

EFL Students' Challenges and Strategies for Learning Reading during the Age of Covid-19

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Abstract

This study looks at the challenges and strategies that students used to learn to read during COVID-19. Because of the government's social restrictions, the learning process has been shifted to online learning. The purpose of this study is to learn about the challenges that students faced and the learning strategies they used during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used a case study as a research design in this study, with a questionnaire and an interview to collect data. The questionnaire was used to determine the students' challenges and reading learning strategies. Concurrently, the interview was used to gather more detailed information and strengthen the questionnaire results. The participants in this study were sixth-semester students from three classes. Qualitative data analysis was used in this study. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students face learning challenges such as a lack of internet access, a lack of internet data, and unsupportive online learning tools, according to this study. Meanwhile, in the reading learning process, students face challenges such as a lack of vocabulary, a lack of understanding, and an inability to determine the main idea. Students use all the learning strategies based on the Oxford classification to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: *Reading Skills, Challenges, Learning Strategies, Online Learning, Covid-19.*

INTRODUCTION

The current COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mobility of all human activities. The Covid-19, which can be transmitted through the air, restricts direct or face-to-face human interaction and communication. This epidemic not only affected one country, but the entire world.

This epidemic has a remarkable effect in that

it forces most sectors to close indefinitely, including tourism, the economy, and even education. As one of the pandemic-affected countries, Indonesia completed all school activities and engaged in online learning. Learning activities are carried out using online media in online learning.

Gonzales and Louis (2019) define online learning as distance learning aided by

electronic devices such as tablets, smartphones, laptops, and computers that require an internet connection. One of the many lessons that EFL students must learn is the subject of reading. Reading is one of the most common and often compulsory activities that students and academicians must do all the time, all over the world. To complete their assignments and other academic requirements, they must read a variety of texts. According to Yukselir (2007), reading is one of the most beneficial, fundamental, and central skills for students to master new information, gain access to alternative explanations and interpretations, and begin synthesizing critical evaluation skills. Reading also improves students' vocabulary, fluency, speaking, writing, and mastery of their target language.

Students must master the majority of the text's information when learning to read. As a result, the students' abilities to comprehend and remember the main idea and supporting ideas of the text were required. When we first start reading, we face some difficulties. Students may encounter difficulties while reading certain texts. According to Nancy (2008), students face a variety of challenges while reading, including ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and

limited available time to process the text cognitively. Students' comprehension had an impact on these challenges.

The students completed the online learning process during the pandemic. Students face challenges when learning online, such as a lack of an internet connection, the requirement that students study independently, and a lack of communication between teachers and students. These difficulties disrupt the learning process for students. The students use different methods to achieve the same goal, which is academic success. Learning strategies are the procedures for gathering, organizing, and transferring knowledge (Francoise, 2004). According to Huang et al. (2012), knowing the right strategy is very useful for academic success, not only for the students but also for their educators, who can apply effective supportive techniques in their curriculum.

In this case, the learning process that is normally done face-to-face should be transferred to an online learning process. This necessitates students' being astute in managing their own learning systems, particularly in learning to read, as it is a prerequisite for mastering other sciences. Students should have a reading strategy in place. Using a reading strategy can help

students improve their comprehension. As a result, students should have appropriate language learning strategies in order to dominate all aspects of the English subject curriculum. According to Alexander (2012), reading strategies can improve reading comprehension. Unfortunately, students are sometimes perplexed when it comes to selecting the best reading strategy.

Based on the description above, the purpose of this research is to look into the challenges and strategies used by SMP IT Sulthon Rinjani NW Dasan Poto in learning to read. Because this is the first time the learning process has been fully online, research on the challenges and strategies for learning reading during the pandemic is rare in Indonesia. This situation compelled the students to be prepared for the challenges that lay ahead. This research is very important for understanding the problems that students have while reading and the ways that they try to solve those problems.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Reading

Many experts have offered their interpretations of what reading entails. Reading is a critical skill that students must master because it cannot be separated from the teaching and learning process. Reading is

the most important activity in any class, not only as a source of information but also as a way of consolidating and expanding one's concepts and knowledge of a language (Alexander, 2012). Francoise (2004) says that reading is a smooth process in which readers combine information from a text with what they already know to make sense of it.

