Offline or online?: EFL students' perceptions on working in face-to-face and virtual learning modes

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ABSTRACT

Given the intensified number of online learning activities and having inadequate knowledge to identify the details of how it was organized within increased students' language learning ability; this study focused on identifying the students' perceptions of learning in two different situations. This study investigated how students perceived working in a new learning mode (online learning activity) compared to the traditional or face-to-face learning mode (offline learning activity) in regards to the learning frameworks, including the depth and comprehensiveness of learning, appropriate length for learning, comfortability of learning, and flexibility of learning. Ten students were selected to be the participants of the current study; all of whom were sixth and eighth

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semester students at the Department of English Language Education of Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. They were served by several questions related to their experiences working on two different learning modes. The findings revealed that working in offline learning mode was still the common preference among the students and only a few of them preferred online learning. Even more interesting was the finding of one or two students who perceived no differences between participating in offline and online class learning activities. In addition, the findings also indicated that interaction between the course instructors and students still becomes a prominent element on the students' satisfaction and comfort of learning. The students also suggested that the keys to their satisfactory learning experiences are access to learning materials and to their class instructors. To conclude, this study also provides new insights on what matters the most to the students' learning experiences with respect to the current online learning trend.

Keywords: *EFL students' perceptions; Offline learning; Online learning*

1. Introduction

People are very reliant on technology today, making technology a basic necessity for everyone. The development of technology and science has affected almost every aspect of lives including education. Technology-based learning is immensely used in the instructional process as a supporting media to deliver knowledge in a more attractive, flexible, and convenient way (Derakhshan, Salehi, & Rahimzadeh, 2015). One of the examples of such use within education is online learning that utilizes the Internet access in the learning process. Lecturers and students in universities can now access the Internet for various educational purposes such as looking for new learning materials and interacting virtually outside the classroom (Rambe, 2021; Safriyani & Khasanah, 2021; Warschauer, 1996). Shih, Chen, Chen, and Wey (2013) argue that online learning help enhance teaching effectiveness and complete inadequacy of conventional education. Online learning also let students actively engage in learning activity and make them change their habits in learning from passive acceptance to more active self-oriented learners (Tathahira, 2020). In addition, Zainuddin (2015) highlights that online learning enables students to gain educational material and to participate in learning along with other students and teachers. Online learning also creates a more convenient and flexible teaching resource for students to acquire knowledge (Zhong, 2015). Further, Dağ and Geçer (2009) also add that online learning approaches the learning process by using communication technology. Therefore, technology such as the Internet makes learners and lecturers be brought together for learning purposes without barriers.

The change in the classroom condition to be more flexible and convenient through online learning settings helps produce a better outcome in student learning performance. Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2010) reported their study on online learning in U.S schools and higher education between 1996 and 2008 which showed that in general, students in online settings had better performance that those in traditional offline classes who studied similar learning material. Additionally, research

by Platt, Raile, and Yu (2014) found that students who carried out online learning also gained better outcomes than those in offline learning. As such, applying online learning entirely can be useful in order to get better academic performance among students.

Nevertheless, despite being used extensively in education, technology still has some issues, such as limited physical interactions between students and lecturers which affect assessments toward students' body language, gestures and also students' involvement in the learning process (Hart, Berger, Jacob, Loeb, & Hill, 2019; Kanuka & Anderson, 2007). In this regard, conventional learning still contributes to face-to-face and social interaction for teachers and students during lessons (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). A number of studies have also revealed that the role of teachers in physical classroom plays a role in student motivation and achievement (Mentzer, Cryan, & Teclehaimanot, 2007; Meyer, 2007).

In light of the above discussions, this present study concerned English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' experiences carrying out different learning activities, in offline (traditional) and online (web-based) learning at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Aceh Province. The study sought to answer how EFL students perceived working in the offline and online learning modes.

