

## EFL TEACHER TRAINEES' EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN ONLINE CLASSROOM INTERACTION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the experiences of EFL Teacher trainees' engaging in online classroom interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic and to find out how EFL teacher trainees perceived the benefits of engaging in online classroom interaction during Covid-19 through reflecting on their experiences. This qualitative case study used the data taken from online classroom observation and semi-structured interviews administered to ten EFL teacher trainees in semester two of English education department in one private university in Ciamis. The data analysis of this study was coding and summarizing. This study produced three main points, namely: Challenges and Opportunities for EFL teacher trainees' experience in engaging online classroom interaction during the pandemic, the most effective strategies to help EFL teacher trainees engaging online classroom interaction, and how EFL teacher trainees perceive benefits in engaging in online classroom interaction during covid-19 through reflecting on their experiences. Based on the findings, engaging in online classroom interaction in a situation like the Covid-19 pandemic where all classes shifted to online mode is crucial. Being active and initiative to interact with instructors, peers, and content helps the learners engage, enjoy, improve and master English in a fun, effective, and efficient way. This experience has reflected the learners to be more independent, disciplined, and aware of how impactful encouragement, feedback, care, and respect are. Thus, it is recommended for English lecturers to create a classroom situation that makes the learners feel comfortable to initiate an interaction using English and improve the technique in teaching-learning activities.

**Keywords:** Student Engagement; Online classroom interaction; Covid-19.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The spread of Covid-19 pandemic has led many students and teachers to online communication. The migration to online learning because of the pandemic was sudden and quick. COVID-19 pandemic will directly and lastingly change the upcoming education. Therefore, we have to be able to adjust to the new learning setting.

Although online learning has many benefits, it certainly comes with its own set of challenges. And one of them is student engagement. Without face-to-face accountability, students can easily get distracted and give up concentration without being noticed. If students do not get engaged properly, their test scores and achievement will plummet.

Engaging in online classroom interaction is very important, especially in language class. Interaction and engagement are almost connected and both are interchangeably used. Student engagement is established within interaction (Martin & Bolliger, 2018) and it is significant to adopt interaction in online learning. Online interaction can improve student engagement and motivation, as well as student performance (Kwaske & McLennan, 2021).

Interaction has an important role in English language teaching and learning. Students have to interact with the instructors, other learners, and the course content to learn how to speak English well. It might create a successful teaching-learning process in the classroom (Eisenring & Margana, 2019). When the interaction is highly qualified, the process of effective and efficient English teaching-learning may occur. Such an English teaching-learning process could uphold the quality of students' learning achievement. Those who deal with the process of English teaching-learning, must push the interaction qualified and effective.

There are many previous studies related to the present topic (Bhandari, 2021; Havik & Westergård, 2020; Zayapragassarazan, 2020; Banna et al., 2015). The previous researchers found that many instructors were not sufficiently prepared to teach online courses because the focus of their training was on face-to-face instruction. At the same time, students' perceptions of engaging in online classroom interactions have received little research attention. In addition, considering that many future teacher trainees around the globe are participating in online learning courses and programs, it is crucial that information is gathered on the experience of teacher trainees in these learning settings.

## **METHOD**

This study used a qualitative case study since it can offer opinions about the reason people involve in such a certain action or behavior (Meagen, 2016). In addition, Yin (2014) states that the Case study has the scientific method in investigating an actually detailed phenomenon in its environmental context. Such a case may be an individual, a group, an association, a case, a problem, or an anomaly. The sample of this study was ten EFL teacher trainees in semester two in the English education department in one private university in Ciamis. Regarding the sampling technique, purposive sampling was adopted because it gives further understanding of the topic. The researcher used two techniques to collect the data. Those techniques are non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Coding and summarizing were used in the data analysis.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to answer the following questions: (1) “What are EFL teacher trainees’ experiences of engaging in online classroom interaction in the Covid-19 pandemic?” and (2) “How do EFL teacher trainees perceive the benefits of engaging in online classroom interaction in Covid-19 through reflecting on their experiences?”

After analyzing the data from observation and interview, the researcher found three main points concerning the EFL teachers’ trainees’ experiences of engaging in online classroom interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic namely. The first is Challenges and Opportunities of EFL teacher trainees’ experience in engaging in online classroom interaction in Covid-19 pandemic and the most effective strategies to help EFL teacher trainees engaging online classroom interaction (answering RQ1); and how EFL teacher trainees perceive benefits in engaging in online classroom interaction during covid-19 through reflecting on their experiences (answering RQ2).

