Online learning for freshmen: challenges and opportunities in developing English communicative ability

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Abstract

During pandemics COVID-19 online learning modality had become the best alternative for any school level with its either positive or negative consequences. The purposes of this research were to identify the challenges and opportunities taken by the freshmen from their online learning, and to analyze the ways they might alternately manipulate ones for the others in developing their English communicative ability. It was a survey study by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from the participants, the freshmen of EESP of FKIP UNTAN registered in academic year 2020/2021. The techniques of data collection were questionnaires and a focus group discussion (FGD). Based on the research findings, it was concluded that the challenges were contributed by the factors indicating the less readiness of the institution, the instructors and administrative staff as well as the less readiness of freshmen with online learning. Meanwhile, the opportunities were contributed by characteristics of the online learning itself. In spite of facing challenging, the freshmen had alternately taken opportunity from joining the online learning. They gradually became well adjusted to the usage of a wide set of technology applications of online learning. They also developed their positive personal characters by the system. Eventually, the achievement of their GPA level indicated that they were able to improve their English communicative ability. Therefore, the online learning modality should be still applicable in the post-pandemic situation.

Key words: online learning; freshmen; challenges; opportunities

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In the early 2020, the world had been shockingly muddled by the situation of a pandemic of a terrible disease caused by deadly virus called COVID-19. Such a situation had been affecting all sectors of human life across the world, including the education system. Before the pandemic most of schools conducted their academic programs by traditional face-to-face classroom interaction or offline mode. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, everything suddenly changed. Physical distancing among people was compulsory to obey in order to avoid them from being infected by the deadly disease. Consequently, only overnight the normal offline mode for the classroom activities as well as other school activities was shifted to the online one. This policy was really shocking everyone for their unreadiness to face such a situation.

For the freshmen, particularly, the situation should be even harder. They are in such complex problems of transition. They do not only have to adjust the online learning system which is new to them but also have to adjust the new campus life which are entirely new to them. Surely, they must not be able to manage everything to be well-established all of a sudden. Instead, they need a process of adjustment to study in a higher education, which is totally different from their secondary school. In the first few weeks in campus, they are supposed to gain the campus orientation in order to access on-campus sources and facilities, to be acquainted with the campus personnel (administration and teaching staffs), the persons who will guide them and share experiences while completing their academic tasks. They also need to make friends with whom they will share things, to create clubs of campus activities, such as study clubs, sport clubs, art or music clubs, and so forth. Therefore, some schools of higher education even required the implementation of a Freshman Academy program, a designed program for freshman students as an effort to provide the strategies and the support to the needs of the freshmen to survive for their transition from middle to high school (Wilder, Murphree, & Dutton, 2009).

Applying online learning mode entirely for all campus programs from the very beginning are certainly difficult for the freshmen. It will become a special challenge for them to realize their academic tasks and to fulfill their social-psychological need for their campus life. It is due to the constraints of the online learning mode itself. The system cannot facilitate them with the real physical contact, nor direct face-to-face communication. Moreover, almost all the
platforms can only provide the visualization on merely the part of participant’s face with the unstable quality of voice. They cannot facilitate the users to recognize each other’s characteristics and personality, either. Meanwhile, being well-acquainted with each other among the class participants as well as between them and the other campus personnel will support the class participants doing the class-works more effectively. Especially when they have to do group works, communication practices and so forth. In short, online learning mode should be more challenging for the freshmen compared for the senior ones.

In the case of the freshmen of English Education Study Program (EESP) at FKIP (Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan) UNTAN (Universitas Tanjungpura) Pontianak, the challenge of online learning mode should not be only about their survival on the engagement of the common campus activities but also about the fulfilment of their major academic tasks, i.e. English communicative ability, as they are majoring in English language education. Therefore, the basic English communicative ability or competence should be prerequisite for them. In the first year period, particularly, they are supposed to cover the post-intermediate level of English language proficiency as their basic skills. Such a proficiency level must be represented by their good performance in their oral and written English communicative ability. The acquisition of the communicative ability will not only become an indicator of the achievement of their English communicative competence, but also as a medium for the achievement of courses that they need to cover in the higher grades. For this purpose, they need to engage with all the learning process of all those subjects. They also have to do a lot of reading, practice class discussion, perform individual presentation, and practice teaching simulation. Thus, the basic English communicative ability is very essential for them to acquire.

In fact, a number of researchers have highly put their attention on the issue of online learning, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic period. It has become a top issue to discuss (Kidd, 2010; Osborne, 2013; Ngampornchal & Adams, 2016; Rimba Hamid, et.al.; 2020; Ikhsanudin, 2021; Dhawan, 2020; Van Wart, et.al, 2020). Most of those researches were conducted for various purposes. Commonly, it was for evaluating the obstacles of online learning and identifying the solution; analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the online learning; and measuring the effectiveness of online learning in high education. Mostly, the problems were investigated from the students’ perspectives. For those purposes, the previous researchers applied different kinds of research approaches and methods. To sum up, the problems of online learning can be approached from different perspectives and different research methods.