2. Literature review
2.1. Offline learning vs online learning
2.1.1. Offline learning

Offline learning is commonly known as traditional learning that provides a face to-face learning activity in a conventional face to-face classroom setting (Staker & Horn, 2012). Traditional learning employs zero online technology used whose learning content is provided in writing and orally (Allen & Seaman, 2013) such as lectures and textbooks (Nguyen, 2011). CPD News Team (2018) points out that offline learning requires students to travel to the teaching places, e.g., a classroom or lecture hall, and learning period is usually during office hours which makes little flexibility to students or teachers. However, it is more convenient to confirm whether or not students pay attention to the learning process in offline learning.

2.1.2. Online learning

Online learning refers to technology-based environment where students are required to have supporting learning tools such as computers and internet connection. Anderson (2008) describes that online learning is a set of learning process which includes "e-learning, Internet learning, distributed learning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, computer-assisted learning, web-based learning, and distance learning" (p. 16). Although there are many definitions of online learning, no specific compliment refers to online learning itself; so far, all the definitions are associated to the technology-based learning and distance learning.

According to Kuong (2015), online learning not only changes the learning system from traditional model into some electronics format, but it also includes the other essential elements such modifying the learning arrangements, preparing the instructional strategies, providing a proficient instructor, and providing a well-organized learning platform. Moreover, online learning leads to the new improvement for students and teachers to be more active and autonomous in the real-life practice. For these reasons, online learning constructs the student capability and knowledge to direct and influence them for active learning (Vonderwell & Tuner, 2005). Therefore, online learning should be designed appropriately in order to engage students to actively participate in learning activity and support the learning system.

2.2. Main differences between online learning and offline learning

Recognizing the basic differences between online and offline learning is really important to help determine the gap between the two. Platt, et al. (2014) classify the distinction between offline and online learning based on three major aspects: 1) *Flexibility,* which allows students in online learning to have greater control over learning time and place*;* 2) *Interaction,* in which in face-to-face learning, students can get higher interaction levels with teachers and other students as they can communicate directly; and 3) *Knowledge gained,* in which both online and offline learning show that students can have obtain more knowledge whichever learning mode they have. All in all, Platt et al. (2014) pinpoint that students seem to view online learning with more flexibility, but with fewer opportunities to get interactive than offline learning.

3. Method

This qualitative study used the snowball sampling to select participants of the study, consisting of ten students (one male and nine females). The researchers asked the participants to recruit others to take part in the study. The participants of this study were students in the Department of English Language Education, had taken courses related to technology (e.g., Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Instructional Media, English Language Assessment), and had experienced learning using technological practices. This study took place at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh in Aceh, Indonesia.

The study utilized interview to obtain data, in which the researchers carried out the interview with each participant separately. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. Then, the researchers employed QDA Miner Lite, a software to analyze qualitative data to run the coding process and the data analysis. The results were categorized into two points: how the students perceived working in online learning mode and how they perceived working in offline learning mode.

4. Findings

To answer the research question on how EFL students viewed working in both offline and online learning settings, this study revealed several common themes, as described in the following.

4.1. Theme 1: Personal learning experiences

The first category is the personal experience of the students working in both offline and online learning activities. The experience refers to their involvement in teaching-learning process during the technology-related courses. Specifically, this is related to the students' physical, emotional, and intellectual experiences after taking the offline and online learning activities.

4.1.1. Positive experiences

The researchers asked the participants about the most interesting learning mode in the teaching-learning process that they had attended. The study found that the participants showed their own views about the interesting aspect of both offline and online learning activities. On the one hand, some participants revealed that learning online was more interesting than learning offline since using technology-based learning has made English learning become more attractive and flexible.

> I think online learning is a new thing right now because we know we are in the twenty-first century where the internet has a very fast development ... and this [Online Learning Activity] is one of the alternatives of face-to-face instruction... This is the new revolution in education. (Student 2; Segment 169)

> I think that's more interesting because for the assignment I prefer to online because the timeline can be modified. Like, the assignment should be submitted on Tuesday, so, the deadline commonly at 12 p.m. So, we still have spare time from morning until night if we are a deadliner. (Student 10; Segment 174)

However, other participants also addressed that offline learning activity was more interesting than online learning activity.