### **Challenges and Opportunities EFL Teacher Trainees’ Experience in Engaging in Online Classroom Interaction during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

To answer research question number one, the data were gathered by means of observation and interview. By doing observation, the researcher understood the real condition in the classroom and by doing an interview the researcher can gain a better and deep understanding of EFL teacher trainees’ perspectives regarding this issue. The observation was held twice on the 14th and June 21st.

In the first observation, the lecturer started the class by greeting the learner and asking about their readiness to perform role-play activities in the speaking class. From what the researcher saw, the learners answered the lecturer’s questions as soon as possible, but when the lecturer asked who want to perform first, they became so quiet. Then, the lecturer encouraged the learner to become more confident and told them that they were not native speakers, so it was understandable if their pronunciation were not fluent. Then, the learners listened to the lecturer’s encouraging and they came forward one by one. The lecturer kept saying “Very Good” and “Good Job” after the learners answered her question or after they had performed. Then, the lecturer asked the learners to give feedback on their classmate’s performance, but only one learner tried it, and the rest of the class become quiet again. The learner’s voice is not heard as often as the lecturer’s voice. The lecturer tried hard to make the learners active and interact in class. In this class, learners’ successes were celebrated, and when the lecturer saw the learners’ misbehavior, she told them in a good way, so the learners did not feel integrated.

In the second observation, the learners seem more relaxed and enjoy performing in front of the lecturer and other learners. Before the class begins, the lecturer greets the learners, and they responded immediately. The lecturer explained the significance of the material and what they would gain from the class. When the lecturer asked the learners, who want to perform first, so many of them came forward. Learners’ confidence and excitement made the class seem more alive. When the lecturer asked the learner to provide feedback on the performance of a classmate, the learner did their best to provide honest and constructive feedback while being mindful not to harm others with their words. The lecturer kept saying "Thank You" to those who gave feedback to their peers and "That's Good" to everyone else. If they make a mistake in their spoken English, the lecturer will correct them, and then they will laugh together, in a good way, of course. The tense of this class is very bright and fun. The lecturer gave so many compliments

to the learners and encouraged them until the last minute of the class.

This finding is in line with the study conducted by Havik and Westergård (2020) that lecturers' emotional support had the strongest association with student engagement. Furthermore, Banna et al., (2015) states that three points in online learning consisting of efficacy, efficiency, and attraction can be accomplished from the practice of efficient learner-content interaction through proper activities. In terms of learner-instructor interaction, the social presence of a lecturer is an important part of successful online courses; lectures must carry out activities to transform virtual interactions into impressions of "real" people. Learner-learner interaction is particularly important to promote in the online environment. Learners learn better when in close contact with their classmates; this reduces anxiety and boosts confidence. A lot of research evidence has confirmed that these interactions in English language classrooms enhance learning and retention and facilitate the development of autonomous learners. This shows us that Interaction in online learning can enhance students' engagement, students' motivation, and student's performance (Bhandari, 2021).

When doing observation, the researcher saw that they were two types of learners in the classroom, those who are actively responding to instructors which are called engaged students. Student engagement occurs when they look excited to learn, take part in learning, and show positive manner in classroom (Kampen, 2020). Those who barely speak and remain uninterested is called disengagement student; student disengagement occurs when students do not spend much effort in their school works, and sometimes none at all (Collie et al., 2019).

By looking at the two observations, there is different behavior in observations 1 and 2. To understand the reason behind this behavior, researcher conducted the interview that was held on June 28th-29th 2021. The researcher interviewed both types of learners, the engaged students and the disengaged students to gain a deep understanding and unbiased research.

The result of the interview concludes that the answer to research question number one, "What EFL teacher trainees experience in engaging online classroom interaction during a covid-19 pandemic?" are both challenges and opportunities. According to Tomas et al. (2015), online learning has both opportunities and challenges to promote engagement. For the challenge, most of the students faced the same difficulties, which are insecurity or anxiety to interact in English because they feel their English is not good enough. They are worried to spell/pronounce some words wrongly and network problems as well. This is also the main reason that leads the student to feel disengaged. Furthermore, language ability is a mental ability that requires correct teaching strategies and training methods (Cai, 2012, p. 846).

