Synchronous and asynchronous online learning in university English language classrooms: findings from Indonesia

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

English has a significant role in the education and economic sectors. However, learning English has been challenging for students, especially when the implementation of online learning has significantly increased. This research aimed to reveal the reality of English online learning in an Indonesian university, focusing on synchronous and asynchronous technological applications used and challenges faced by students. By employing a qualitative approach, data were collected by observing five English language skills subjects as well as interviewing 13 volunteered students. The findings revealed that Zoom and Google Meet were used in synchronous online English language classrooms mainly for lectures, discussions, and presentations. Meanwhile, Spada, the university YouTube channel, and the university online portal were used asynchronously for assignments, projects, information updates, peer corrections, forums, and learning materials. Some challenges in synchronous online learning included unstable internet connection, expensive internet data, incompatible gadgets, and low self-confidence. Meanwhile, in asynchronous online learning, some challenges included difficulties in comprehending learning materials, overloaded assignments, and lack of personal time commitment. This research suggested teachers and relevant stakeholders incorporate balanced synchronous and asynchronous online learning in their English language classrooms, improve infrastructure and technology for online learning, and prepare students for the challenges of tomorrow.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English is strategically important in Indonesia, a developing country in South East Asia (SEA) with a population totaling around 260 million individuals, the fourth largest in the world. Nowadays, learning English is always associated with globalization where the country needs to perform on the global stage for the sake of the economy [1]. Especially in the higher learning context, university students start to realize the growing importance of English, especially for academic and professional purposes, as reputable universities require them to achieve a particular English proficiency test while multinational companies demand a certain level of communicative English language skills from their employees [2].

However, the transformation of online teaching using technology in English language classrooms caused some problems, especially among students [3]–[9]. First, students faced motivational challenges as

they had to study autonomously and virtually from home and were not ready for the disruption of technology in the teaching-learning process [10], [11]. Second, students faced interactional and pedagogical challenges as learning became one-way in which they did not receive sufficient and immediate feedback on what they were doing. Furthermore, there was limited opportunity to express opinions followed by lacking of two-way interaction using English; therefore, their English language skills were not developed [12], [13]. Third, students had technical challenges because of poor internet connection and low-quality technological devices which made learning more problematic [1], [7], [14]–[17].

In the global context, many researchers investigated online learning in English language classrooms, which gives educational benefits, including English language teaching [3], [18]–[20]; oral presentation [21]; debriefing in the online English classroom [22]; and listening comprehension [3]. It was also reported that the use of online technology improved the quality of English language classrooms [23]. Stuby by Hedman and Mannish [19] contributed new insights on collaborative agency in English remote teaching. Another study conducted by Kandasamy *et al.* [22] explored the impact of debriefing in English online classrooms which helped students with collaboration, reflective and critical thinking skills, and ease of understanding. However, Atifnigar *et al.* [21] reminded that class size still became an important factor in affecting students' active participation. Purwati *et al.* [20] found that students' evaluations of video lectures were high, and this was consistent with how they positively regarded video lectures in online classrooms. Meanwhile, a study by Jiang *et al.* [23] claimed that students improved their listening skills in online teaching modes.

Online learning is a learning model that enables students and teachers to carry out the teaching-learning process remotely supported by digital platforms [24], [25]. It has unique characteristics, including student-centered learning, structured and organized manner framework, involvement of massive participants and participation, integration, as well as timely and authentic practice [26]. Because of these characteristics, online learning is carried out in two platforms, synchronous and asynchronous as seen in Figure 1 [27].
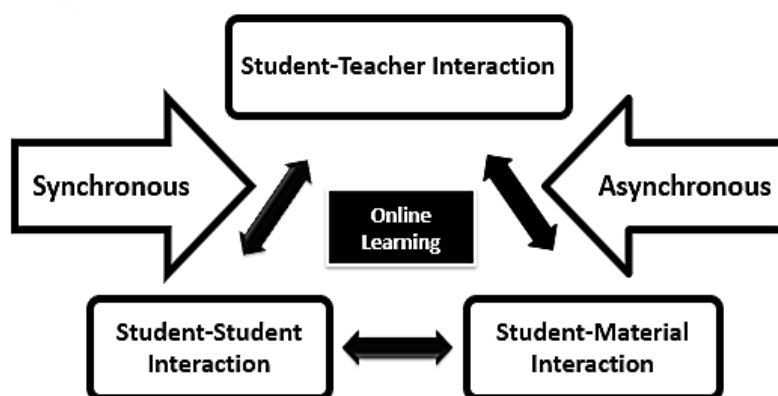