> I think after I have experienced both of them, I think I like offline learning because you know, like, offline learning are we study with the picture, I mean *lecturer*. We can ask if we have the problem. We can ask face-to-face to the lecturer. Yes. But I am more familiar with offline learning. (Student 9; Segment 160, 161, 162, & 168)

From the interview results, it can be highlighted that most students put a higher interest in online learning activity. They found that online learning activity is a new discovery for their learning activity in today's education completing the missing puzzle in conventional face-to-face learning. Interestingly, in this case, online learning activity not only becomes a fascinating and attractive learning experience itself, but also helps

the students manage their learning activity to be more flexible according to their own learning pace and needs.

4.1.2. Negative experiences

The interview results also found a pattern of negative experience and the difficulties faced by the students within offline and online learning activity. This is related to the way the students learn, absorb the material, engage in classroom activity, and interact with teachers during the learning activity. The participants not only admitted their difficulties, but also expressed their concern and gave suggestion about the missing part in their learning experience. In addition, they lacked understanding on the materials provided in English learning activity. The students' negative experiences are as follow:

4.1.2.1. Negative experiences in offline learning mode

1) Undisciplined learning

Several students pointed out that after considering the agreements and rules during lesson, many still ignored them, and so most students and even the lecturers broke the rules, as expressed by Student 7, "the offline class, maybe we can come a little bit later than the time. I often break the rule of offline. Yeah. Sometimes the lecturer and the students itself will break their own rules yeah. The deadline." (Segment 143)

Here, it can be interpreted that in traditional face-to-face learning, students and lecturers who frequently break the teaching and learning rules can produce undisciplined and unconducive classroom situations. Consequently, this problem can make teaching and learning objectives unfulfilled.

2) Time limitation

Time limitation is one of the major issues in face-to-face (f2f) learning. Short time period sometimes becomes a major problem in students' learning process. Students only have little time to absorb the materials effectively. Thus, limited time to study in class makes many lessons unfinished, and so a lot of learning materials are not well-covered.

Some students addressed that offline learning activity provided shorter time duration than online learning activity. Moreover, sometimes the materials were not fully delivered in the classroom.

> For the disadvantages of an offline class, I think when the material is needed to take more time it will be... uh... you know it doesn't cover, it doesn't cover enough to students to understand because sometimes one material only provides two meetings or at least one meeting while the material is hard to understand, so of course we need another meeting to cover it. (Student 1; Segment 19)

> I don't think the time management in offline learning activity is well because, uh... because when we were in offline activities absolutely the lecturer will run

of time, will be in a hurry because of the time. And then perhaps we will get final test at home not in campus, so I think it is not good in traditional offline learning style. (Student 3; Segment 21)

These results showed that students felt uncomfortable to having limited learning period in offline class. Short learning period made them difficult to absorb the material and understand the discussion properly.

3) Low self-motivation to learn

The study found that several students still had low self-motivation to learn during offline class, as described by Student 8, "in offline you can provide yourself self-study, you can learn after the class; but sometimes your motivation is so low, so you can't provide that, so you only learn in the class." (Segment 153). In addition, Student 10 also expressed that "sometimes, I don't think in the classroom my brain is in the mood in learning." (Segment 106)

According to the interview results, after having the offline class, sometimes students had no interest to learn after that. Nevertheless, self-motivation is one of the crucial aspects in students' learning experiences. Thus, higher learning motivation accompanied by having the mood for learning is important to get a better learning outcome.

4.1.2.2. Negative experiences in online learning mode

1) Problem in understanding the material

The study found that students were sometimes confused in understanding the material in online learning activity. Student 7 perceived that, "in the Canvas I don't really understand what he [the lecturer] means but we have to make an assignment based on what he wants." (Segment 146)

Moreover, Student 4 added that:

So, it's like the obstacle when he/she [the lecturer] delivered the materials. So, it is like there is something wrong with the material that not clearly deliver to us. Oh, so that's your problem when your teacher did not provide a clear a clear question or a clear, how to say like a clear steps or regulation in your assignment, so it will hard to find her to ask a question. (Segment 139)

The minimum amount of information provided in the online platform made students feel it difficult to understand the instructions. On the other hand, the difficulty to contact and ask the course instructor also became one of the reasons of assignments and tasks harder to complete.

