

DESIGNING EFL VIRTUAL LEARNING: THE CHALLENGES AND THE BEST PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The field of education has experienced significant changes due to technological advancements. In response to these changes, online learning has become a popular teaching mode. The COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning a mandatory approach to education. Therefore, a variety of online learning tools have been developed for use. The primary goal of this research was to explore the viewpoints of educators regarding the implementation of digital media for English language teaching amid the pandemic. This research focused on investigating the challenges and the best practices experienced by Junior High School teachers when designing EFL online learning. Three English teachers were taken as participants. A qualitative research method was utilized. Semi-structured interviews and observation were used to collect the data, and descriptive analysis was chosen as the data analysis technique. The findings revealed that the challenges faced by teachers were their difficulties in designing effective online teaching and learning plans. In addition, the best practices experienced by the teachers and students when running virtual learning were using digital media, such as Google Classroom, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Since they were readily available, digital media facilitated students' participation in learning the English language.

Key Words: English teachers; designers; online learning

ABSTRAK

Bidang pendidikan telah mengalami perubahan yang signifikan karena kemajuan teknologi. Menanggapi perubahan ini, pembelajaran online telah menjadi mode pengajaran yang populer. Pandemi COVID-19 telah menjadikan pembelajaran online sebagai pendekatan wajib dalam pendidikan. Oleh karena itu, berbagai perangkat pembelajaran daring telah dikembangkan untuk digunakan. Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi sudut pandang para pendidik mengenai implementasi media digital untuk pengajaran bahasa Inggris di tengah pandemi. Penelitian ini berfokus pada investigasi tantangan dan praktik terbaik yang dialami oleh guru Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP) ketika merancang pembelajaran online EFL. Tiga orang guru bahasa Inggris diambil sebagai partisipan. Metode penelitian kualitatif digunakan. Wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data, dan analisis deskriptif dipilih sebagai teknik analisis data. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tantangan yang dihadapi oleh guru adalah kesulitan mereka dalam merancang rencana pengajaran dan pembelajaran online yang efektif. Selain itu, praktik terbaik yang dialami oleh guru dan siswa saat menjalankan pembelajaran virtual adalah menggunakan media digital, seperti Google Classroom, Instagram, dan WhatsApp. Karena media digital tersebut mudah diakses, media digital memfasilitasi partisipasi siswa dalam belajar bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: Guru bahasa Inggris; desainer; pembelajaran online

INTRODUCTION

The method of delivering and receiving education, especially in teaching English as a foreign language, has been significantly altered by the Covid-19 pandemic. With many schools and institutions shifting to online learning, teachers have had to adapt to new teaching methods, tools, and strategies that would effectively engage their students in a virtual environment. In this context, the role of the teacher as a designer has become increasingly important. A teacher is a lesson designer who conceptualizes, plans, implements, and evaluates instructional materials and activities to promote learning. In the virtual classroom, the teacher must create a learning environment that is not only engaging but also accessible, efficient, and effective for students.

One of the challenges English teachers face in the virtual classroom is maintaining student motivation and engagement (Akbari, 2015). This can be addressed through technology, such as multimedia and interactive activities, to create a dynamic and interactive learning experience. Moreover, utilising genuine resources, such as news articles, videos, and podcasts, can help make English learning more relevant and meaningful to students (Kumbakonam et al., 2017).

Another challenge is to ensure the accessibility of materials and activities for all students, especially those with diverse learning needs. Teachers must be mindful of how students learn and design instructional materials and activities that cater to these differences (Elaoufy, 2023). This can be achieved through the use of technology, such as closed captioning, audio descriptions, and alternative text for images, to make materials and activities accessible to all students.

The significance of the teacher's role as a designer in teaching English as a foreign language has been highlighted by the pandemic. Therefore, teachers should take a proactive approach to designing instructional materials and activities that can efficiently engage and motivate their students while also ensuring accessibility and efficiency in the virtual classroom (Nalliveettil & Al-Rubaat, 2019). With the right tools and strategies, teachers can continue to provide quality English language education, even in the face of unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic.