Meanwhile, the findings of those previous researches indicate that the online learning contribute to both the positive and negative effect on the students’ learning achievement. To such an extent, the students were still found to have problems or obstacles while engaging in online learning activities. Nonetheless, they tried to manage coping with the problems as well as they
could. Therefore, from the students’ perspective, one important point of recommendation is that the students need to be facilitated in such a way by the campus authority that it is accessible and affordable for them to engage with the online learning system.

Separately, the issue of freshmen has been interesting to be investigated as well. The previous researches on freshmen’s problems did not only investigated from an educational point of view, but also from some other perspectives, such as social-psychological, from mental and physical health, and many more (Hughes, 2009; Kelley, 2010; Burger, 2016). Most of those researches were discussing the freshmen’ survivals in the first year period of their campus life and how they affected their success and failure for their study achievement at the end. To approach the problems, both quantitative and qualitative data analysis had been implemented.

Nevertheless, none of them was specifically talking about the freshmen’s problem in managing their online learning activities with all its challenges and opportunities, especially for those who are majoring in English language education. Therefore, the topic of this current research was proposed. The freshmen of EESP were selected as the subject of this research as they are majoring in English language education. In addition, they are coming from various social-economic background, as well as from different places and schools of origin. Their basic English competence should be consequently ranging. Such characteristics, therefore, were presumed to be the contributive factors to the challenges and opportunities in developing their English communicative ability while participating the online learning activities.

Based on the background described above, this current study was conducted for three purposes (1) to identify the challenges faced by the freshmen in developing their English communicative ability through online learning; (2) to identify the opportunities taken by the freshmen in developing their English communicative ability through online learning; and (3) to analyze the ways the freshmen manipulated the challenges becoming opportunities alternately on their efforts to develop their English communicative ability through online learning.

To be consistent with the research purposes, there are three main issues that must be theoretically discussed. They cover (1) freshmen; (2) online learning with its challenges and opportunities; and (3) the English communicative ability. They are supposed to be connected in such a way that the issues need to be discussed more intensively. However, they have to be connected to one another to become one interesting issue as they are respectively discussed in the following subheadings.

Commonly, freshmen is a term used to refer to the first-year students in a higher education (university or college), most particularly used by the high schools of U.S.A. As for the study period is in four-year time, they name the first-year students as the freshmen, the second years are sophomores, third year
students are juniors, and the most experienced ones are seniors. (https://www.mooxye.com/blog/en/what-do-freshman-sophomore-junior-and-senior-mean/). In this context, freshmen are perceived as a group of individuals who have the same problems in common, that is the problem of transition. They are in the transition from middle school to high school or from secondary to tertiary school level. This period is very critical and will affect the success on their academic achievement and graduation (Gossage, 2007; Wilder et al., 2009).

Being freshmen, they experience new things. They start new school, meet new people. For some of them, they even live in a new place, the city or country where the school is located. The new place might be demographically and culturally different from their places of origin. With regard to this, the freshmen’s first year of college can be identified as critical transition point for students. The transitional experiences might range from academic challenges, the development of relationships, to time management, securing independence, and many more. Such experiences indicate the complexities that the freshmen have to face during the first year in college or university (Burger, 2016). Therefore, they need to go through adjustment process in order to be well established with their new campus life situation. The success of managing to cope with the complexity of the transitional period will affect their academic attainment in the next-year periods (Tinto, 2012).

The process of adjustment should not always be smooth because of many factors because the campus life itself is complex. Many things that the freshmen have to learn from it. Therefore, the adjustment cannot happen instantaneously (Clark 2005; Hunter, 2006). Yet, every individual is unique. Each of them has different characteristics and personality. Moreover, they might come from different social-cultural background as well as from different middle schools and places of origin. These factors will consequently affect the rapidity of their adjustment process to the new campus life situation. Certainly, it will be varied from one individual to another when it deals with the way they build relationship with the people in campus by which they will manage to survive their endurance in their first-year campus life (Wang (2014).

Furthermore, the freshmen have to face a new academic system of the higher education which must be different from their secondary or middle school system. Moreover, their former academic achievement must be in a wide ranging along with the diverse quality level of the secondary school they used to join. Therefore, the freshmen should realize their own motivation to join the higher school because it will positively contribute their academic achievement and graduation (Friedman and Mandel, 2011). In addition, the external motivation – such as from the institution management, the family, and the teachers – is also required to make the transitional process feasible (Copeland and Levesque-Bristol, 2010). To conclude, being freshmen by itself is a challenge for them. So, what will happen if the academic programs or activities are fully executed
through an online mode system? They will likely face different learning experience by which challenges and opportunities should be manipulated.