2) Internet connection

The other negative experience faced by students while working in online learning activity is the Internet connection. All of the participants admitted that the Internet connection was the major obstacle in online learning activity.

> The difficulty of online is Internet connection, yeah, because like, we know our campus doesn't provide good Wi-Fi, so when it happened to me and my friends when we were in last semester... not all students use good provider internet, so we will feel like it is so hard for us to make everything in time because, yeah, because the internet connection is bad. (Student 3; Segment 113)

> For the disadvantages from online learning for the first it is also about the connection so if we use the online learning you have to make sure that you have to do to get a good connection. So, I have experienced one time, it is like we didn't get good connection, so our task is being late the deadline. I didn't get the score for the task, so makes me confused, and then sometime to make me sad because I didn't get the score. (Student 9; Segment 141)

In this case, students agreed that the Internet connection is a necessity for online learning. Consequently, Internet connection must be the primary concern before applying this kind of learning activity to ensure learning runs well.

3) Teacher-student and student-student interactions

Interaction is one of the major elements in teaching and learning process. However, the study showed that online learning had the minimum level of interaction causing the difficulty for students in absorbing learning materials and information. Student 6 mentioned that "the minus from the online learning styles is like and you can't... you don't know what to expect someone's facial expression when you learn." (Segment 118)

Additionally, Student 9 stated that:

> Sometimes if we get the problem with, I mean like the task, we cannot ask the lecturer, but you know, we ask friends... we ask the other students first, and then we made our task only by our self-information. Sometime we cannot contact the lecturer. (Segment 137)

The students revealed that it was difficulty to interact directly and connect to the teacher to ask for clarification or further information in online learning activity. Also, working in online learning created misinterpretation of assignment instructions which led to misunderstanding and wrong practices among students.

4) Poor technology skills

In applying technology-based learning, the proficiency level of technological development should be mastered by both the course instructor and the students.

> ... [for] the lecturer use the Canvas maybe for the online learning, makes sure that you know well about it. ... For example, for the first you make the schedule, and then you have to make sure that the deadline everything it is there. And then, maybe about the material you can add everything there. It is like you can share more material in Canvas. (Student 9; Segment 116)

The study found that some students seemed to have a difficulty due to the lecturer's poor skill in managing online learning platforms. Therefore, it would be better for the course instructor to be familiar and master the online platform before using it in class to the students.

4.2. Theme 2: Learning framework
4.2.1. Depth and comprehensiveness of learning

Depth and comprehensiveness of learning is one of the primary elements in learning, reflecting whether students recall properly what has been learned. In this study, the result showed that some students had mixed responses on whether they could better understand materials in offline or online learning activity.

Some students believed that offline learning activity provides more comprehension because teacher gives explanation directly. Student 10 chose offline learning because "we can actually face to face with our lecturer, so if you get confused then get more explanation at the time. So I think to make me understand its offline learning styles." (Segment 90)

However, others thought that online learning activity allows for a deeper learning experience.

> I think both of them, but it depends on the lecturer. The lecturer is plan the material, how the lecturer give students the score, uh... the feedback, it depends on the lecturer. But when I was in online learning activities, I saw my lecturer is very obviously giving the score and giving the feedback and he is also very interesting in explaining about the online learning style. So it makes me more comprehensive in online learning style because of the lecturer. (Student 3; Segment 65)

From the responses above, it can be inferred that both offline and online learning have equal level of comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, it depends on how the learning activity itself is delivered and also how the teacher carries out learning.

4.2.2. Appropriate length of learning

Both offline and online learning activities have their uniqueness in the time management setting, and thus, the appropriate length for learning should be organized well before applying it to the real practice. Too long or too short learning time is also not appropriate for healthy learning. This study found that students had different

opinions on the time for learning. In terms of offline learning, some students felt time for learning is limited, making the learning materials are not delivered properly.