Figure 1. Synchronous and asynchronous online learning

Synchronous learning principally refers to a type of real-time learning. Interaction between teacher and student as well as among students was carried out simultaneously like regular face-to-face meetings, facilitated by a technological device, a system, and an internet connection as well as mediated through video-conferencing applications, video calls, or social media [25], [28], [29]. Meanwhile, asynchronous online learning is not time bound and students carry out electronic activities independently in their way based on their own time availability and convenience. Teachers normally provide learning materials via a learning management system (LMS), web, and blog while students download materials, complete assignments, and send the assigned documents back to their teachers. In other words, students spend most of the time interacting with learning materials related to the topic of discussion while teachers only give instructions and supervise or check [30]–[32].

Research by Rido [32] asserted that the key to success in online learning is the ability of teachers to incorporate synchronous and asynchronous online learning and to accommodate interactions between teacher and student, student and student, and student and learning material. This is where interaction and learning are intertwined, especially while using technology [31], [32]. Interaction cannot be separated from learning because they are the core of second or foreign-language teaching pedagogy [31].

The present research is initiated at the base of these concerns and an in situ needs to be conducted to understand the situation of online learning in English language classrooms in Indonesian universities from students' perspectives. Their voices are necessary to be heard since all decisions about learning are influenced by them. Studies on online learning in English language classrooms using technology [1], [3], [10], [13]–[17], [19]–[23] are valuable for the insights into this research.

However, studies that specifically investigate synchronous and asynchronous online learning in English language classrooms in universities are still in their infancy. Therefore, the present research is an effort to fill the gap in the existing literature. Therefore, the objective of this research is to reveal the reality of English online learning in an Indonesian university, focusing on synchronous and asynchronous technological applications used and challenges faced by students. Thus, this research tries to answer the following research questions: i) what are the technological applications used in synchronous and asynchronous English online learning in an Indonesian university? and ii) what are the challenges faced by students in synchronous and asynchronous English online learning in an Indonesian university?

2. METHOD

The primary concern of this research is to understand the reality of synchronous and asynchronous online learning in English language classrooms in Indonesian universities from the students' perspectives. This refers to an emic or insider perspective [33]. With such a perspective, this research locates itself within the qualitative research tradition.

This research was conducted in a university in Indonesia, involving students who took English language skills courses such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. The researchers met the university authority and potential participants and explained about this research. Information given included what the research was all about, what would be done during the research (this included data collection procedures, the role of participants, and the researchers), how results would be reported, what the university and the participants would gain from the research, and what this research would contribute to society.

The participants were chosen according to some considerations. They were senior students who had completed English language subjects such as reading, listening, writing, speaking, and grammar through both synchronous and asynchronous platforms. This research also involved student-participants based on recommendations from their head of department and on a voluntary basis. In total, thirteen students from the English literature department took part in this research.

After getting permission from the university authority, data were collected through observing both synchronous and asynchronous online English language classrooms throughout the semester. The observation was employed as this study needed direct information to understand ongoing behavior, process, unfolding situations in the classrooms. Specifically, observation was used because first, it allowed the researchers to get first-hand data about technological applications used in synchronous and asynchronous English online learning and second, the researchers could obtain information about their classroom activities which they were unwilling to mention during interviews. The type of observation protocol used in this research is an action protocol which was used to record whether specific technological applications and activities were present or absent during the observational time periods.

Following that, semi-structured individual interviews with thirteen volunteered students were also administered. The use of semi-structured interviews leaves space for the researchers to add any further questions that may arise during the actual interviews with the participants. In this particular research, interviews were used to collect data from the students as they were asked questions about what happened in their English language classrooms. It mainly involved asking a series of structured questions about how learning was facilitated using technology synchronously and asynchronously and the challenges faced by the students while attending the class. Then, it was probed using open-ended questions to obtain in-depth information. The participants were invited personally to attend an individual interview session which was arranged based on the availability of the participants and on a voluntary basis. The interview session was conducted using English and lasted for approximately ten minutes. Data from interviews with the students were carefully transcribed manually in Microsoft Office. To ensure the validity of data after the transcription was done, peer debriefing was employed and the students were asked to verify the results to establish strong credibility of data.