Online learning is considered the best alternative mode of teaching and learning for its benefits (Nguyen, 2015; Singh & Thurman, 2019). Recently, online learning has been replacing the traditional face-to-face offline classroom teaching and learning. Online is a form of distance learning or distance education, which has been long a part of the American education system, and it has become the largest sector of distance learning in the last two decades (Bartley & Golek, 2004; Evans & Hasee, 2001; Allen & Jeff Seaman, 2007). It is a subset of a distance education which embraces a wide set of technology applications and learning process including computer-based learning, web-based learning, virtual classroom, and digital collaboration (Urdan & Weggen, 2000). The focus is not only on the online context but also including a full range of computer-based learning platforms and delivery methods, genres, formats, and media such as multimedia, educational programming, simulation, games, and the use of new media on fixed or mobile platforms across all discipline areas ((Kengwee, & Kidd, 2010).

Online learning is characterized by its flexibility and dynamics. It is not dependent on the presence of instructor, location, and students at a time (Dabbaggh and NannaRitland, 2005). It also supports student’ active learning or student-centered based pedagogical paradigm (Browne, 2005). The positive characteristics of online learning offers an opportunity for educational institution, especially the higher schools, to make a transition from a traditional face-to-face classroom interaction to the full online, blended, or web-facilitated courses.

During the difficult time of COVID-19 pandemic, particularly, online learning was not supposed to be only an option but a necessity for keeping the educational course programs continuing without even considering the affordability and the accessibility (Dhawan, 2020). It was considered as the best alternative mode of teaching and learning for its benefits (Nguyen, 2015; Singh & Thurman, 2019). Therefore, online learning modality was suddenly becoming the only alternative to adopt for continuing the educational program across countries in the world during the crisis time of pandemic.

As a matter of fact, the survey reports that not all institutions see online education in the same way. Some believe it to be critical for their long-term survival, others see it as a short-term means of boosting current enrollments, and still others as something that goes against the very nature of what they are trying to achieve at their institution (Olin, 2007). In addition to its possible opportunity to offer a viable alternative to the need for physical space, online learning is reported to bring a number of barriers. They may include the readiness of the institution as well as the acceptance of the institution’s staff and their support (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Kengwee, Kidd & Kyei-Blankson, 2009). Moreover, the inadequate facilities of hardware and software, the slow internet connection, lack
of administrative support, learners’ procrastination, lack of technical expertise among the instructors, insufficient orientation for learners, and lack of release time for instructors to develop and design their online courses have been cited as barriers to faculty participation in practicing online learning courses (Nelson & Thompson, 2005; Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006). In other words, the viability of successful online courses must be supported by the readiness and the acceptance of all participants involved in the institution. In addition, the infrastructure of technology application which support the online learning modality must be adequately accessible.

In short, the freshmen will face challenges from joining online learning when the those factors are around. They include unreadiness of the institution to conduct the online leaning, the less adequate accessibility of infrastructure and other supporting facilities, such as the insufficient internet connection, the lack of technological application (hardware and software), the low level of commitment of the campus authorities, the unreadiness or the lacking of technology expertise of the instructors and the administrative staff. The most possible challenge might be contributed by the learners (freshmen) themselves if they do not get enough orientation of the online learning system. In addition, the unconducive personal characters of the freshmen — e.g., being less motivated, procrastinated, uneasily sociable, too dependent, and less creative — will become another challenging factor. The other challenging factor is the absence or the insufficiency of the freshmen’s English language prior knowledge and skills as well as their level of technology literacy.

However, they might alternately take opportunities from it since they will get a new experience in practicing computer-based learning platforms with multimedia educational programming. By its flexibility and dynamics in time and location and the unnecessary presence of the instructor, it might facilitate the freshmen to build their positive personal characters by becoming more active, creative and independent learners. They will become more familiar with the usage of online technological devices and applications. In other words, their technology literacy will improve simultaneously with their English communicative ability.

As it has mentioned earlier, the acquisition of the basic English communicative ability or communicative competence is required for the freshmen of EESP of FKIP Untan since English language education is their major. Based on the guidebook provided by the faculty, it is cited that a number of courses have to be taken by the freshmen for supporting the acquisition of the target language (English) competence. According to Savignon (2001) communicative competence covers grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence. Meanwhile, Bachman (in Jordan, 2004) introduced a communicative language ability (CLA) framework by including three components: (1) language competence; (2) strategic competence; and (3) psychophysiological mechanism. Language
competence is a set of specific knowledge components that are utilized via language, whereas strategic competence is the mental capacity for implementing the components of language competence in contextualized communicative language use; and the psychophysiological mechanism is the neurological and psychological processes involved in the actual execution of language as a physical phenomenon. Bachman (in Jordan, 2004) further describes that language competence is composed of two components: (1) organizational competence, which includes grammatical and textual competence; (2) pragmatic competence, which deals with the speaker’s or writer’s ability to achieve his purpose through his utterances (including illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence).