Student 6 explained that:

> Offline mostly doesn't give feedback ... and we are learning and then suddenly it's out of the time, so we can't really understand like what it is. Some of the lecturers doesn't give a lot of explanation when we ask. (Segment 2)

This study identified that some students felt learning time was not enough during offline learning since they could not ask more questions and the teachers did not provide sufficient explanations due to time limitation. Moreover, some teachers also came late, making lessons delayed, as stated by Student 10, "lecturer not coming on time like in last 30 minutes, last 45 minutes, so it not good timing for learning anymore." (Segment 1)

However, the implementation of online learning becomes a great alternative to learn. Student 5 described that:

> I prefer online learning activity because uh... learning activity is, you know, we could have much more time in making the homework, so the lecturer giving us due dates. But, by giving the learning activity, we also could do more homework or assignment from other lecturer, so it makes easier to do in activity online. (Segment 208)

The response above showed that some students preferred working in online learning due to a longer period of learning time, so students can use their time flexibly.

4.2.3. Comfortability of learning
4.2.3.1. Conducive learning environment

Another category is comfortability of learning. This study found that some students admitted that online learning environment allows them to learn comfortably so that they can better understand learning materials. Student 9 viewed that, "for online learning there is no distraction, but for offline learning there is a distraction from our friends. For example, there is so busy, so noisy... so sometimes we can't get the information that the lecturer share to us." (Segment 43)

According to the response above, offline learning has an uncomfortable environment to learn because of the distraction from other students. Therefore, in offline learning activity, sometimes it feels difficult to catch the information delivered by the teachers. The result is consistent with the study by Puteh, Che Ahmad, Mohamed, Adnan, and Ibrahim (2015) which affirmed that conducive learning environment enabled students to have enjoyable study, to actively assemble the learning information, and to obtain necessary learning experiences. Such a proper, comfortable learning environment helps improve teaching learning process, and consequently, it will enhance students' learning quality.

4.2.3.2. Close teacher-student interaction

This study revealed that offline learning activity made students feel more comfortable since they could have an interaction and discussion with the teachers and other students in a direct, face-to-face activity.

> Offline learning can engage you in real time communication... I guess we as humans we are social, we need to see more in real-time, not online. So, I guess getting this advantage of offline and also, we can get the feedback right on time, right after we do something, we can get the feedback in offline. So, we cannot forget what our mistakes... This is the advantage of offline. I love to interact with them [teacher and the other students] in real time. (Student 8; Segment 38 & Segment 42)

Here, Student 8 explained that the level of comfortability in learning is having a chance to interact with other classmates and teachers. Since we are human beings, we have to communicate with other people. In addition, in offline learning activity students can get feedback directly after they ask the teachers. Hence, the level of learning satisfaction will be higher in offline learning than in online learning activity.

4.2.4. Flexibility of learning

Flexibility in learning embraces three aspects: time, place, and pace. Online learning activity is commonly identified as the more flexible learning activity offering a more attractive and limitless learning experience.

> The online is flexible. The lecturer can ask the students to a task wherever because we know that nowadays we have the internet in our phone and we can bring the gadget wherever we go. So, the lecturer didn't force students to learn, but the lecturer give the due date. So, the students have to fulfill the material that given before the due date. (Student 3; Segment 229)

> Advantages of online is ... based on myself, we could do one, two homework at one time. We could do offline and then we could do it online later. (Student 5; Segment 207)

Overall, online learning activities give students a more dynamic movement, where they do not have to focus on one single matter. Besides, students can be more flexible in organizing their learning styles. Students can also be more creative by using technological support. This finding is in line with the flexibility in online learning discussed earlier by Platt et al. (2014). They remark that online learning offers a greater flexibility than traditional face-to-face learning.

5. Discussion

To answer the research question, this study investigated the students' perceptions of having offline and online learning activities in EFL classes. The results

found five themes related to both offline and online learning, including: learning experiences, depth and comprehensiveness of learning, appropriate length for learning, comfortability of learning, and flexibility of learning.