Next, the data were, analyzed using five steps adopted from Bernard *et al*. [34]. First, establishing a database; the data obtained from observation and interview were organized and marked in one folder as the database. Second, open coding; the data were studied carefully and open to any possible categories based on the conceptual framework used. Third, focus-coding; here, the data were classified into sub-categories. Fourth, organizing the emergent theme; synchronous and asynchronous online learning technological applications used and challenges faced by students were presented. Last, presenting the findings; the data were presented then followed by a conclusion.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The findings indicated that the students attended online English language classrooms in their university. They utilized various synchronous and asynchronous technological applications in online English language classrooms. They also met a number of challenges while participating in both synchronous and asynchronous online learning.

3.1. Synchronous and asynchronous online learning applications in English language classrooms
In terms of synchronous online learning, this research showed that two video-conferencing applications, Zoom and Google Meet were dominantly used in English language classrooms. These two applications were used in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar subjects. This research also found that the students used more video conferencing for speaking class which could be until 90% and around 30% for reading, writing, listening, and grammar subjects. It can be seen in Figure 2.
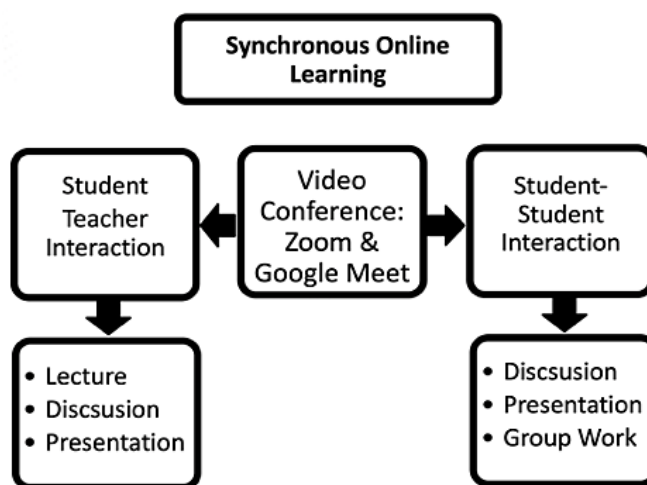
Figure 2. Video conference for synchronous English language online learning

Zoom and Google Meet were used to facilitate interactions between student and teacher as well as between student and student through which they attended lectures, involved in discussions, and presented their papers and ideas. The two applications facilitated students' group work as well. First, for student-teacher interaction, the students were introduced to language skills concepts based on the decided topics, provided explanations and examples, and practiced their language skills with more exposure to listening and speaking skills. During lectures, they were also given opportunities to raise questions and give comments which led them to an in-depth discussion where they exchanged ideas. Sometimes they made pronunciation and grammar errors, including vocabularies. Therefore, they received constructive feedback on their language errors as well as content knowledge. Second, for student-student interaction, the students got the opportunity to synchronously interact with their colleagues through presentation, discussion, and group work which were fully supervised by the teachers. To the extent of massive adoption of online learning tools, in fact, synchronous online applications like Zoom and Google Meet are not learning applications, but they were also used because of one main function, facilitating two-way communication between teachers and their students, at the same time, engaging them with their classmates in a real-time basis [25], [28], [29], [35]. Zoom and Google Meet also provide various supporting features such as screen sharing where teachers can display learning materials on the screen to aid comprehension, mics feature where teacher and students can talk as well as respond to each other, and a chat box where students can respond in a form of writing text and upload files. This promoted their listening and speaking skills [15], [36]–[38]. The findings are in line with previous studies [3], [21]–[23].

Meanwhile, in terms of asynchronous online learning, this research found that LMS or Spada, YouTube, and the university online library and journal portal were among the asynchronous online platforms used autonomously by the students at home. These platforms were mostly used in reading, writing, and grammar classes which could reach 70% of the total meetings. First, a LMS provided by the Ministry of Education called as Spada was used as the main asynchronous English online learning platform by the students. It can be seen in Figure 3.

