Do You Prefer Online Learning to Offline Learning? EFL Students' Voices

by Siti Aimah

Do You Prefer Online Learning to Offline Learning? EFL Students' Voices

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Abstract. The length of online learning causes the saturation and demotivation of EFL students from attending online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic that they have to join. Therefore, many of them shared their experiences of online learning and their preferencefor offline learning to attend. This study aims to gather information about EFL students' learning preferences, either online or offline. Besides, it is also to know how EFL students see the differences between online and offline learning. A semi-structured interview focused on EFL students' experiences and perceptions of online and offline learning. EFL students were asked to report and explain their choice. To gather the data, the interview was also recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to interpret the data. The results show that EFL students prefer offline learning to online learning. From the psychological aspect, EFL students feel more comfortable, easily focus on the materials taught by the teacher, confirm what they do not understand to the teacher directly, and actively participate in the classroom through learning activities designed by the teacher. Meanwhile, from the social aspect, offline learning enables students to communicate and interact intensively with others. The interaction built between teacher-student and student-student in the physical class is more optimal than online learning. The relationship between teacher and student can be shaped by having eye contact and being in touch during class. At the same time, the relationship between student and student can be built by knowing each other better and physically interacting with the others through some conversation they have. Besides, by attending the class, they would have a learning experience that helps them explore their learning ability and enhance their performance. Students, at this point, need not think about the internet connection, which invariably becomes a big issue in online learning. Internet networking cannot be neglected since it influences the success of online learning, particularly for students who live in a village with a poor internet connection. Through offline learning, student-teacher-peer interactions are also better than online learning. The awareness of giving simultaneous responses and the responsibility to participate actively in the classroom influences their learning performance.

Keywords: EFL students · interaction · offline learning · online learning

1 Introduction

"*I feel so excited to come to the classroom and meet my friends there to share with. For about two years, I was only at home and sat behind my desk to join online learning. Nothing makes me happy now but going to the campus and participating in the teaching and learning process. Can't wait to have it*". The above statement comes from one of the EFL students who heard that offline learning would have been held in no time. Some points strengthen their reasons, such as internet connection problems and anxiety issues in online learning. Undeniably, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all institutions (particularly in Indonesia) have opted for online learning. It is regarded as an immediate solution since teachers and students remain connected and engaged while they have to stay at home.

Unfortunately, there are many problems faced by either teachers or students regarding online learning. Teachers, for example, often feel underprepared for online learning psychologically and pedagogically [1]. Consequently, the teaching and learning process result is not as expected. Meanwhile, students often hide behind the screen and are reluctant to interact with others and respond to teachers' questions in online learning [2]. Unsurprisingly, teachers feel depressed about conducting online learning.

The condition contradicts the policy in which offline learning will be held as the Covid-19 pandemic is getting better. Students are enthusiastic about welcoming offline learning. They explain that online learning makes them challenging to understand the material given by the teacher. However, they do not want to tell their learning problems to their teachers. Online learning made them not focus on learning. During the class, they were assigned by their mom to take care of their little brother/sister and lift the clothesline since it would be raining soon. Those reasons support their willingness to select offline learning rather than online learning.

Previous studies investigated how online learning provides convenience and flexibility to students [3–5]. Only a few believe online learning offers a meaningful learning experience [4]. Unsurprisingly, online learning is a negative experience for students because of technical problems [6, 7] and diminished awareness of instructor and peer presence [6]. Because of some issues, students could not perform optimally in online learning [8]. Unsurprisingly, Patel & Patel reported that online learning is less effective than offline learning [9].

The desire of EFL students to prefer offline learning to online learning should be further investigated to gather information and explore some factors they consider.

2 Method

The study was conducted in EFL classrooms in Indonesia, in which students experienced attending online learning for about two years during the Covid-19 pandemic. They currently attend offline learning in post-pandemic.

The focus of this study is to gather information about EFL students' learning preferences, either online or offline learning. Besides, it is also to know how EFL students see the differences between online and offline learning. This study was conducted by considering that at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, students were very enthusiastic about the shift of learning (from offline learning to online learning), which they

considered new and interesting learning to implement since its flexibility to conduct everywhere and anytime. However, in the second year of the pandemic, students showed their boredom with joining online learning. Some technical issues during online learning were found, and they influenced the process of online learning courses.

To address the problems, it is required to conduct this study seen from students' perceptions of selecting online learning or offline learning. It also aims to find out their needs in learning so that teachers can adjust their learning to students' needs.