The majority of the students participated in this study preferred to have blended learning as it offers a facilitative environment which helps them engage into face-to-face learning activities combined with technology-based learning at the same time. This combination is often believed to deliver more meaningful learning experience as learning activities can be structured in a more integrated manner (Yusny & Yasa, 2019) and facilitates varied learning options (Fadde & Vu, 2014).

Furthermore, learning framework played a crucial role in developing students' learning activities. In terms of the depth and comprehensiveness of learning, both offline and online learning provided relatively similar benefits. Although some admitted that offline learning was more comprehensive in delivering the information and materials, others acknowledged online learning was better and more comprehensive.

Time management was also an important aspect in learning activity. The accuracy of time management in both offline and online classes could help increase students' self-motivation in learning and influence their academic achievements. Nasrullah and Khan (2015) drew a conclusion that students who performed poorly gained significantly lower time management. They also emphasized that there was an association between time management practices, academic achievements, and stress reduction. Their study found that most of the students had quite a high pressure while working in too limited time. Therefore, open-handed time to studies outside the class or at home have shown to bring positive impacts on the students during online learning.

Meanwhile, the frequency of face-to-face communication has effects on students' performance and learning comfort. Since students primarily need direct clarification, feedback and also comment; traditional face-to-face learning becomes the major preferable learning activity. Unfortunately, even though offline learning is better in facilitating the immediate communication, meanwhile, online learning activity also offers more flexibility in learning in terms of time and space (Dhawan, 2020). Students can work in online learning mode creatively by organizing and modifying the appropriate time and place according to their learning needs. The greater level of flexibility in learning is offered by online learning (Platt et al., 2014; Singh, Rylander, & Mims, 2012). Hence, this reason still becomes the fundamental rationale of choosing online learning activity.

The results showed that real interaction or face-to-face interaction is essential in learning activities. For most learners, interacting with lecturers and friends are needed to have proper perceived learning (Baber, 2020). Moreover, Dobson (2009) mentions that students with visual learning style perform best when they learn using pictures, graphs, diagrams, and engage in physical interaction during learning activity. This also happen for auditory learners who admitted that without hearing the teacher explanation, they

would find it hard to understand the discussion. Unfortunately, online learning lacks proper two-way interaction between teacher-student and student-student (Dhawan, 2020). Consequently, working in online learning activity is one of the difficulties faced by visual learners.

Overall, after seeing the findings of the research, it can be inferred that this research is slightly similar to the previous research by An and Frick (2001) which affirmed that even though students were comfortable with technology-based learning through the convenience it offered, they still admitted that traditional face-to-face learning was faster, easier and more convenient. Here, the study revealed that both offline and online learning activities present different benefits and manifestations which give a very diverse choice for the students. Still, whether or not a learning mode is the best can only be determined by the students' learning style and habits. Implications for EFL teaching include understanding the students' learning needs and styles so that they can have better learning experiences in any learning mode they work.

6. Conclusion

This study has discussed students' experiences in both offline and online learning activities and shaped various statements of students' responses. The findings are divided into two themes: personal learning experiences and learning framework. In terms of personal learning experiences, there was a consistent preference working in a new learning mode, the online learning, as it was interesting and attractive. However, many still chose face-to-face learning as it was still more interesting and convenient.

In relation to the learning framework, most students believed that both learning activities presented similar stages. They admitted that the level of comprehension in learning depended on the instructors' explanations. In addition, the interaction still became the primary concern of comprehensiveness of learning. Furthermore, time management also played an important role in learning activity. The accuracy of time in both offline and online settings might increase students' self-motivation in learning and influence their academic achievements.

To sum up, it can be inferred that learning using online learning mode offers a new perspective on the students' learning experiences. Still, most students suggested that it would be better to combine face-to-face discussion and online setting to become a blended learning. Thus, they may work consistently with their classmates and teachers at the same time using integrated technology-based learning. Finally, this study opens up a new path for students and teachers to assess their performances within this new online teaching and learning process.

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