However, this is a challenging task. The role of teachers and the students determines the success of teaching and learning in the classroom. Students also play a vital part in attaining an effective learning process. Nevertheless, students sometimes haveneed help withng English. One of the main problems is the loss of motivation and engagement among students, who may find online learning to be less interactive and less enjoyable than traditional in-person classes. Teachers must find ways to create an engaging and interactive virtual learning environment that can maintain student interest and motivation (Chahkandi, 2021). Another problem is the lack of accessibility of materials and activities for all students, particularly those with diverse learning needs (Mahyoob, 2020). Teachers must ensure that the materials and activities they design are accessible to all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

In addition, teachers might also face technical difficulties and limitations in the virtual classroom, such as slow internet connections, lack of resources, and unfamiliarity with technology. Teachers must be proactive in addressing these challenges and finding ways to use technology in the virtual classroom effectively.

In the context of the universities in Russia, Kurbakova et al. (2020) mentioned that

the implementation of a virtual learning environment brings some issues, such as the ability to continue an educational process in the event of a pandemic and to be adaptable in transition from a modern to a traditional classroom setting to a virtual one. This clearly differs from the Indonesian context, where distinct learning environments exist in different towns and areas. Considering the diversity in the availability of technology and people's readiness and willingness in Indonesia, creating a virtual learning environment may provide extra difficulties. Educational solutions enabling classrooms to be in virtual environments and be just as effective in person are necessary for teaching and learning. Llerena-Izquierdo's previous study (2020) revealed that the employment of virtual learning has to consider its design, with the order, graphic line, formats, and several resources, with the motivation and performance of the students. This can also be one of the considerations when putting this virtual learning into practice.

The issue of implementing virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has become an urgent topic to discuss, and some contexts and settings in Indonesia need to be explored to see if this is suitable for some contexts; this paper tries to consider teachers' perspectives in designing a virtual English teaching and learning environment, more specifically in the context of English as a foreign language.

METHODS

Research design

A qualitative research method is used. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews or focus group discussions with English teachers, students, and parents. These interviews could explore the experiences of English teachers in designing effective virtual learning environments and the challenges they face in this role. Utilizing a qualitative study technique would provide a deeper comprehension of the teacher's role as a facilitator in the online classroom following the epidemic. The creation of evidence-based recommendations and best practices would be facilitated to assist English instructors in their changing positions (Smith et al., 2017).

Research site and participants

The study was conducted at a state junior high school, Majenang, in Cilacap Regency, a region in Indonesia. The participants of the study were three female English teachers, identified as Mrs Em or Teacher 1 (30 years old), Mrs Ed or Teacher 2 (46 years old), and Mrs D or Teacher 3 (33 years old). These teachers were selected based on their experience conducting virtual learning during the pandemic. These teachers had likely adapted their teaching methods to the virtual classroom, which made their experiences valuable in understanding how teachers designed effective virtual learning environments.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage the informants to offer their insight and observation on virtual learning environments freely. The semi-structured interviews were then recorded and transcribed. Then, to unveil the common themes, patterns, concepts, insights and understandings, researchers analyzed the qualitative data thematically to unveil the common themes, patterns, concepts, insights and understandings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study was conducted at a junior high school with three English teachers' classrooms from 30th November to 30th December 2022. This study investigates how

teachers design lesson plans based on their best practices and challenges. To achieve this goal, the researcher arranged interviews with participants. The findings of the study were as follows:

English teachers face challenges in the virtual classroom, such as maintaining student motivation and engagement, ensuring the accessibility of materials and activities, and addressing technical difficulties.

“According to me, the first challenge in online teaching is maintaining students’ motivation to join and stay in the process of teaching and learning.” Teacher 1

“In my class, the challenge that I face is ensuring the material is accessible so we have to design the teaching and learning plan well.” Teacher 2

“The challenge that I face and should anticipate is about addressing technical difficulties especially internet connectivity.” Teacher 3

T1 emphasizes the primacy of this challenge, underscoring the necessity to cultivate a compelling learning atmosphere. T2 further elucidates that the seamless accessibility of instructional materials is paramount, necessitating meticulous planning and design. Concurrently, T3 pinpoints the ubiquitous technical glitches, especially concerning internet connectivity, which educators must preemptively address.

The best practices and design strategies that can be used by English teachers to effectively teach English as a second language in the virtual classroom.