Reading, according to Anderson (2016), is a complex conscious and unconscious mental process in which the reader employs a variety of strategies to reconstruct the meaning that the author is assumed to have intended, based on data from the text and prior knowledge. Reading, according to Grellet (2004), is an active skill. It constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking, and questioning oneself. Reading is the process of deriving meaning from a printed or written message (Al-Seyabi, 2005). The first step in reading is to be able to look at words and recognize them quickly, correctly, and automatically, no matter what they are used for.

Reading is an important skill in English. Reading allows one to obtain information from the text. There are numerous definitions of reading. Because people have different backgrounds, different reading perspectives result in many definitions

of it. According to Anderson (2016), reading is the process of obtaining information from a text and interpreting it. In other words, reading is being able to show and use information from written text correctly.

Based on the theory above, reading is a process that depends on how well the author uses words to show what the reading text means and how well the writer expresses his or her opinion by taking a new word from a sentence and using it as a paragraph.

The Purpose of Reading

Reading is a purposeful activity. A person may read to learn new information or to confirm existing knowledge. A person may also read for pleasure or to improve their knowledge of the language being read. Reading is also very important in civic life. Reading keeps an individual informed about their country's political, social, economic, and cultural issues. Reading has an impact on our attitudes, beliefs, standards, morals, judgments, and overall behavior; it shapes our thinking and actions. The goal of reading is to connect the ideas on the page to what you already know. To connect the ideas, the reader must understand the subject matter.

According to Nancy (2008), reading purposes include reading for simple information, reading to quickly skim, reading

to learn from a text, reading to integrate information, reading to write, reading to critique texts, and reading for general comprehension.

1. Reading to search for simple information

Reading for the purpose of searching for simple information is common reading ability, though some researchers believe it is a relatively independent cognitive process. It is used so frequently in reading tasks that it is most likely best viewed as a type of reading ability.

2. Reading to skim quickly

Reading to skim is a common part of many reading tasks and a useful skill in and of itself. It involves a mix of strategies for guessing where important information might be in the text and then applying basic reading comprehension skills to those parts of the text until a general idea forms.

3. Reading to learn from text

Most of the time, people read to learn in academic and professional settings where they need to learn a lot from a text. This requires the ability to remember main ideas, recognize and

build rhetorical frames, and connect the text to the reader's background.

4. Reading to integrate information

When you read to integrate information, you need to think more about the relative importance of information that supports, contradicts, or supports itself. You may also need to change a rhetorical frame to fit information from different sources.

5. Reading to write and reading to critique texts

Reading to write and reading to analyze texts are two task variations of reading to integrate information. Both require the ability to compose, select, and critique textual information.

6. Reading for general comprehension

To read for general comprehension, you need to be able to process words quickly and automatically, have good skills at making a general representation of the main idea, and be able to coordinate a lot of different processes well while you're short on time.

Reading is done for a variety of reasons, not just for students. They must read extensively in order to gain information and an understanding of social life. It can help a

person stay informed about their country's social, political, and economic problems.

The Types of Reading

Reading, which is one of the four language skills, can be classified into two types: initial reading and reading comprehension (Nancy, 2008).

1. Initial reading

It is an effort made by those who have not been able to read to learn reading (e.g., how to read the alphabets and combination of letters or simple words).

2. Reading comprehension

It is an activity aimed to understand the messages of a particular text.

The types of reading that have an advantage are initial reading and reading comprehension. Reading the letters is very useful for children who are learning to read English, whereas reading comprehension is to fully understand the message of the text.

Principles of Reading

According to Hanafi (2005) the principles of reading are as follows:

- 1) teachers encourage students to read as often and as much as possible;
- 2) students need to be engaged with what they are reading;

- 3) teachers encourage students to respond to the content of a text and explore their feelings about it, not just concentrate on its construction;
- 4) prediction is a major factor in reading;
- 5) teacher has to match the task to the topic when using intensive reading texts;
- 6) a good teacher exploits reading texts to the full.