Understanding how someone can acquire a second language effectively is not easy. A research in second language acquisition requires wide-ranged perspectives in order to gain an insight into complementary approaches and facilitate interdisciplinary crossovers (Myles, 2013). In other words, an acquisition of a second language (L2) should be viewed as a complex process. It needs to be explained from different factors, such as the linguistic factor, learner factor (which deals with individual learner differences, the psychological, social and cultural background of the learner), as well as the teaching learning factor. Ortega (2009) argued that the acquisition of an L2 can be viewed from two different contexts, namely naturalistic and instructed contexts. In the first context, learners learn the L2 through informal opportunities in multicultural neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, without ever receiving any organized instruction on the working of the language they are learning. In the second context, learners learn additional languages through formal study in school, university, private lesson, and the like.

In most cases, Indonesian learners learn English as their additional language through the second context. In this case, the classroom setting or the instructional design will take very important roles as they will provide learners with the input processes, the practice, the giving of feedback, and the assessment. Based on the skill acquisition theory, learning is defined as the gradual transformation of performance from controlled to automatic. It happens through relevant practice over many trials. The practice enables controlled processes gradually to be withdrawn during performance and automatic processes to take over the same performance. The process is called “proceduralization” or automatization. It entails the conversion of declarative or explicit knowledge (‘knowledge that’) into procedural or implicit knowledge (‘knowledge how’) (Ortega, 2009).

Considering such a complicated process of an L2 acquisition, the roles of teachers or instructors, instructional materials, and practices should be powerful. When the instructional design is set for the traditional offline classroom interaction, such a process should be feasible to happen much easier compared to when it is by an online teaching learning modality. The making of instructional
design should be in a consideration as such that it becomes a big challenge for the instructors. Similarly, the active participation of the learners and the role of learning sources should be made more dominant and conducive because the learners will interact among themselves as well as with the learning materials or media more intensively compared to interact with the instructors (Mohamed Ally, 2004; Anderson, 2004).

In conclusion, to support the freshmen’s high achievement from their online learning mode, the campus authorities, the instructors or the lecturers, the administrative staff, the informatics technician, as well as the freshmen themselves should be highly committed and collaborate well. For the freshmen, particularly, they should have been well oriented to such online learning program before the courses begins. No matter how huge the challenges are, they should not be panic and upset with the sudden change of the traditional offline teaching learning system to the online one because there is always a solution behind a problem, and there is always an opportunity behind a challenge.

**METHODS**

This research implemented a survey method. The data being gathered should represent the challenges and opportunities that the research participants might take from joining online learning from the beginning of their entrance to the EESP. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected (Creswell and Clark, 2007; Creswell, 2012) from questionnaires as well as from the students’ reflection through an online focus group discussion (FGD).

The subject of this research was the total sample of the freshmen of of EESP of FKIP Untan who were registered in academic year 2020/2021. They consisted of 79 students. The questionnaires were administered to them through Google form. The questionnaires consist of 25 items of questions or statements that the respondents had to fill out. In the same way, the FGD was also conducted through a Google Meet. The discussion was focused on the reflection on the online learning process as the reconfirmation of the items of questions from the questionnaires. In this case, the items of questionnaires were classified into four different parts. The items in the first part (A) were administered for exploring the freshmen’s accessibility on the infrastructures of online leaning provided by Untan. The information taken from these items represented the readiness of the institution to conduct online learning program. The items in the second part (B) were asking about the extent to which the freshmen had been prepared to join the online learning. Those in the third part (C) explored the general information about the freshmen’s experience in their online learning from which the challenges and opportunities were identifiable. The items in the last part (D) explored the freshmen’s online learning experience which specifically represented their effort to improve English communicative ability.

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. It was started by making percentage from the respondents’ choices.
After that the points of statements or choices should be identified and classified according to the aspects of both challenges and opportunities while the freshmen were developing their English communicative ability through online learning. Then, those descriptive points were interpreted as the way the freshmen