A semi-structured interview focused on EFL students' experiences and perceptions of online and offline learning. EFL students were asked to report and explain their choice. To gather the data, the interview was also recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to interpret the data.

3   Findings and Discussions

There are some reasons why EFL students prefer offline learning to online learning. First, many students think online learning burdens them and their parents with the high use of data internet. Many courses they enroll in need virtual meetings (zoom or google meet) cause of the high internet use they have to spend. At least they need to join four classes every day that requires signing in with zoom or google meet.

> I need to provide many internet data packages to join online classes. I often did not join the class because I have no data anymore. No idea at all to tell my parents that I spend the internet data package.

Another student also reported the use of internet data packages as a big issue in online learning.

> What…??? I already bought the internet data package yesterday. I think the biggest problem of mine in joining online learning is spending the data package in a very short time.

Second, EFL students agree that online learning is more difficult than offline learning. It commonly happens to those who rely on the physically present teacher in the classroom to direct their attention to the material. Without the teacher's presence, they would not explore themselves to learn and collaborate with others in comprehending the material given. As one student said:

> Not all materials are easy to understand via online learning. To learn pronunciation, phonetics, or speaking, I get difficulties to practice. I sometimes have a partner who has a poor internet connection. No interaction between us. Hence, I fail for my speaking practice.

Another student also reported as follows:

> Online learning enables us to join from anywhere we are. However, I am used to have an explanation directly from the teacher before the pandemic. Even though the teacher shares with me the material in the form of PPT, video, or others, I get

trouble for understanding it. Yes, I have read it several times, but I didn't get the point.

The two mentioned statements imply that online learning can be taken if the material is easy to understand. However, for the more difficult ones, offline learning should be chosen. It is because there is an emphasis from the teacher through the explanation given. Students, at this point, can also directly confirm with the teacher dealing with the incomprehensible material. Students would easily understand the materials if it is taught directly in the classroom. It strengthens the study of Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, Hart et al. and Patel & Patel that online learning may be difficult for students who are inclined to procrastinate and/or unskilled in self-directed learning since it affects their declines in performance [9, 10, 11].

In more detail, the consideration of EFL students in choosing offline learning is because of the teacher's presence in the classroom. The teacher's presence commonly provides feedback and more student engagement [12]. Patel & Patel argue that online learning provides delayed feedback and influences students' understanding [9]. Therefore, students are more convenient in attending offline learning which enables them to contact directly with the teacher rather than joining online learning.

The teacher's and students' presence in offline learning is admitted by one of the students as follows.

I feel that online learning limits us to be present in class. It is different when we have to attend offline learning which enables us to engage, communicate, and help others with our learning problems. I hope to meet my teacher and listen to her/his explanation directly in the classroom so that it will be easier for me to understand the material.

The above explanation implies teacher presence is fully expected in offline learning since not only will the engagement be built in the classroom, but the explanation conveyed directly will help students understand the material easily. It also proves that social presence offers more benefits to EFL students, such as improving interaction, communication, and engagement in the class (Lim et al., 2021) [12].

Third, online learning may be a big problem for students who lack the technological resources that virtual classes rely on and/or lack technological skills. Undeniably, online learning demands teachers or students to be more skilful in using technological resources to assess the course content. However, with the lack of technological devices and skills in technology mastery, students would not access the resources to support their studies.

I never use this device to online learning. My device does not support some specifications to support the teaching and learning process. I am also not too familiar with the features provided in the learning management system. What I have to do to adjust with the others?

Further, another student also reports her problem:

I feel crazy when I have to join online learning. It is okay if the class is only via zoom, telegram, or WAG. My mobile phone is supported with the apps. However, when the teacher offers me to use the other apps, I certainly could not access it.

Fourth, students cannot focus on the material taught in the virtual class. It happens because they must do multiple tasks simultaneously during online learning. Because of its flexibility in online learning, which enables anyone to prioritize his/her major activity, it sometimes makes them unable to reach the learning target.

One of my big problems in joining online learning is that I lose my focus. It is because when I join the class, my mom shouts at me to help her cook and wash the plates. Sometimes, even though I have told her that I have a class, she keeps asking me to give her a ride to the market. That's the reason why I always hide behind my laptop screen.

