Exploring Students' Views on the Combination of Synchronous and Asynchronous Electronic Language Learning in an Interpreting Class

by Renata Kenanga Rinda

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ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19 pandemic, teaching and learning activities in all programs, including English Language Teaching (ELT), have experienced a significant transformation. Face-to-face or onsite activities of ELT in all levels, especially higher education are shifted into online activities in which synchronous and asynchronous electronic language learning activities are involved. This phenomenon leads to the emergence of various research conducted to explore the synchronous and asynchronous online teaching and learning activities in the pandemic era. However, the use of synchronous and asynchronous activities in Interpreting courses has received little attention. As a result, the purpose of this research is to characterize how students perceive the combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities in an Interpreting course. To reach the aim, a case study that employs a questionnaire and an open-ended interview is conducted in English Study Program Politeknik Negeri Jember. The participants were the sixth-semester students of the English Study Program, Language Department, Politeknik Negeri Jember who were taking an Interpreting Course in the Academic Year 2020/2021. The results indicate that the students have positive views toward the combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities in the Interpreting course and that the combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities in the Interpreting course's remote learning seem to help students to increase their confidence in doing English interpreting. Thus, the results of this study shows that synchronous and asynchronous online activities cannot be set apart since they complement one another. Teachers should precisely design their teaching instructions and set the suitable online modes, either synchronous or asynchronous, based on the learning objectives and the students' level.

Keywords: synchronous language learning, asynchronous language learning, combination, Interpreting class, students' views.

1. INTRODUCTION

When studying a second or foreign language, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking is a language skill that receives the greatest attention (EFL). English learners' speaking performance has mostly been used as the parameter of their success in learning English as a second or foreign language [1]. However, EFL learners have long considered speaking as the most onerous language skill to master due to the following possible reasons: (1) speaking requires complex cognitive processes that create a challenging atmosphere for EFL learners; (2) there are several psychological factors that contribute to EFL learners' speaking skills, such as anxiety and confidence [2]. The anxiety that EFL learners have, somehow, can hinder the learners in producing satisfactory utterances in their speaking

performance [3]. Responding to this phenomenon, EFL teachers need to formulate and implement eclectic teaching strategies and learning tasks that can help the learners minimize their anxiety, boost the learners' confidence and encourage them to improve their speaking achievement. It is critical for EFL teachers to assist students in improving their speaking skills since it contributes significantly to the development of another productive language skill that they must acquire, i.e. Interpreting skills.

Interpreting and translation are included as linguistic disciplines and are closely related, yet they have clear distinctions. Reference [4] explained that in translation learners study written text in one language (the source language) and transcribe or recreate it in writing in a different language (the target language). Students listen to a spoken message in the source language and attempt to convey it orally into the target language while interpreting. Reference [5], in his study, figured out that interpreting students tend to have an interest on the process of interpreting, especially the strategies to cope with the challenges they face in interpreting. Thus, it is suggested that teachers focus on designing a more process-oriented instruction in an interpreting class instead of focusing on correcting errors solely.

Interpreting is one of the courses or sub-courses provided in most English study programs of Indonesian higher education institutions. Nowadays, teaching and learning activities in the Indonesian higher education context are still conducted online within remote learning settings due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the teaching and learning of interpreting are to be conducted within remote learning settings as well. There have been a number of studies conducted to investigate remote or online English learning during the pandemic. A study about blending asynchronous and synchronous digital technologies and instructional approaches to facilitate remote learning was conducted in Hong Kong to investigate how Hong Kong English language teachers in primary and secondary education adapted their onsite teaching instruction to online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic [6]. The findings of the study showed that the teachers employed various digital technologies and approaches to support their online teaching instructions, that synchronous and asynchronous approaches cannot stand alone to facilitate students' learning, and that a blend of the two approaches is highly needed.

Responding to that study, this study aims to examine the combination of synchronous and asynchronous approaches in remote learning seen from the students' perspectives. Students' view is also one of the aspects that need to be explored in English language learning. Therefore, this study is conducted in order to explore students' view on the combination of synchronous and asynchronous electronic language learning in the interpreting class of English study program, Politeknik Negeri Jember since the course has deployed the combination of the approaches during the implementation of remote learning due to the pandemic in Indonesia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Interaction in Learning

Interaction becomes an integral part of a learning process, especially in distance education or remote learning [7]. It is necessary to develop clear interaction in distance education or remote learning context since teachers and learners do not involve in on-site teaching and learning activities, in which they can easily build face-to-face interaction. In transactional distance theory, the important elements in the mediated learning environment are communication and knowledge construction. These two elements are needed in building a live interaction in a language class. Interaction in distance learning can be categorized into three distinct types: learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner [8].