Asynchronous Online Learning

- Structured Assignment
- Independent Project

Student-Teacher Interaction

LMS/SPADA

Student-Student Interaction

- Forum
- Peer Correction

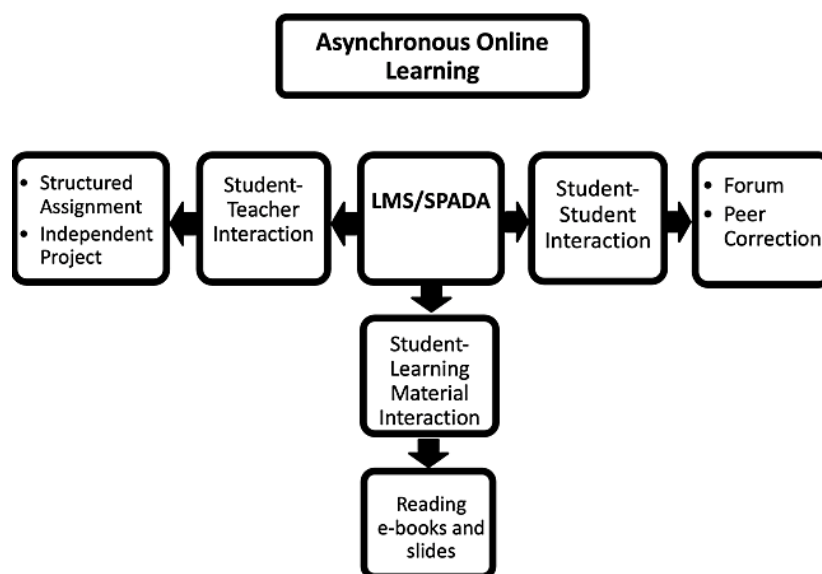Student-Learning Material Interaction

Reading e-books and slides

Figure 3. LMS/Spada for asynchronous English language online learning

LMS or Spada facilitated interactions between student and teacher, student and student, and student with learning material. Spada was the LMS where the majority of asynchronous online learning took place. The students accessed PowerPoint slides for their reading and relevant learning videos which could be downloaded and stored in their personal database as well as involved in discussion forums where they posted their comments or shared ideas based on the given topics. They also interacted with their teachers via the chat box feature, consulting their works or asking questions and taking examinations, quizzes, and post-test examinations [39]–[41]. However, in the implementation, poor internet connection [32] and too many compulsory tasks made the students struggle with time management as it took a huge amount of time to prepare, learn, and complete all work [42], [43]. The results are similar to the previous study [14]–[18].

Another asynchronous learning platform used by the students was the university YouTube channel. The findings indicate that YouTube channels were popular among students and used to facilitate student-learning material interaction. This platform was utilized by the students in all English language skills courses to watch videos produced by the lecturer. It can be found in Figure 4.

Asynchronous Online Learning

The University Youtube Channel

Student-Learning Material Interaction
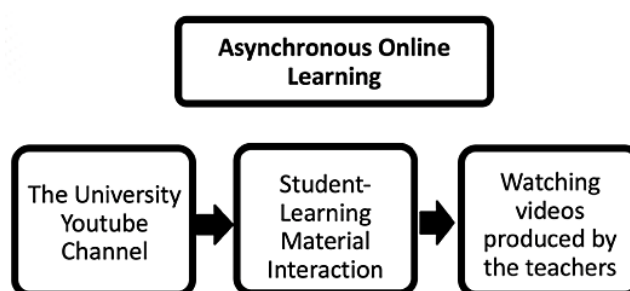
Watching videos produced by the teachers

Figure 4. The university YouTube channel for asynchronous English language online learning

The students accessed the university YouTube channel which contained learning materials designed and delivered by their teachers. They watched the videos at home and normally synthesized them with the materials available in Spada. YouTube is a video-sharing application that was also utilized in asynchronous English online learning. Teachers normally uploaded their teaching videos and students were asked to watch them, then, gave their responses in the comment box [42], [44]–[47]. Teachers claim that the use of social media enhances students' listening and writing skills and improves both their grammar and vocabulary. However, YouTube used a lot of data and when the internet connection was unstable, uploading video became longer and learning became slower [48]–[50]. However, not all teachers had their videos so they just

shared relevant learning videos from other channels. After watching the videos, the students gave their comments on the topics under discussion forum in Spada. With this official YouTube channel, the students did not need a large database to store all the videos as they were available online and could be accessed anytime and anywhere [26], [27]. The findings are relevant to the results of previous studies [20], [32].