Reading Techniques

There are many techniques that we can use to make our reading easy. According to Alexander (2005) stated that reading can help much more if we can read well. The techniques are:

1. Scanning

Scanning is a technique used to look up a word in a phone book or dictionary. You look for key words or concepts. Scanning typically involves the following steps: a. stating the specific information you seek; b. attempting to predict how the answer will appear and what clues you might use to help you find the answer. If you were looking for a specific date, for example, you would quickly read the paragraph looking only for numbers; c. Use headings and any other aids that

will help you identify which sections may contain the information you are looking for; and d. Read and skip through sections of the passage selectively.

2. Skimming

Skimming is a technique for quickly identifying the main points of a text. Skimming typically involves the following steps: a. reading the title; b. reading the introduction or first paragraph; c. reading the first sentence of each subsequent paragraph; d. reading any headings and sub-headings; and e. reading the conclusion or final paragraph.

Reading Challenges

According to Huang et al. (2008), there are four aspects of reading comprehension. Students should be able to determine the main idea of a text, understand vocabulary, make inferences, and provide detailed information. These aspects are regarded as difficulties that students face when reading the text.

1. Determining the Main Idea

The main idea is a statement that expresses the author's viewpoint on the subject. According to Anderson, N. J. (1991), finding the

main idea is critical for understanding a paragraph or short selection. The main idea is usually found in the first sentence, but it can also be found in the middle of the last sentence. As a result, the main idea may be more difficult to find. Students may not be able to figure out what the main idea is in a passage.

2. Understanding Vocabulary

While reading a passage, the student expands their vocabulary by looking up new words in the dictionary and guessing the meaning from context. The context assists students in making broad predictions about the meaning. It means that predicting the context will assist students in understanding the meaning of a passage without stopping to look up every new word in a dictionary. One of the things that makes it hard for readers to understand things is that they don't know enough words.

3. Detail Information

A detailed question or information is the last type of question that is commonly found in reading tests. This question is used to assess the student's comprehension of the

material directly stated in the text. Students can use a scanning strategy to understand and answer a detailed question. Also, a reader can find the answer to a specific question by highlighting the key word in the question and then reading the passage to find another word that means the same thing.

Online learning

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning became the preferred method for establishing the learning process. Surani and Hamidah (2012) identify some difficulties in the online learning process, including short learning times, increasing tasks, unused quotas, and hostile signal conditions. Furthermore, the current online learning process is an impromptu system that requires students to master technology and use it correctly. Some students, on the other hand, who live in remote and even mountainous areas with limited infrastructure and other supporting capacities, contribute to the digital divide.

Every learning process requires the use of a method or strategy in order to achieve the primary goal of learning. In this study, the researcher used previous research on students' reading challenges and learning strategies as a

literature review to support this research and as a reference for the researcher while conducting this study.

Widya completed a thesis titled "Strategy for Teaching English Online in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the teaching and learning process from face-to-face classroom instruction to an online learning system. Using today's widely available platforms learning The less pleasant environment because students must be silent in front of computer screens, laptops, or smartphones, and because they cannot freely interact with teachers and classmates, has reduced students' motivation to learn English. This community service seeks to introduce online English teaching strategies, such as teaching methods and media, in order to increase students' motivation to learn English online. The results of this community service are that: 1) teachers learn about and improve methods and media for online English teaching; 2) teachers can use techniques and media learned in training to make a more pleasant learning environment for students; and 3) students learn English in a new way and are more motivated to learn.

Putu Eka Dambayana Saputra's thesis, Master Lessons English Online Classroom

During a Pandemic: A Learning Challenge revealed that teachers and students face difficulties with classroom and technical management. Teachers have limitations when it comes to explaining materials. In the previous conventional class, the teacher used teaching methods that were adapted to the material, task characteristics, learner characteristics, learning situations and environments, and so on. However, because learning is done online, teachers are limited in their ability to explain the materials. It also puts teachers and students to the test when it comes to carrying out learning activities.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted using a case study approach by the researcher. This study was carried out at SMP IT Sulthon Rinjani NW Dasan Poto. This school is located in Desa Rarang, Kec. Terara, Kab. Lombok Timur. The researchers chose this school because it meets the criteria for participating in this study to investigate the challenges and strategies of online learning. The researcher used an open-ended questionnaire to collect data, which was followed by an online interview. There were fifteen respondents chosen because they had been studying the subject of reading for a long time and were the most representative of their class. Out of

all the students who answered, five were chosen to take part in an online, semi-structured interview.