“As an English teacher we have to consider many things in designing online teaching, for me, I have to use variety of teaching methods. It is done to engage the learners and meet their need.” Teacher 1

“In my view, online learning must be designed in a supportive learning environment by providing positive feedback.” Teacher 2

“Online class design must consider the instructions which offer additional resources and make sure that the students get the expected learning target.” Teacher 3

To navigate these challenges effectively, English teachers employ a repertoire of best practices and design strategies tailored to the virtual landscape. T1 underscores the imperative of deploying diverse teaching methodologies to captivate learners and cater to their needs. Similarly, T2 advocates crafting a supportive online milieu enriched with constructive feedback. T3 accentuates the significance of furnishing comprehensive instructions with supplementary resources, ensuring students attain the anticipated learning outcomes. The efficacy of these design strategies resonates profoundly in their impact on student motivation, engagement, and overall academic achievements within the virtual milieu. As articulated by T1, conscientious design of learning materials and activities is pivotal, necessitating invigorating activities to galvanize student enthusiasm. T2 elucidates that an effective teaching plan hinges on engendering unwavering student focus, achieved through transparent objectives, instructional resources, and seamless

communication. Echoing this sentiment, T3 underscores the quintessentially of aligning all educational endeavours with predetermined learning outcomes, necessitating rigorous criteria delineation.

The impact of design strategies on student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in the virtual classroom.

“When we design the learning material and process well, we need to think about the students’ motivation, as designer of our-own class so we need to give and put activities which is motivating” Teacher 1.

“For me, designing the teaching plan must consider about how to engage the students to the classroom, especially in online learning, we need to keep them stay focus in class. The establishment of objectives, whereby teachers and students possess a clear understanding of what needs to be accomplished, what steps are necessary to attain these objectives, what instructional resources must be created by the teacher, and how to effectively communicate the material.” Teacher 2

“The most crucial one, in designing the teaching and learning plan is about everything we did, must meet the learning outcomes. Prior to the development or creation of educational materials, it is imperative to establish the subject matter that will be conveyed. During the construction of this material, it is essential to identify the necessary criteria.” Teacher 2.

Classroom observations to observe English teachers' design strategies and better understand how they are being implemented in the virtual classroom have resulted in the accessibility of materials and activities and the resolution of technical difficulties, as pictured in the observation table below.

Table 1. Teaching observation result

| No. | Indicators | Findings |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. | Use of multimedia resources | Teachers incorporate multimedia resources such as videos, podcasts, and interactive activities to enhance student engagement and learning. |
| 2. | Personalized instruction | Teachers use design strategies that allow for personalized instruction, such as providing additional resources or support to students who need it, or offering alternative activities or assignments. |
| 3. | Inclusive design | Teachers use inclusive design strategies that consider the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities or limited access to technology. These may include closed captioning or transcripts for videos, accessible formats for materials, and clear and concise instructions. |
| 4. | Use of technology tools | Teachers utilize technology tools that support student learning and engagement, such as video conferencing software, digital whiteboards, and online collaboration tools. |
| 5. | Varied teaching methods | Teachers use a variety of teaching methods to keep students engaged and motivated, including group work, discussion forums, and games. |

Classroom observations palpably manifest the practical manifestations of these design strategies, offering a nuanced perspective on their implementation. As delineated in Table 1, English teachers adeptly harness multimedia resources, personalized instruction methodologies, and inclusive design paradigms to foster an equitable and enriching learning environment. Furthermore, the judicious utilization of technological tools and the employment of varied teaching modalities elucidate educators' multifaceted strategies to engender robust student engagement, learning outcomes, and holistic development in the virtual classroom.

Discussion

The shift to virtual classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic has posed several challenges for English teachers, including maintaining student motivation and engagement, ensuring accessibility of materials and activities, and addressing technical difficulties. To begin with, maintaining student motivation and engagement is one of the biggest challenges English teachers face in the virtual classroom is keeping their students motivated and engaged. Students may experience screen fatigue or environmental distractions, affecting their ability to focus on the lesson. Aziez et al. (2024) pointed out that the shift from offline to online learning changes the students' attitudes and learning habits from active to passive. Therefore, teachers may need to incorporate more interactive and engaging activities, such as games, quizzes, and multimedia resources (Profile, 2022).