With regards to the opportunities in the situation where all classes shifted away to online courses, it helps the student to be independent, discipline, and initiative to interact with other peers, content, and instructor. It related with the research carried out by Zayapragassarazan (2020) in that online learning methods encourage students to be independent in learning. The learners stated that engaging in online classroom interaction improves their ability to communicate their ideas in a language classroom which will be beneficial to enhance their target language. Furthermore, one of the participants said: "...we're not meeting in person so don't be too embarrassed if there is a misspoke or anything". Another participant answered: "...with a lack of confidence in myself, learning online is a little help when I express an opinion or answer a lecturer's question". These concludes that online classes reduce students' anxiety to interact; they still might be feeling insecure to interact in English but online classes help them to feel less insecure. After finding out about EFL teacher trainees' challenges and opportunities, the

researcher would like to investigate the EFL teacher trainees' strategies to keep engaging in online classroom interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic situations.

To have a better understanding, the researcher asked the participant about the best strategies that help them to engage in online classroom interaction. The researcher interviewed disengaged and engaged students and the result show that there are three most helpful strategies to help the participant engaging online classroom interaction. This result is the solution for research question number one, based on participant experiences in engaging in online classroom interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **The Most Effective Strategies to Help EFL Teacher Trainees on Engaging Online Classroom Interaction**

By referring to the findings, the several strategies that help learners in facing challenges and maximizing their opportunities for engaging in online classroom interaction in the Covid-19 pandemic are initiative and development of active interaction with the lecturer (getting feedback, motivation, and explanation), content (self-discipline), and other peers (to feel less isolated and to have fun in teaching-learning activities). Most participants picked Learner-lecturers interaction as the most helpful strategy as eight participants. It was followed by Learner-Learner interaction picked by five participants; and last, content-learner interaction picked by four participants. As the researcher previously explained, the participant does not only provide one strategy. This conclusion was reached after the researcher analyzed the response.

The findings also show that a high level of lecturer social presence contributes a good effect on learner outcome and satisfaction. Encouraging and motivating the learners is as crucial as explaining the material to them. The encouragement was given by the lecturer such as “that’s good” and “that’s correct” were motivated them. The learners felt that the lecturer respected them. Based on the result, lecturers’ encouragement and feedback made the learners more enthusiastic about joining the class activity.

Learner-content interaction helps the learner to become independent, and responsible with their studies. It also increases their knowledge which makes them feel not left behind and enhances their confidence to interact with lecturers and peers. Learner-learner interaction escalates learner pleasure, which may further consider an outcome increase. The findings show that by interacting with their peers, learners are motivated to study and improve their abilities. They also become supportive sources, making them feel more enthusiastic about the teaching-learning process.

This finding is in line with Hodges et al. (2020) who states that the existence of every type of interaction, when meaningfully combined, develop the learning outcomes. Online learning interaction may enhance student engagement and motivation as well as improve student outcome (Bhandari, 2021). Furthermore, effective interaction can develop the students’ involvement and their language outcome in the classroom. It motivates them to work autonomously in the learning process. When students take part in direct classroom activities, it can create better learning. Those who are active in the classroom interaction can give and transmit the information and learn well. The classroom interaction such as pair work, group work, and problem-solving work improves learners’ independence and confidence in learning. Also, it maximizes exposure to the English language because they are comprehensive input tools. The interactive activity-based student-centered keep the learners active and empower them to learn effectively and successfully on their own way (Bhandari, 2021).

### **How EFL Teacher Trainees Perceive Benefits in Engaging Online Classroom Interaction during Covid-19 Through Reflecting on Their Experiences.**

Based on their learning experiences, the participants reflected and understood the importance and benefit of engaging in online classroom interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a teacher trainee in the twenty-first century, the Covid-19 pandemic may be a challenge, but it may also be an opportunity to become accustomed to teaching-learning in an online environment. The benefits of engaging in online classroom interaction include increased confidence and academic achievement, as well as practice for them to develop better skills and prepare themselves as professional English teachers. They must be accustomed to use teaching-learning English in the online environment. It is in line with study conducted by Blakey & Major (2019) that engaging online classroom interaction is critical for student learning, retention, persistence, and satisfaction. Based on the result, this experience also shapes their plan in teaching and learning English. As a teacher trainee, they said one day if they teach the class, they will provide interactions between learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-instructor. Making the class alive by providing fun content, being available for their future student, giving feedback, motivation, and encouragement, and making sure to make group discussions provide the student the opportunity to practice their target language and get the best outcome in the teaching-learning activities.