2.2. Synchronous and Asynchronous E-Language Learning

In a remote learning or an online learning mode, there are two main approaches to conducting teaching and learning activities: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous e-language learning is a mode of conducting language teaching and learning activities in which the information transfer and idea-sharing between teachers and students occur at the same time. The teaching and learning activities take place simultaneously via video conferences and/or live structured chats in an electronic mode using certain online platforms. The virtual classroom that is conducted in a synchronous setting can facilitate teachers/instructors and students to have real-time interaction and collaboration [9].

Unlike synchronous e-language learning which needs real-time interaction, asynchronous e-language teaching and learning does not require real-time interaction since it promotes more flexible time [10]. Due to its flexibility, asynchronous e-language learning is mostly implemented in an online learning context. In asynchronous e-language learning mode, teachers usually provide prepared materials in the form of documents, lecturing audio and/or video, handouts, power point presentations, and assignments. Students are given a set time to read and learn the materials prepared by teachers and complete the assignments.

2.3 The Combination of Synchronous and Asynchronous E-Language Learning

Despite the distinctiveness of synchronous and asynchronous modes in e-language learning context, these two modes or approaches of learning cannot actually be strictly separated. Based on the social constructivist conception of learning, a conceptual design and development model of the convergence of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning has been suggested and executed in an online learning environment [11]. The conceptual framework for merging synchronous and asynchronous approaches in e-language learning is depicted here.
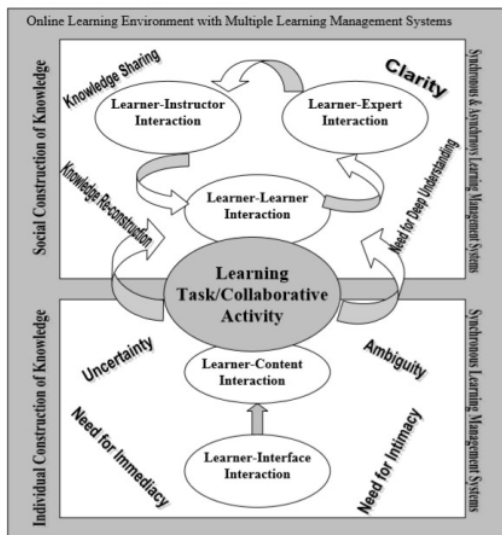

Figure 1 A theoretical paradigm for integrating synchronous and asynchronous learning management techniques

3. METHOD

The research method used in this study was a case study since it concerns on a single unit, such as an individual, a single unit, an organization, or a program, and the goal of which is to get a detailed description and understanding of the entity [12]. Furthermore, a case study can be used to explore and analyze the lives of the social unit such as an individual, a group, an institution, or a community as a whole [13]. Thus it can be concluded that a case study is a kind of research method that is used to explore and investigate certain cases that occurred in certain social units. The method was selected as the design of this study in order to get a comprehensive representation on students' views about the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning in an Interpreting class at English study program Politeknik Negeri Jember.

The study included 68 sixth-semester students from the English Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Jember who were enrolled in an Interpreting Course during the even semester of Academic Year 2020/2021. The course was conducted online throughout the semester due to the pandemic. The two modes of e-language learning, synchronous and asynchronous, were combinedly implemented in the course. In the English study program of Politeknik Negeri Jember, Interpreting is a sub course of Subtitling & Interpreting Course, which is provided in the sixth semester within curriculum 2017 that the English study program implements.

There were three techniques of data collection conducted in this study: an observation, a semi-structured interview, and a questionnaire. An observation sheet, an online questionnaire, and an interview guide were used as the research instrument of this study. The observation was done to observe the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning in the interpreting class. The online questionnaire was distributed to get information about the students' views on the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning in the interpreting class. In addition, a semi-structured interview was done to learn more about and corroborate the students' perspectives on the deployment of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning in the interpreting class.

The questionnaire consisted of seven statements. The first two statements were used to get the data about the students' views on online learning tools in general and the other statements were used to gain the information about their views on the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning in the interpreting class.