The next asynchronous English online learning technological platform used by the students was the university library and e-journal portal. The findings reveal that this portal was used to facilitate interaction between students and learning material. This portal was also used to access various learning sources to promote self-accessed learning. It can be seen in Figure 5.
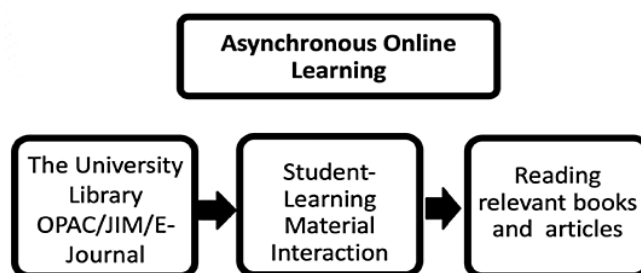
Figure 5. The university library and e-journal portal for asynchronous English language online learning

Another asynchronous online learning that the students used was the university online library and journal portal. This type of online portal was one of the most common asynchronous learning platforms provided by an education institution [26], [29], [32]. This portal was provided by the university and contained e-books and journal articles that they could access for free. The students used the journal articles mainly for writing assignments which they needed to support their paper project. Most of the time, the students visited this portal after getting such instructions and assignments from their teachers, downloaded all necessary sources, and saved them on their personal computers for further intensive readings or discussion materials. Giving the students exposure to these journal articles was able to give them more reading options which can help students to improve their reading and writing skills, including preparing their final year project [51], [52]. Reading and writing are two important skills needed by industries, especially for university graduates and new employees as they have to read many job instructions and write daily reports [1], [2]. These results are in the same vein as several researches [14], [16], [18], [29].

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be seen that this research has practical implications for educational practice. First, synchronous online learning by using Zoom Meeting and Google Meet has led students to engage in English online learning. These two virtual online learning applications enable students to interact with their teachers and classmates through discussion, asking questions, and presentation via screen share and relevant features available. Second, asynchronous online learning by using Spada, YouTube, and the university library and journal portal has led students to autonomous learning as they are facilitated with various reading materials, teaching videos, supporting journals, and clear instructions on task submission.

3.2. Challenges of synchronous and asynchronous online learning in English language classrooms

This research also identified challenges faced by the students while participating in both synchronous and asynchronous online learning in English language classrooms in Indonesian universities. For synchronous English language online learning, the findings indicated some issues. The students mostly experienced technical issues such as poor internet connection and low-specification devices. They also mentioned financial issues like expensive internet data and personal issues such as lack of self-confidence as presented in Figure 6.

It was interesting that while attending synchronous English language online sessions, the students frequently disappeared from the screen, delayed in receiving the lectures, and had to find a strategic place to get better access to the internet. In addition, not all students were equipped with advanced devices, in fact, their personal computers, laptops, and smartphones seemed incompatible with their needs which made them have to install and reinstall the applications which disturbed learning. As a result, the students were reluctant to participate as they missed some explanations and not confident to share their ideas. However, they were willing to participate in the presentation and discussion. It can be seen in the extracts of the students' voices.
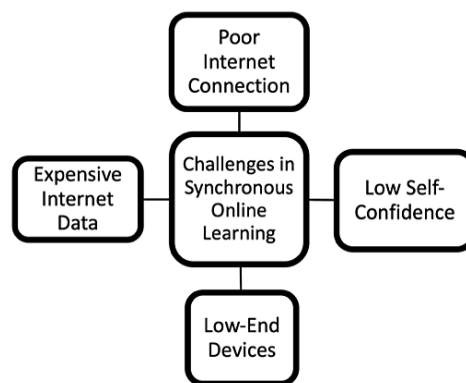
Figure 6. Challenges in synchronous English online learning

Student 2: "*I think because I live in a village most of my problems lean on the connection problems and also the laptop or the computer problems. Where sometimes it happened to be blackout and we didn't have enough battery to start the laptop. So, for me the connection problem and also the device problem.*"