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<th>Supporting Factors</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
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<td>e commitment of the campus authorities and the readiness of the institution to conduct the online leaning</td>
<td>Low commitment of the campus authorities</td>
<td>High commitment of the campus authorities</td>
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<td>Insufficiency of infrastructure and other supporting online learning facilities</td>
<td>Sufficiency of infrastructure and other supporting online learning facilities</td>
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<td>The readiness of instructors and administrative staff to serve students with the online learning system</td>
<td>Less knowledgeable or expertise in technology</td>
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<td>Less viable with online learning modality</td>
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<td>The readiness of freshmen</td>
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<td>Unconducive personal characters, e.g., being less motivated, procrastinated, uneasily sociable, too dependent, and less creative</td>
<td>Conducive personal characters, e.g., being highly motivated, punctual, easily sociable, independent, and creative</td>
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<td>Low level of technology literacy. Insufficiency of English language prior knowledge and skills</td>
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<td>e characteristics of online learning modality</td>
<td>Practicing a full range of computer-based learning platforms and delivery methods, genres, formats, and media such as multimedia educational programing, simulation, games, and the use of new media on fixed or mobile platforms across all discipline areas</td>
<td>Increasing learners’ and instructors’ familiarity and expertise in technology of teaching learning</td>
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<td>Requiring learners and instructors to have adequate level of technology literacy</td>
<td>Being characterized by its flexibility and dynamics in time and location.</td>
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<td>Demanding learners to be more active, creative, disciplined, and independent in learning.</td>
<td>Developing learners’ positive personal characters and skills in learning (becoming more active, creative, cooperative and becoming more disciplined, confident, and independent learners)</td>
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manipulated challenges to become opportunities as they were experiencing online learning.

Since the questionnaire was distributed through a Google form, the data were automatically processed by the Google system. They represented the percentage of the respondents’ choice from the statements given. However, since the data would not automatically or directly represent either the challenging factors or the opportune at once, a further qualitative analysis was necessary to be applied. Each point must be identified and classified based on points of indicators for either challenges or opportunities. These points of indicators were adapted from the previous studies mentioned above (Nelson & Thompson, 2005; Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006). They were adjusted to match the purposes of this study, though. The classification of the points were analysed by referring to SWOC analysis by Dhawan (2020) which were also adjusted according to research focus. The points of indicators were listed in Table 1 above.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The challenges of online learning experienced by the freshmen in developing their English communicative ability are supposed to deal with a number of indicators. They refer to unreadiness of the institution to conduct the online leaning; the unreadiness of instructors and administrative staff to serve students with the online learning system; The last and most contributive factor which become a challenge is the freshmen’s own readiness. Consistently, the data are described respectively based on those indicators.

Challenges in Developing English Communicative Abilities

Based on the data description, the challenges dealt with the following factors: the first, they were associated with the readiness of the institution to conduct online learning should start from the high commitment of the authority of the institution. In fact, UNTAN has established high commitment on this matter. It has been recorded by the vision and missions of UNTAN. One point of the missions mentions that UNTAN commits to conduct the higher education for the best quality outcomes and to develop sciences and technology based on the values of the Indonesian State Philosophy (Pancasila). Nonetheless, UNTAN still could not thoroughly cover the need of internet access for its community, especially for the freshmen. During pandemic of COVID-19, particularly, the freshmen studied from home, so they could not reach the access of UNTAN’s internet facility. Instead of covering the freshmen with their internet facilities, it had leased them access the internet on their own because more of them (62%) lived far away from campus. They lived scattered all over the regencies of Kalimantan Barat Province. There were only 38% freshmen who lived in Pontianak, the city where UNTAN campus is located. For those who lived in Pontianak, they (65.8%) stated that the internet connection was sufficiently available and only 21.5% of them reported that it was highly sufficient. The rest (12.7%) reported that it was less sufficiently available.
For those who live outside of Pontianak, it was even worse because the internet connection was not evenly accessible. It was found that 54.4% of them had problem with their internet connection. It was less sufficiently available. The other freshmen (46.6%) found that their internet connection was only sufficient. Such situations were reconfirmed by the result of FGD which indicated that at the very beginning period of their study, it was not easy for many freshmen to access the internet connection, especially for those who lived away from the city or the central areas of the regency or district.

The other challenge from the institution’s readiness was indicated by the lacking of the accessibility of the Learning Management System (LMS) or e-learning system which were supposed to be provided by UNTAN. This platform was only accessible in the second semester of the first-year period of their study. The freshmen reported that the Moodle platform was even still rarely used (16.5%). Only Google Classroom which was more frequently used (40.5%) and Google Meeting (36.7%). The other platforms which were more commonly applied were WhatsApp, email, and telegram. The instructors commonly used these applications simultaneously with those formerly mentioned platforms, especially for communicating any necessary information before the online learning process began.

The second, the challenges were indicated by the instructors’ and the administrative staff’s readiness to serve the online learning practices. Their contribution to facilitate the online learning process should have been indicated by the usage of the available online platform. Unfortunately, most of the instructors were not viable with the usage of all e-learning platforms and the online learning programming. Many of them only facilitated the online learning by Google Classroom (40.5%) whereas the availability of UNTAN’s LMS was still ignored. The result of reflection in the FGD reconfirmed this report. It was notified that two instructors did not even practice using any of those online platforms in their teaching, except Whatsapp. They only distributed printed textbooks, handouts the learning material sources and printed task instructions via the class leader, instead. The rest class instructions were done through WhatsApp Group via the class leader.