1. I am familiar with the use of online video conferencing platforms in teaching and learning activities. [QS1]
2. I am familiar with Learning Management System (LMS) used in my institution. [QS2]
3. I enjoy learning interpreting synchronously in a real-time virtual classroom using an online video conferencing platform. [QS3]
4. I enjoy learning interpreting asynchronously through LMS and assignments. [QS4]
5. I prefer the combination of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning. [QS5]
6. Both synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning provides benefits for me in learning interpreting. [QS6]
7. Immediate error correction from teacher and peers is important to me after my performance. [QS7]

A four-point Likert scale was provided as the options for each statement of the questionnaire: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*. The *neutral* option, which is usually included in a five-point Likert scale, was excluded in the questionnaire of this study in order to get a clearer representation of the students' standpoint for every statement. Then, to

triangulate the data gained from the questionnaire fill-out process, a semi-structured interview was conducted. There were eighteen voluntary participants for the semi-structured interview. The interview transcription becomes another source of data that elaborate the data collected through the questionnaire.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented in nine sections based on each questionnaire statement (QS). Each section describes the findings from the QS responses and the interview results for each QS category.

4.1. I am familiar with the use of online video conferencing platforms in teaching and learning activities. [QS1]

As a response to QS1, 88.2% of the participants chose agree. 10.29% students decided to choose strongly agree, and 1.47%, selected disagree. It can be seen from the percentage above that more than 95% students are familiar with online video conferencing platforms and do not have problems dealing with it. Supporting the data, the result of semi-structured interview between the interviewer (I) and the students (Ss) related to statement QS1 is shown below.

I : Do you have any difficulties in using online video conferencing platforms?
Ss : Basically no, Ma'am.
S4 : Maybe it was just in the beginning of the pandemic, when it was the first time for me taking an online learning and different platforms were used.
S1 : *ya*, Ma'am… at the beginning of remote learning, we had to install different applications at the same time. But now, I think no problem with the use of online platform for virtual classroom because most of the teachers use Zoom so now we are familiar with it.

Based on the above transcription, students admitted that they actually experienced 'a shock' in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic since the traditional teaching and learning activities had to suddenly be shifted into the remote learning in a fully online setting. Yet, now they manage to attend virtual classrooms through online video conferencing platforms, especially Zoom, which was regularly used in their learning environment. It indicates that the students' confidence in utilizing online platform has supported their readiness for online learning since students' confidence in operating electronic communication tools and their competence on the internet and ICT is one of the aspects of student readiness for online learning [14].

4.2. I am familiar with Learning Management System (LMS) used in my institution. [QS2]

Responding to QS2, 89.7% students agreed with the statement QS2 and the rest of them selected strongly agree. The total responses showed that 100% of the students are familiar with the use of LMS in Politeknik Negeri Jember and thus it shows that they have positive standpoint with its existence. An interview excerpt related to QS2 is shown below.

I : Do you have any difficulties in using LMS Polije during the remote learning?
S10: I have no problem with the features of the LMS, Ma'am. Mostly the problem is… LMS is down, so my friends and I sometimes get trouble with the scores of online quizzes in LMS or in the submission of assignments.

The interview excerpt above shows that the students have high familiarity on the use of LMS in Politeknik Negeri Jember. This is due to the fact that they have already been the users of LMS Polteknik Negeri Jember prior to the remote learning policy due to the Covid-19 pandemic, although the frequency of their using the LMS was not as high as that of at the moment. However, as the regular users of the LMS, they revealed that they were slightly inconvenient with the LMS technical errors that sometimes occurred.

4.3. I enjoy learning interpreting synchronously in a real-time virtual classroom using an online video conferencing platform. [QS3]

Reacting to QS3, a number of participants (41.18%) selected disagree while the others (58.82%) chose agree. The elaboration of QS3 responses can be seen in the following interview result.

I : Do you enjoy learning interpreting via Zoom?
Ss : Yes, we have no problem with that, ma'am.
I : What do you like about learning interpreting synchronously via Zoom?
S7 : I can directly ask what I don't know, Ma'am.
S1 : Yes, Ma'am agree…
S2 : Besides, we can get direct feedback. But I think I am not confident enough to get direct feedback in Zoom, *hehe*…
I : Why are you not confident?
S2 : because it is spontaneous practice Ma'am. Interpreting is difficult.

The result of the questionnaire and the interview showed that mostly the students enjoyed learning interpreting synchronously. On one hand, they enjoyed synchronous e-language learning in an interpreting class because they can interact directly with the teacher and get direct feedback whenever it is needed. On the other hand, they also stated that the direct feedback, somehow, made them feel a little bit insecure since they

still had anxiety in practicing interpreting performance synchronously. Although the number of the participants who chose agree is higher than those who opted disagree, this phenomenon should be put into account when the teacher designed the synchronous teaching and learning instructions. Students' comfort with e-learning is also one of the factors supporting the students' online readiness [15].

