online assessment requires extra effort. Finally, the gap in technological mastery between digital natives and immigrants should be overcome so that online ELT learning can occur as expected.

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