Another service of online learning by the instructors was indicated by the implementation of the relevant and interesting online teaching learning models. In this case, most of the freshmen (83.5%) considered that the teaching learning models applied by the lecturers were only moderately interesting. Yet, 8% of them considered that the models were less interesting. Only few of them (7.6%) who reported that the teaching learning models were very interesting.

To support the online teaching models, the lecturers/instructors were required to facilitate the freshmen with relevant learning sources for their online teaching and learning. Unfortunately, there were only 39.2% of the freshmen who stated that the learning sources had been facilitated by the lecturers while the rest (60.8%) stated that they accessed the learning sources by themselves from various
external sources, especially from internet. By the freshmen’s own access on the learning sources, most of them (72.2%) stated that the availability of the learning sources became sufficient. However, for a few of them (12.7%) it was still less sufficient.

Furthermore, the instructors/lecturers also provided learning tasks to engage the freshmen with their online learning experiences. Most of them (65.8%) reported that the load of the tasks was plentiful. Yet, they were still manageable to be completed. Some of them (31.6%) stated that the tasks given were actually reasonable. They fitted the weightiness of the courses’ credits they were taking, so they were manageable to be fulfilled.

In addition to having duty on teaching or training the freshmen with several courses, an instructor/lecturer had been in charged as an academic adviser of several freshmen during their study session. For such a role, he/she was responsible to serve guidance or superintendence to the freshmen to support their campus live endurance. He/she is supposed to arrange periodical meeting with their supervisees for monitoring or anticipating any problems they possibly faced while joining online learning during the situation of pandemic of Covid-19. Unfortunately, such services were hardly actualized. Consequently, the freshmen took very little advantages from such guidance or superintendence.

The third, it was the factors dealing with the freshmen’s own readiness to join the online learning. With regard to this, it was found that almost all the freshmen were formerly not viable with online learning. They had never practiced such learning modality before in their secondary schools. Moreover, the freshmen’s readiness with online learning was indicated by their knowledgeability in technology or their level of technology literacy. It was found that most of the freshmen (70.9%) testified that their technology literacy for online learning practice was just satisfactory (good enough). There were only 27.8% of them who testified to be very good at their technology literacy. A few of them (1.3%) even stated that their technology literacy was only less satisfactory.

Along with their literacy in technology, the freshmen’s personal characters also contributed to a challenge for them. In relation to this, there were only 38% of the freshmen who stated that they were highly motivated in learning and the rest were not sure about their motivation. Meanwhile, there were only 39% of them who identified themselves as always being good at their time management. Moreover, there were 55.7% of them who identified themselves as less confident persons and there were only 20.3% who belonged to independent persons in learning. It would be more challenging when the freshmen belong to less easily sociable persons. Unfortunately, 49.4% of them characterized themselves being such kind of persons.

Those data were reconfirmed by the secondary source of data from the FGD, some freshmen admitted that they belonged to those kinds of persons and it was not easy for them to make friends, they were not confident to initiate a communication and discuss their learning problems with their peers at the
beginning while they had never met each other before. Especially when they realized that their English proficiency was still poor.

In addition, the freshmen had a problem to communicate with each other for their physical distancing. Fortunately, the result of reflection in FGD informed that there were at least one or two class members who had creatively initiated a direct face-to-face meeting by inviting the class members for the meeting in a certain place for the ice breaking. Even though not all members managed to be present at the meeting (only 40% were present), at least some of them had already began to know each other and initiated group membership through WhatsApp Group. Since then, they kept communicating through this social media. The less sociable members took advantage from this initiation. Besides, the group tasks assigned by instructors had facilitated the freshmen to engage with group work or team work. These models had made them easier to socialize and to complete their online learning tasks.

The last, the other aspect which can be either a challenge or an opportunity for the freshmen while participating the online learning – especially for improving their English communicative abilities – is their English background knowledge and skills. They can be indicated by the level of their grammar and vocabulary mastery as well as from their basic competence on the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). In this case, there were only 49.4% freshmen who testified themselves mastering basic grammar and vocabulary satisfactorily and the other 43% testified that they only mastered them less satisfactorily. The other 3.3% even stated that their English grammar and vocabulary mastery was still very poor. Meanwhile, there were only 3.3% who claimed mastering them very well. Furthermore, there were 51.9% of the freshmen who testified that their English basic competence was less satisfactory and there were 41.1% of them who stated that they covered satisfactory level of competence on the four language skills. There were only 6.9% who confidently appealed to have very good basic competence on the four English language skills. Subsequently, more freshmen (48.1%) only mastered some parts of them while some others (45%) reported that they mastered most parts of the learning materials.

By all means, 78.5% of them admitted to have managed fulfilling their structural assignment, midterm and final semester examination tasks quite easily. Only few of them (17.7%) considered that it was difficult to fulfill them. Inconsistently, from the reflection data in FGD, it was proven that some of them had problems in understanding the inputs presented by the instructors during online learning and they were not confident to share their problems with their instructors or peers.