The phenomenon often comes to students taking online learning. During the online class, their parents frequently asked students to take care of their little sister/brother, give their mom a ride to the market, lift the clothes while raining, or help their mom cook in the kitchen. Unsurprisingly, they never participated and hid behind the screen during the online class even though their teachers reminded them several times to activate their cameras and participate actively. Hence, it implies that online learning provides flexibility and time efficiency in learning, and it becomes the key factor in attracting students to attend online learning [3–5]. However, its flexibility and efficiency in joining the class also interfere with their concentration on learning. They will be easily distracted by an unsupported environment. That is why they prefer keeping silent and hiding behind the screen to responding to the teacher's questions and participating actively in online classes. Further, Tu & McIsaac mention that although online learning offers flexibility, it also influences social interaction between teacher-student and student-student, which is not optimal [13].

The above condition is contradicted by the study of Abraham, Chang & Windeatt, Rosell-Aguilar, Sockett & Toffoli, in which many language learners prefer online learning to offline learning since they can prioritize their life by keeping engaged in language learning. At the same time, they are home or at the workplace [14–17]. They even believe that online learning allows them to explore their ability more easily without sacrificing other work.

Fifth, offline learning enables students to interact well and participate during class. It can be seen from the student's explanation as follows.

How can I interact with others when nobody turns on their camera during online classes? Even though it is in speaking class, breakout rooms are also available for my friends and me to join, but we all keep silent. We often neglect what the teacher said. For me, it would be better if the offline classes is held. The interaction will be more optimal if we meet each other, focus on the learning activity to do, and share with others in the classroom.

Through offline learning, students are motivated and stimulated to interact with others and encouraged to become active learners in the classroom [6, 18, 19]. As mentioned

by Kee that the essential part of learning is interaction. Through interaction, students' confidence and engagement will be shaped [20]. It is understandable since those who participate actively in the classroom feel like important class participants. They can learn and explore something they fascinatingly learn with others. Therefore, it implies that offline learning triggers students to improve their performance and participation in class [21]. It is contradicted by the study of Rienties et al. that online learning allows students to engage with others actively in language learning and achieve the target language through communication and interaction [22].

Further, some EFL students explain that online learning lacks social interaction, particularly between teacher-student and student-student. It is because they cannot come to the campus, which enables them to meet and interact directly [23]. It also becomes one of their reasons to prefer offline learning to online learning.

> *I feel awkward when I have to talk to my friend since we never meet each other and share our experiences. Online learning gives me a limitation in creating an intimate conversation.*

Another student also strengthens the previous explanation as follows.

> *The most difficult one for me now is to talk to my teacher. Online learning enables me to escape from the interaction with my teacher. I can hide from my screen in online learning, so I can freely choose not to respond to the question given.*

Sixth, the length of online learning they have to attend during the Covid-19 pandemic makes them saturated and demotivated to join the online class from home. It is as what is mentioned by one of the students:

> *Should we stay at home anymore and join online learning? We have joined online learning for a long time by staying at home and without going anywhere. For the first time, we are enthusiastic about online learning. However, we also feel bored if we can't meet our friends and only sit behind our desks to join online classes. No spirit anymore for the online class.*

Unfortunately, the six above reasons are from regular students who are not burdened to work fully. They come to campus only for learning. It seems different with those who spend their time working even on weekends. Online learning helps them to attend class while working. They will not take the class if it is not in online learning.

> *The only reason I have is that online learning offers flexibility and time efficiency in learning. I need not worry to review my learning by myself even though I have to work.*

It implies that even though offline learning has become the favourite one for EFL students, in certain cases, online learning will be a good learning solution, particularly for those working while studying.

4   Conclusion

In weaving together EFL students' voices on reasons for selecting online learning and offline learning, there seemed to be some highlighted points from the psychological and social aspects. From the psychological aspect, EFL students feel more comfortable joining offline learning than online learning [9]. By attending the classroom, they can easily focus on the materials taught by the teacher, confirm what they do not understand to the teacher directly, and actively participate in the classroom through learning activities designed by the teacher. Meanwhile, from the social aspect, offline learning enables students to communicate and interact intensively with others [24]. The interaction built between teacher-student and student-student in the physical class is more optimal than online learning. The relationship between teacher and student can be shaped by having eye contact and being in touch during class. At the same time, the relationship between student and student can be built by knowing each other better and physically interacting with the others through some conversations they have. Besides, by attending the class, they would have a learning experience that helps them explore their learning ability and enhance their performance. Students, at this point, need not think about the internet connection [25], which always becomes a big issue in online learning. Internet networking cannot be neglected since it influences the success of online learning, particularly for students who live in a village with a poor internet connection. Through offline learning, student-teacher-peer interactions are also better than online learning. The awareness of giving simultaneous responses and the responsibility to participate actively in the classroom influences their learning performance.

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