The researcher went through several stages when analyzing the data. Because the data collection and analysis process is cyclical and interactive, the researcher must constantly circulate among these steps in order to comprehend all of the information required in the subsequent data analysis steps. The following step is data condensation. It is the selection, simplification, focusing, abstraction, and transformation of data. The researcher chose the aspects that were raised as questions on the questionnaire in this step. It makes data collection easier for researchers. The researcher focuses solely on the students' strategies based on Oxford's classification, i.e., learning strategies charts. The data display is the next step. This step organized a collection of information. The final step is to draw a conclusion and verify it.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Reading Challenges during Online Learning

Based on the findings of this study, the students faced the following challenges: The primary challenge for students learning to read during a difficult time is technological issues. The researcher discovered that

students encountered some issues during online learning, such as a lack of internet access, internet data, and inapplicable devices or gadgets. The following is what the researcher discovered:

1. Lack of Internet Access

Internet access has become critical during online learning. Some of the students who live in remote areas had very limited access to the internet. When the students were doing online learning, this was frequently an issue. Students who live in remote areas with limited internet access should travel to hilly areas to access the internet. Here are the answers that the students gave to the questionnaire about not being able to get on the internet:

"...Face-to-face learning is more effective than online learning because during the online learning I always get lack of internet signal...."-R2-

"...Online learning is ineffective because of network constraints...."-R3-

"...It is quite fun if the media used is interesting enough as a fun video, but sometimes it is hampered by internet errors...."-R6-

"...Online learning is not effective because of network constraints. My house also in a remote area so internet access is a bit difficult...."-R8-

2. Lack of Internet Data

Internet data also became one of the problems that students faced. The students sometimes ran out of their internet data when online learning. They also have to take out their money to bought internet data.

"Learning online is not effective. We sometimes have a quota and network constraints"-R7-

"...I think learning is getting more difficult because, on the other hand, it is difficult for quotas and signal"-R10-

"My experience while studying online is I always run out of quota when online learning still running"-R11-

3. Un-applicable Digital Devices

Devices are essential tools to run online learning. It also became a problem for the students did online learning. Some students have devices that did not support them did online learning. Their instruments' capacity

was sometimes not enough to download the application used for the online learning process.

"In my opinion, it is not effective because of connection problems and the capacity of the facilities is lacking, for example, there are many students who lack the mobile phone used, starting from the storage capacity, RAM, processor and internet connection on the mobile phone used"-R4-

Students' Reading Challenges

Students experienced many changes in the learning process, such as face-to-face learning, which was replaced by online learning. Students also felt the online education was not sufficient. They were required to be independent in education, especially in learning reading.

1. Lack of Vocabulary

Vocabulary cannot be separated from the reading subject. Vocabulary also is essential to translate the text. Lack of vocabulary became the problem which always aware of learning reading. Most of the readers faced this difficulty; even the respondents of this study also experienced a lack of vocabulary when

they read some texts such as novels, articles, etc. The students sometimes found the unfamiliar word when they read the text with a high level of the terms.

"...When learning reading, I always get a lack of vocabulary.."-R1-

"My experience in learning reading, I always got a lack of vocabulary"-R2-

"...While learning reading, lack of vocabulary was a challenge for me. For example, when I read a novel, I don't know a lot of vocabulary" -R4-

"...I also think that reading is a little difficult because I often lack vocabulary" -R6-

"...In reading lessons I often have difficulty interpreting texts because of the lack of vocabulary" -R7-

"...For me, reading lessons are quite difficult because I find a lot of vocabulary words that are not familiar for me and also I still find it difficult to interpret them by the sentence" -R9-

"...The challenge that the most often I experienced when learning reading was a lack of vocabulary" -R10-

"...In my opinion, reading is quite difficult. The difficulty I had was a lack of vocabulary" -R12-

"...My difficulty in learning reading is lack of vocabulary" -R14-

"...It's quite difficult because there is a lot to read and sometimes there are vocabulary words or sentences that I do not understand"-R15-

2. Less Comprehension

Comprehension is essential in reading. The students cannot get anything from the text without understanding the contents of the texts they read. According to the questionnaire result, the students also got a challenge when they tried to translate per sentence. However, they could not translate word by word to be the right sentence. Sometimes they were also confused when they found the idiom in the reading text.