Student 3: "*Actually, there are a lot of problems that me and my friends need to deal with, but the major one is, of course, the signals or network. Moreover, lots of my friends and also me feels that the online class is not that effective because sometimes the students are not into that class, I mean, some of them attend the Zoom Meeting, but they actually not on screen or not appearing.*"

Student 4: "*The first is about the internet connection because sometimes when we have online learning, it will be dependent on the internet connection when the internet connection is down, so we will miss the class and the materials... internet data also expensive.*"

Student 5: "*The biggest challenge is learning language must be practiced. In speaking subject, we did a presentation. We were introduced to the new technology that we never used, so when doing presentation, we felt like not confident because we saw our face on screen so very often off-cam except during presentation or when the teacher calls our name… and bad internet connection.*"

Student 6: "*In my hometown when rainy days come the signal is the problem the signal gone then after that I don't know what happen in the meeting because of that.*"

Student 7: "*I think the internet connection is the issue, yes because sometimes when the teacher wants to open the class, we don't have internet, just the internet…learning by the Zoom for me is difficult to understand, too much material.*"

Student 8: "*We attend class through Google meet and Zoom and a lot of to do in the class and sometimes I don't have problem if I do it at home, but when outside I have to use my own data and it's expensive.*"

Student 9: "*Yeah, we need to be on time. So, when I have to open the link, we need to enter because if we don't, we cannot enter the Zoom like this one. The signal I think because the internet connection is more important when we learn using technology, it's hard and also difficult because of bad signal.*"

Student 10: "*Maybe it is experienced also by other students. It's about the signal buffering, the signals…some problems with my phone and my laptop I think it's too old because there's some lacking or something install uninstall many applications, technical problems.*"

Student 13: "*I lived in a village with a bad internet connection sometimes so lazy to attend the class, even I ignored the class because no internet connection.*"

The students admitted that they experienced various challenges in synchronous English online classrooms. The majority mentioned technical problems like poor internet connection, especially for those who stayed or resided in remote areas. Interaction is somewhat influences the success of second/foreign language learning [15], [18], [31], especially in the aspect of speaking. When direct interaction in a synchronous online classroom setting slows down, the materials cannot be completed and comprehended, therefore the values of teaching and learning cannot be well-delivered [30], [31]. In fact, language learning is not merely an act of transferring knowledge, but also changing students' attitudes and facilitating them to grow as an individual during learning [1], [2]. They also had to afford their own internet data which was expensive when the economic situation was currently unstable as limited budget and no budget allocated for technologies for education sectors happened everywhere [6], [32]. The findings are in line with previous studies [40], [53].

Not only that obstacle, there was also a condition when they could not attend class because of a blackout. Another issue raised was low-end and incompatible gadgets owned by the students which made learning more difficult. The poor quality of devices also made them run out of battery while attending lectures or presentations. Because of the low quality of personal devices, students frequently installed and re-installed their learning applications [37], [54]–[57]. This matter frequently made the learning session obstructed and might also alter people's mood in the session. Furthermore, in many countries, students were not ready for online learning due to a lack of self-directed learning, poor online communication, and a lack of learner control [11]. Besides that, they could not focus because of the unconducive learning environment at home; while attending the class via video conference, they were also helping their parents doing domestic work, which was a common scenario in developing countries, especially in Asia [35]. Additionally, the students expressed some personal issues like feeling insecure while seeing themselves appearing on screen and lacking of self-commitment as they could not attend the class on time and did other activities while attending the class [11], [13]. These findings are also relevant to [13], [18], [44].

Meanwhile, for asynchronous English language online learning, the students also faced some challenges. This research found three main issues mentioned by the students. They had difficulty understanding the materials at hand, overloaded assignments, and lack of personal time commitment. It can be found in Figure 7.
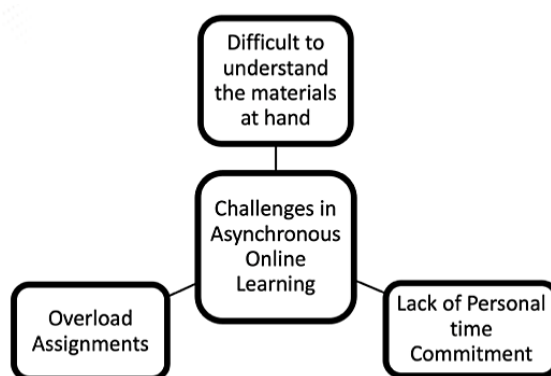

Figure 7. Challenges in asynchronous English online learning

The students admitted that they had several issues during asynchronous online learning. The issues had several impacts on the students' performance. They felt isolated, demotivated, and overburdened because of limited interaction and load of assignments. The following excerpts showed the students' voices.