The responsibility of teachers to guarantee that every student has the opportunity to reach the educational materials and participate in the activities implemented during class. To strengthen the accessibility of materials and activities like in the virtual classroom, teachers must provide an accessible learning source and consider the students' condition in accessing them. This can be challenging for students with limited access to technology or disabilities, which makes it difficult to use certain digital tools. Not every student is equipped with current technologies and is aware of the basic learning tools, such as books and laptops (Yusuf & Ahmad, 2020). Teachers can address this challenge by using accessible and inclusive digital tools and providing alternative ways for students to participate in the lesson (Rolf, 2021).

Moreover, technical difficulties such as internet connectivity issues, device problems, and software glitches can disrupt the flow of the lesson and make it difficult for teachers to deliver content effectively. Various studies have shown that there are many teachers who are able to use computers, but they still lack the ability to operate them to support teaching and accessing any further related to the internet network, as well as dealing with technical problems (Efriana, 2021). Teachers need to be prepared to troubleshoot these issues and have a backup plan in case of technical difficulties. The government and schools should encourage every teacher to have training about the use of technology in teaching. Besides that, providing alternative resources or activities that students can work on independently can also be an alternative to overcoming technical difficulties (Thumvichit, 2021).

To sum up, the foremost challenge highlighted by teachers, as echoed by T1, is the imperative need to maintain student motivation and engagement. This resonates with existing literature (Hanafiah & Aziz, 2022; Lukas & Yunus, 2021; Meftah & Wahas, 2023), emphasizing that sustaining student interest in online settings presents unique hurdles due to the absence of physical interactions and the potential for distractions (T1). Concurrently, T2 underscores the significance of English teachers' need to create effective design and planning, which are indispensable in mitigating barriers to instructional

materials. Moreover, T3's emphasis on technical difficulties corroborates the pervasive challenges associated with internet connectivity, underscoring the necessity for proactive measures to address such contingencies.

After considering the challenges of applying virtual classrooms in the English language context, English teachers can use a range of best practices and design strategies to effectively teach English as a foreign language in the virtual classroom. English teachers can use various teaching methods, such as discussion forums, group projects, role-playing, and multimedia resources, to engage learners and meet their diverse learning needs. However, teachers need to make the learning material brief, concise, clear, and interesting. Using simple and interesting media and conducting regular and continuous evaluations are also needed to keep the teaching-learning process running well (Sutarto et al., 2020).

English teachers need to create a supportive and inclusive virtual learning environment. This can involve setting clear expectations, establishing a positive classroom culture, and providing regular feedback and encouragement to students (Widjaja, 2022). English teachers can leverage technology tools such as video conferencing software, learning management systems, and digital whiteboards to deliver lessons and communicate with students. Additionally, teachers can incorporate online resources such as interactive quizzes, games, and videos to make lessons more engaging (Anggawirya et al., 2021).

In order to monitor student progress and adjust instruction as needed, English teachers can use formative assessment strategies, such as quick quizzes, polls, and exit tickets (Ardinengtyas & Himawan, 2021). English teachers can personalize instruction by providing differentiated instruction and offering additional support to students who may need it. This can involve providing additional resources, one-on-one meetings with students, or targeted feedback on student work (Suriaman et al., 2022). In the virtual classroom, English teachers need to provide clear and concise instructions for activities and assignments to ensure that students understand what is expected of them.

In short, the study elucidates a repertoire of best practices tailored for the virtual milieu. T1's advocacy for diverse teaching methodologies resonates with pedagogical frameworks emphasizing the efficacy of varied instructional strategies in fostering engagement and addressing diverse learning styles. Furthermore, T2's emphasis on cultivating a supportive learning environment aligns with scholarly discourse emphasizing the pivotal role of positive feedback mechanisms in nurturing student motivation and resilience. Additionally, T3's advocacy for clear instructions and supplementary resources underscores the importance of transparency and accessibility in facilitating students' attainment of learning objectives.