Opportunities in Developing English Communicative Abilities

On the other side, the freshmen might take opportunities while joining the online learning. It mostly depends on the freshmen’s own readiness with the online learning mode system as well as their awareness of being students of
higher education. It was found that more than 50% freshmen had already realized that the teaching learning system in university obliged several requirements which were different from the one they had in their former school level. Most of them (86.1%) realized that it required learners’ independence in accessing learning sources and in completing their campus tasks. Some of them (64.6%) also realized that it required good time management and state of being self-disciplined. They (50.6%) were also aware that cooperation and teamwork was very necessary to support their study in university. They (69.6%) also realized that they need to interact well with the academic staff (lecturers), administrative staff, as well as the other relevant campus personnel. The freshmen must have taken opportunities from being aware of such demanding system.

Since online learning with multimedia educational programming requires high level of technology literacy, it had consequently forced the freshmen to improve their technology literacy. They became familiar with the usage of online learning devices. They became more familiar with the utilization of Google Classroom and Google Meet as the online learning platforms and some more. It was also proven that both the freshmen and the lecturers improved their knowledgeable ability and experience in operating those technology devices. Most of the freshmen (70.9%) testified that by online learning practices, their technology literacy level had increased to be satisfactory (good enough). Few of them (27.8%) even notified that their technology literacy had increased to be very good. Yet, several of them (1.3%) admitted that their technology literacy was still less satisfactory. Moreover, they could improve their learning skills, especially for the practice of self-access learning. After two semesters joining the online learning modality, they (72.2%) stated that their skill in using online learning multimedia and devices had improved significantly.

In the meantime, online learning is characterized by its flexibility and dynamics in time and location. It can be practiced either synchronously or asynchronously. Therefore, most of them (78.5%) enjoyed the time and place flexibility of the online learning system. It had been engaging the freshmen with new learning experiences. Another characteristic of online learning modality is that it should support students’ active learning or independent learning by which the freshmen can build their positive personal characters in learning. Moreover, the presence of the instructor was not always necessary as long as the learning materials and the learning tasks were provided and accessible, they were able to keep practicing their own learning. The data showed that the online learning experience had built the freshmen’s positive personal characters in learning, especially being more independent and creative. Some of them (57%) notified that they had become more independent and creative in completing their tasks after joining online learning. They had been trying their best to solve their own problems for achieving their English communicative abilities well while participating the
online learning. Most of them (96.2%) initiated to improve their English communicative ability by practicing self-access learning using the accessible social media. Similarly, they did self-access learning for the improvement of their skills in applying multimedia and online learning devices. Some of them (62%) took learning advantages from their peers, and the rest made an effort to improve their English communicative ability by their own independent learning. In other words, the freshmen had taken opportunities from the characteristics of the online learning itself.

Nonetheless, more freshmen (55.7%) considered that they were still not confident to actualize themselves during the process of online learning. Besides, some of them (49.4%) felt that it was not easy for them to make friends in the physical distancing situation, especially for those who belonged to less sociable persons. In the first place, 74.2% of them were not taking the opportunity to be disciplined or punctual learners for their online learning. It was indicated by only 26.6% of them who notified themselves to be more disciplined while experiencing online learning. These situations, then, had become more challenges than the opportunities.

Based on those descitive data, it was identifiable that the lower the level of the readiness of those relevant parties, the more they contributed the challenges and the higher the level, the more they contributed the opportunities for the freshmen. Nevertheless, during the process of online learning many freshmen had been able to manipulate the challenges of online learning in such a way that they had managed to take the opportunities from the learning experience. As a result, most of them (84%) testified that after joining online learning for two semesters, they could improve their English communicative abilities significantly. There were only 6.3% who testified that their improvement was very significant while few others (8.9%) could only less significantly improve the abilities. Ultimately, their learning achievement was quite satisfactory. It was indicated by the achievement of the freshmen’s temporary scores of GPA (Grade Point Average) after taking two semesters of online learning modality. There were 43% of them who could manage to achieve very satisfactory GPA, (≥3.50). Some others (46.8%) could reach their satisfactory GPA (3.00-3.49). Meanwhile, there were only 8.9% who scored less satisfactory GPA (2.50-2.99), and there were only small numbers (1.3%) who only managed to score unsatisfactory GPA (< 2.50).

Even though it was not easy for many of them to adjust the situation in the first place, as the time went by, they had gradually become more experienced to engage with online learning modality semester. Finally, they became accustomed to the online learning activities and they increased their technology literacy as well as significantly improved their English communicative language ability. In addition, the online learning experience had engaged them to build their positive personal characters, as well as their learning skills. It can be concluded that the freshmen were able to take the challenges of online learning
experiences complementarily becoming the opportunities. Yet, it did not happen to the whole number of freshmen.