Student 1: *"For me it's managing my time…We have a lot of home works in Spada, so managing my time is my biggest challenge."*

Student 3: *"Sometimes I feel like I don't understand the materials, especially in Spada, not enough explanation and too many works to do."*

Student 4: *"Sometimes when we don't check the assignment in Spada because sometimes the teachers don't give the information that they have put the materials or the assignment in the Spada and we don't check it, we will miss it and our score will be zero* and then the next one is *misunderstanding because we need to understand the materials by ourselves. We only watch the video and sometimes we don't really understand about what the teacher tries to convey to us through this video and sometimes it's too long video. So, I think it will be a little bit challenging for us to understand the materials."*

Student 6: *"The biggest challenge in this pandemic era is that the material that has been given by teachers is hard to understand, especially if the teachers don't give us explanation."*

Student 8: *"First problem is how to understand the material in Spada because we have to understand it by ourselves, read and try to understand the material by ourselves and not explained by the teacher. So, it's quite hard for us."*

Student 11: *"The biggest challenge for me is during asynchronous session so I have to learn by myself alone and I have to research it and then I cannot directly ask my teachers... sometimes I discussed with my friends and yeah, my friends also didn't understand about it…and a lot of exercises, essays, and papers to submit."*

Student 12: "*The biggest challenge is we are sometimes as a student still lazy because we do the assignment only from home. Sometimes while learning at home, we can't understand what the teacher said and we only read and watch the materials.*"

Student 13: "*In Spada the teacher just gave the material without explanation so it's hard for me to understand the materials…all subjects give a lot of assignments and so many things to do in one platform.*"

The main issue mentioned by the students was difficulty in understanding the materials at hand. They just read the materials, watched the learning videos, and did the assignments alone, trying to discuss with other classmates but failed as they were also struggling with their own tasks, exercises, essays, and papers of other subjects. In other words, they became a passive recipient of knowledge as interaction occurred was one way [12], [13]. There were fewer opportunities for class discussion and communication [58], [59]. Students were also unaware of how well their peers were learning. That made them feel alone, which diminished their motivation to study [10], [11]. According to this, students saw interaction in asynchronous online classes as additional difficulty since they could not ask the teacher questions and get immediate feedback [58], [59]. Consequently, students felt demotivated and socially isolated from learning [60]. In addition, time management became a serious issue among students because there were too many tasks to complete. In a similar vein, Lin and Gao [60] asserted that students' learning in asynchronous online courses was adversely affected by the course load, as they reported feeling overburdened by the volume of assignments and learning materials. In some cases, they did not submit the assignments as they missed the deadline. The results, to some extent, are similar to previous studies [39], [42], [43].

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be seen that this research has practical implications for policy practice. English online learning in Indonesia is somewhat challenging. Internet connection, big internet quota, and time management become the major issues that hamper the online learning process. These issues were able to demotivate students. Therefore, policymakers and relevant stakeholders should provide facilities and anticipate technology applications for future English language learning, mainly in the university context.

4. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to reveal the reality of English online learning in an Indonesian university, focusing on synchronous and asynchronous technological applications used and challenges faced by students. This research discovered that the students used Zoom and Google Meet in synchronous English online classrooms for lectures, presentations, and discussions which promoted their listening and speaking skills. Meanwhile, they employed the university LMS called Spada, YouTube, and the university library and journal portal in asynchronous English online classrooms for self-directed learning improving their reading and writing skills as well as grammar. Internet connection became the major factor that affected the smooth running of online learning, followed by internet quota and time management. This research suggested English language teachers use various online learning applications to promote balanced synchronous and asynchronous online learning. This research also suggested the university prepare facilities that enable students to prepare English language learning challenges of tomorrow. It is, however, important to note the limitations of this research. This research only involved a limited number of university and volunteered participants. Thus, it cannot be generalized. There must be further research involving a greater number of participants to portray the reality of synchronous and asynchronous English online learning from a more holistic perspective.

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