The findings showed that the impact of designing strategies on student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in the virtual classroom is significant. When English teachers use design strategies that create a supportive and engaging online learning environment, students are more likely to be motivated to participate in class and complete assignments. Strategies like personalized instruction, the use of technology tools, and the creation of a positive classroom culture can all help to increase student motivation (Nadera, 2015).

Students' engagement is also improved when the design strategies incorporate various teaching methods and multimedia resources and can be applied well in the virtual classroom. For example, group projects, role-playing, and online quizzes can all help to make lessons more interactive and engaging (Husna & Martini, 2019).

Besides that, the use of effective design strategies can have a positive impact on

student learning outcomes in the virtual classroom. For example, formative assessment strategies can help teachers identify areas where students may need additional support, allowing them to adjust instruction. Additionally, personalized instruction and differentiated instruction can help to ensure that all students can access the content and make progress toward their learning goals (Popenici & Millar, 2015).

Overall, the findings accentuate the profound impact of meticulously crafted design strategies on student motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes. T1's assertion underscores the intrinsic link between engaging pedagogical practices and heightened student enthusiasm, emphasizing the pivotal role of design in galvanizing learner engagement. Moreover, T2 elucidates that transparent objectives and effective communication mechanisms foster student focus and alignment with instructional goals. This sentiment is echoed by T3, highlighting the imperativeness of aligning educational endeavours with predetermined learning outcomes through rigorous criteria delineation.

Additionally, classroom observation results elucidate the practical manifestations of these design strategies, offering tangible evidence of their efficacy. Teachers adeptly harness multimedia resources, personalized instruction modalities, and inclusive design paradigms, thereby fostering an equitable and enriching learning milieu. Furthermore, the judicious integration of technological tools and varied teaching methodologies elucidates educators' adeptness in leveraging resources to engender robust student engagement and holistic development (Suriaman et al., 2022).

According to the findings gained from several instruments used in this study, there are some recommendations for English teachers on effectively using design principles in the virtual classroom: First, when designing lessons and activities for the virtual classroom, it's important to keep the learning objectives in mind. Design strategies should be aligned with these objectives, helping to ensure that students are making progress toward their goals. Second, to keep students engaged and motivated, a variety of teaching methods should be incorporated into virtual lessons. These can include group work, discussion forums, multimedia resources, and games. Third, regular feedback is essential for student growth and progress. Use design strategies that allow for easy and timely feedback, such as a formative assessment tool, discussion forums, and peer feedback (Atkinson & Bolt, 2012). Fourth, consider the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities or limited access to technology, when designing virtual lessons. Use inclusive design strategies to ensure that all learners can participate and engage with the material. Fifth, Use design strategies that allow for personalized instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners. This can include providing additional resources or support to students who need it or offering alternative activities or assignments. Sixth, utilize technology tools that support student learning and engagement, such as video conferencing software, digital whiteboards, and multimedia resources. By using these design principles effectively, English teachers can create engaging, inclusive, and effective virtual learning environments that support the needs of all learners.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

This study was conducted to explore English teachers' experiences with virtual teaching, focusing on lesson plan design, challenges, and best practices. Three primary challenges emerged: maintaining student motivation and engagement, ensuring material accessibility, and addressing technical issues like internet connectivity. Teachers emphasized the need for a compelling learning atmosphere, meticulous design of materials, and proactive measures for technical glitches.

In response to these challenges, teachers employed various best practices. They

emphasized the importance of diverse teaching methods to engage students and meet their needs, crafting a supportive online environment enriched with positive feedback and providing clear instructions with additional resources to ensure students achieve learning targets. These strategies aimed to bolster student motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes in the virtual setting.

Observations revealed practical manifestations of these strategies. Teachers adeptly incorporated multimedia resources like videos and podcasts, utilized personalized instruction methods, and employed inclusive design strategies to accommodate diverse learners, including those with disabilities or limited technology access. Additionally, teachers leveraged technology tools such as video conferencing software and digital whiteboards while employing varied teaching methods like group work and discussion forums to maintain student engagement.

The study underscores the multifaceted challenges and innovative strategies English teachers navigate in virtual classrooms. The findings highlight the critical role of effective lesson planning, diverse teaching methodologies, and technological integration in fostering an equitable, engaging, and enriching online learning environment conducive to student success and holistic development.

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