4.4. I enjoy learning interpreting asynchronously through LMS and assignments. [QS4]

The result of the questionnaire for QS4 shows that 2.94% of the students disagree, 82.35% selected agree, and the rest (14.71%) chose strongly agree. The result of the interview related to this statement is shown as follows:

I : Do you enjoy learning Interpreting via LMS?

S6 : Yes, I enjoy doing the interpreting practice that needs to be submitted in e-learning, Ma'am…

I : Why do you like it?

S6 : because I can manage the time by myself to learn the sources and do the practice or the assignments. I also can be more confident doing interpreting in a recording mode.

S3 : yes. Ma'am I feel the same.

From the result of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, it is shown that most of the students enjoyed asynchronous online activities in learning interpreting slightly more than synchronous ones. The interview result revealed that the students mostly enjoyed asynchronous online activities because they could somehow have more preparation to learn and practice interpreting. The flexibility of conducting the interpreting assignments in asynchronous setting makes them more comfortable and confident.

4.5. I prefer the combination of synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning. [QS5]

In QS5, the responses were clustered in the positive options only, agree and strongly agree, with the highest percentage 77.94% of the participants opted for strongly agree and 22.06% of them chose agree.

I : so, which one do you prefer in interpreting classes, the synchronous online learning and practice activities or the asynchronous ones?

S1 : I can't choose one over the other, ma'am… because I think I can have different benefits from the online activities via Zoom and via assignments in LMS.

4.6. Both synchronous and asynchronous e-language learning provides benefits for me in learning interpreting. [QS6]

Two positive point Likert scale were selected by the participants of the study. From the total percentage, 72.06% students opted for agree, 27.94% chose strongly agree and 0% selected either disagree or strongly disagree.

The responses from QS5 and QS6 show that the students seem to get benefits from either synchronous or asynchronous online learning activities in interpreting classes. They could feel the significances of each of the two online learning modes. Thus, they stated that they prefer the combination of both of the online activities in their learning activities.

4.7. Immediate error correction from teacher and peers is important to me after my performance. [QS7]

Interestingly, slightly more than half of the students (52.94%) selected disagree with QS7, 44.12% of them chose agree and 2.94% chose strongly agree. The students' responses for this statement was quite surprising since slightly more than a half of the students tended to disagree with the existence of immediate error correction from teacher and peers. From the result of the interview with the students, it is revealed that immediate error correction seems to arise their anxiety.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study explores the students' views on the combination of synchronous and asynchronous electronic language learning in a distance learning setting of interpreting classes. The results and discussion recommended that synchronous and asynchronous online activities cannot be separated. Teachers cannot carry out either a synchronous-only or asynchronous-only interpreting classes since the students would learn effectively if they are exposed to the combination of both modes of online learning. This is in line with the previous study about blending asynchronous and synchronous digital technologies and instructional approaches to facilitate remote learning in Hong Kong [16]. The study suggests that a blending of the two approaches is highly needed because synchronous-only or asynchronous-only approach cannot facilitate student learning efficiently.

Teaching interpreting is a multifaceted task for teachers since they should take into account such several things as minimizing the students' anxiety, enhancing their confidence, and at the same time improving their interpreting skills. Teachers should conduct the teaching and learning activities that facilitate those needs. It is conceivable that by implementing the combination of synchronous and

asynchronous online activities in interpreting classes, teachers can provide a convenient learning setting for the students. In a synchronous setting, teachers can have direct interaction and knowledge-sharing with students and the students can immediately ask the teachers whenever they have questions. Then, in an asynchronous setting, the students have flexible time to deepen their understanding and to do the practice. Besides, they can also feel more relaxed in asynchronous setting since they do not do 'face-to-face' practice with the teachers. It may boost their confidence to practice, especially for those who are in the novice level of interpreting skills.

There are some limitations in this current study. First, the subject of the study is limited. Second, the findings reflect the subject's views in a certain situation and a specific moment so that the results cannot be generalized. Future studies are needed to explore synchronous and asynchronous approaches in the teaching and learning activities of English interpreting.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 designed the research instruments, carried out the data collection techniques and analysed the data. Author 2 transcribed the recording of the interview and did the data coding. Author 3 participated in the preparation of the manuscript.

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