"Based on my experience in learning reading, I often cannot

interpret the text sentence by sentence"-R3-

3. Determining the Main Idea of Paragraphs

Determining the main idea became the crucial thing in reading the text. The main idea is the way in which the writer delivers the message or information for the readers. The purpose of the reading text was to get the information from the text. It is also becoming a problem during the reading text. Some of the respondents in this research faced difficulty when they tried to find the main idea. They did not know how to determine the main idea.

"I often have difficulty in determining the main idea of paragraphs"-R2-

Students' Reading Strategies during Online Learning

The strategies used by learners influence their success in learning a language. Because language learning is an intentional and strategic effort, it appears undeniable that foreign language learners should be equipped with appropriate learning strategies in order to learn the target language more effectively and efficiently. It is, therefore, very important to

know what kinds of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) students use to improve their English skills.

Respondents had a variety of responses to learning reading strategies based on their learning experience. The direct strategy assisted students in gaining reading comprehension. In memory strategy, they performed actions such as looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary and then memorizing them. Because reading is related to vocabulary, this strategy is appropriate for learning to read. In addition, as part of their cognitive strategy, the students took notes and attempted to read the text again. During the compensation strategy, the students attempted to guess the meaning of a word that they did not know when reading the text, and they attempted to connect the word with the next word to obtain the appropriate meaning of the word.

In addition to the indirect strategy, the students engaged in metacognitive strategy activities such as downloading the article from the internet, reading the text that their lecturers sent, and attempting to translate the text. The students thought this strategy was very helpful in improving their reading ability. They tried to read the text in front of the mirror as an affective strategy to boost their

self-confidence. During social strategy, the students who were having trouble reading asked a more knowledgeable student the question and talked about it with them.

The researcher also conducted the interview section in order to obtain more valid data to back up the questionnaire results. The following are the interview findings:

Students' Reading Challenges

The interviewees experienced some challenges during learning reading. As some interviewees stated below:

"I am having trouble with vocabulary and translating sentences that are a little longer"-R1-

"Vocabulary became the prominent difficulty when I was learning reading" -R2-

"I have difficulty when finding idioms because idioms are not interpreted per word but have meaning per sentence"-R3-

"I often have difficulty in determining the correct meaning because one word has many meanings"-R4-

"My difficulties in learning reading are lack of vocabulary, and I also cannot interpret it per sentence"-R6-

Based on the result of the interview above, the researcher concluded that the students experienced various learning difficulties, such as lack of vocabulary,

inability to interpret sentences, and sometimes confusion when they found the idioms.

Students' Reading Strategy

The interviewees have some strategies to overcome the challenges during the learning reading process, such as:

"In the evening, I read the text, and then in the morning, I try to talk to myself in front of the mirror"-R1."

"I usually search for the meaning of unfamiliar words in the dictionary, and then I try to memorize it and make a sentence from the words." -R2-

"I take notes, memorize, mark words that I don't know, and I try to make sentences from the words I wrote down"-R3-

"When I found a difficult word, I look up the meaning in the dictionary, or I used google translate"-R4-

"I usually read aloud. This is also to practice my speaking. When I found a word I do not know, I wrote it down, looked up the meaning in the dictionary, and then memorized it. I also read over and over again so that words I didn't know the meaning of before could be remembered in my brain"-R6-

From the interview above, the average responses were the students overcome their difficulties by marked unknown words than looked the word in the dictionary, memorized

it, and tried to make the sentence from the word. They also reread the text check their understanding. Based on the result above, the researcher concluded that the students believe that applying the strategies during the learning reading process could help them manage their learning and reach the learning process's goals.

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