The results of this study complement and support the previous studies about engaging in online classroom interaction. However, there are different things between this study and previous studies. The first study is from Blakey & Major (2019) who carried out research about student insights of engagement in online courses; figured out how students visualize engagement in online courses; and described what aspects students perceive to be engaging. The findings show that in accomplishing “student engagement”, interaction must be empowered and accessed easily for all course members. The similar point between this previous study and this current research is the subject engaging online classroom interaction. The different point between this current research and this previous study is the time spent on this research when the Covid-19 pandemic and E-Learning is the only way to continue learning activities.

Second study is from Sari (2020) which conducted a study about observing English learners’ engagement and their roles in the online language course. The similar point between this previous study and this current research is the subject that elaborate the English students’ insights of their engagement in the online learning process in a covid-19 pandemic. The different point between the previous study and this current research is the previous study used an exploratory study and this research used a case study. Also, the finding at which in the previous study found that learner roles are popular to reveal a better thought of their learning outcome progress and potential drawbacks in online language classes, this research show that teacher roles are popular to reveal to a better understanding. In addition, it increases student to engaging online classroom interaction which leads to students satisfactory and successful in the process of teaching-learning.

Another study is conducted by Khoiriyah (2018) focusing on classroom interaction during in English Speaking classes. This previous study examined the different kinds of classroom interaction, the roles of classroom interaction, and the leading type of classroom interaction in English one course Surakarta's speaking class. The similarity between this previous study and this research is in term the topic. The difference between the previous study and this research is the time spent on this research. This research was conducted in a covid-19 pandemic situation

where all classes shifted to fully online mode.

The last previous study is from Havik & Westergård, (2020) who conducted a study entitled “Are teachers important? Students' insights of classroom interactions and student engagement”. The similar point between this previous study and this current research is the topic that is students' perceptions of classroom interactions and student engagement. The different point between this current research and this previous study is that this research uses E-Learning in education while the previous study uses the traditional face-to-face class. So, the present result of study had mostly provided students' experiences on the online learning activity.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the research findings, the researcher concluded that there are three key points of the present research. First, EFL teacher trainees' experience in engaging an online classroom interaction during the covid-19 pandemic includes challenges and opportunities. Regarding the challenges, most of the learners faced the same difficulties, i.e. insecurity or anxiety to interact in English because they find their English not good enough. Furthermore, they are worried to spell/pronounce some words wrongly, and network problems. In connection with opportunities, in the situation where all classes shifted away to online courses, it helps the learners to be independent, disciplined, and initiative to interact with other peers, content, and instructor. The learners states that engaging in online classroom interaction improves their ability to communicate their ideas at which in language classroom it will be beneficial to enhance their target language.

Second, the most effective strategies to help them face their challenges and maximize their opportunities in engaging online classroom interaction during a covid-19 pandemic are lecturer support, motivation, feedback, encouragement, and being initiative to interact with the lecturer (instructor-learner), being discipline (Learner-content), and Connect to a friend (Learner-learner). The learner stated that interacting with the lecturer helps them to improve their ability and reduce their anxiety to interact in English. By interacting with content, they become more disciplined, stay on track, and can develop better knowledge about the material. Last, by interacting with friends, they feel not left behind, less isolated, and more motivated to study, they said it is nice to have someone to go through together, and the teaching-learning becomes more fun.

Third, answering research question number two, “How do EFL teacher trainees perceive the benefits of engaging in online classroom interaction during Covid-19 on their learning through reflecting on their experiences?” The student perceives the benefits of how important for them to engaging online classroom interaction. The findings show that the student had made a better interactions with the instructor, content, and peers to improve their participation in class which leads to academic achievement and social skill improvement (reducing their anxiety to interact in English). They also perceive how important and powerful the social presence of the lecturer. These experiences teach them how impactful support, respect, encouragement, motivation, and feedback are. All of the learners stated that they intend to provide supportive interaction between instructors-learner, learner-content, and learner-learner. The participant has a long way to go until they graduate, so this will help them to reflect, prepare and improve their ability in teaching and learning in English class.

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