**Discussion**

Based on the findings, it is identifiable that most of the freshmen of EESP managed to survive and be well adjusted with the online learning activities within the first two-semester period of their study. In spite of facing some challenges, they simultaneously managed to alternate the challenges to become opportunities from joining the online learning activities.

Despite using the concepts of benefits and barriers of the online learning mode, this study applied the concepts of challenges and opportunities. These last two concepts imply complementary positive values rather than separated binary positive and negative ones. Nevertheless, the findings of this current research reconfirmed the previous studies which formulated that the practice of online learning modality had contributed both positive and negative effects to the learners. In this research, the opportunities taken by the freshmen can be verified from the positive effects as they were defined by Dabbagh and NannaRitland (2005). In contrast, the challenges can be justified from such negative effects (Browne, 2005; Nelson & Thompson, 2005; Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006; Allen & Seaman, 2008; Kengwee, Kidd & Kyei-Blankson, 2009).

Actually, the freshmen took times to adjust the new academic situation in this higher education level as they were in such a critical academic transition from the secondary to the higher education level (Clark 2005; Hunter, 2006; Allen & Seaman, 2008; Kengwee, Kidd & Kyei-Blankson, 2009). Moreover, the online learning modality was totally new to them. Nevertheless, the freshmen were able to manipulate the challenges of the online learning process as such that they alternately became opportunities. Thus, most of them could eventually manage to reach good learning achievement. They succeeded to achieve satisfactory to very satisfactory level of GPA. It indicated their survival with their online learning experiences. The successful endurance in their first two-semester period of study will optimistically affect the success of their study in the higher semesters (Hughes, 2009; Kelley, 2010; Burger, 2016).

Nonetheless, this study was still superficial and only limited to investigate both the challenges and opportunities from the students’ perspective, particularly from the freshmen. In fact, the problems of online learning modality should be more complicated when they are viewed from the side of the instructors, the institution, as well as from the online learning program by itself. Particularly, when it has only been newly practiced. Therefore, further research should be highly recommended.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings, it was concluded that the challenges faced by the freshmen in developing their English communicative ability through online learning were indicated by the first was the less readiness of the institution to
conduct the online learning for the less sufficient accessibility of the internet connection, the less accessible LMS for the freshmen, especially during the first semester period of study. The second was by the less readiness of instructors and administrative staff to serve or to facilitate the freshmen with with the online learning system; and lastly, the challenges were contributed by the freshmen themselves for their less readiness. They were indicated by their less viability with the online learning system as well as by their negative personal characters. In addition, the less satisfactory level of their English background knowledge and skills also contributed to the challenges.

Fortunately, the opportunities were also taken by the freshmen from joining online learning modality. They were contributed by the characteristics of the online learning modality itself. They had supported the freshmen and the instructors to become well adjusted to using those relevant online learning devices and applications. Due to the flexibility and dynamics in time and location of the online learning, the freshmen were used to be more independent and more responsible in completing their duties. Online learning system had gradually made them developed their positive personal characters, such as to be more highly motivated, more independent, active, creative, and confident, as well as become more easily sociable in the learning process. In so doing, most of them were eventually able to improve their English communicative ability. They finally managed to achieve the satisfactory level of GPA to the very satisfactory one.

To summarize, the lower the level of the readiness of those relevant parties to conduct online learning, the more they contributed the challenges. Contradictorily, the higher the level of their readiness, the more they contributed the opportunities. However, challenges and opportunities are not extremely taken in split as being negative value in one pole and positive one on the other. Instead, they can be alternately put one after another. In this case, the freshmen had been able to take the challenges of online learning experiences complementarily become the opportunities. Therefore, most of them significantly improved their English communicative ability.

Suggestions

Based on the conclusion, there are some points of suggestion that can be proposed. For UNTAN, especially, this institution should expand the internet access, provide more efficient and practical LMS for online learning system for the users. The authorities should design the orientation program for the freshmen in such a way that it will enable them to be familiar with the online learning system. It also needs to facilitate its personnel to upgrade their knowledgeability of online programming by conducting a relevant training or workshop for them. Likewise, all the campus personnel, especially the instructors and the staff of technology of informatics should have strong courage to upgrade their online learning knowledgeability for such relevant programs.
For the freshmen themselves, they should get enough orientation program to online learning system. Moreover, they should take more opportunities from the challenges that they face from joining online learning. They should be encouraged to keep building their positive personal characters in learning and to keep building social networking among themselves, with their seniors, with the instructors/lecturers, as well as with all other campus personnel or staffs.

The successful endurance of the freshmen’s participation and their high learning achievement indicators from joining online learning activities should become the reference to recommend the implementation of the blending of online learning and offline learning mode in the post-pandemic situation. Lastly, further research with more various theoretical underpinnings and with more various research methods should be recommended.

REFERENCES


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