Effective and Meaningful Online Learning in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Best Practice in Integrating Local Culture in EFL

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Abstract. The Covid-19 pandemic forces teachers to apply distance learning through online. In online learning, technology is only a tool, and its success is influenced by how that technology is used. This indicates that pedagogical knowledge is the foundation that makes online learning successful. Therefore, this paper aims to explain strategies for effective and meaningful online learning, especially in English as a foreign language (EFL) context, which promotes local culture. This paper is written based on a systematic literature review and best practices on implementing online learning in the Covid-19 pandemic. It starts with the concept of effective and meaningful learning. Then, it specifically discusses the concepts of teaching EFL, what to learn in EFL, and the interconnection of language and culture in the EFL context. Finally, it provides a method of best practices to conduct online learning for teaching EFL during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: effective and meaningful learning; language and culture; online learning

1 Introduction

Learning is generally a process of obtaining new information or knowledge and skill delivered by teachers. It is an interactional educative process that is bound with objectives [1]. There are three features of learning, namely (1) it is an active process in which the learner relates the new experience to existing meaning and may accommodate and assimilate new ideas, (2) past, present, and future are connected, and (3) the process is influenced by the use of how the learning is actualized in the future [2]. It is a process of how the learners get a new knowledge or skill and make use of those knowledge, skill, attitude and behaviour in a meaningful way to enhance problem solving skills and to do things independently [3], [4]. In addition, learning is a never-ending process of self-actualization that should always develop [5]. From those explanations, it is clear that learning is an active interactional educative process. It connects prior knowledge and skill with existing knowledge and skill to form new knowledge and skill to attain learning objectives and how it is used in the future.

In learning, learners are given materials using certain relevant methods and techniques of teaching and learning with the support of facilities and learning media to reach the objectives. To reach optimum and conducive learning, teachers are required to select the materials, determined appropriate teaching and learning strategies that are supported with sufficient learning media that help learners maximize their learning [1]. In other words, to run an effective
learning, teachers should prepare their instruction well [6], [7]. Furthermore, the extent to which the learning reaches the instructional objectives can be seen from a set of evaluations. Thus, it signifies that optimum or effective learning happens when there is a successful attainment of objectives shown from the result of assessments.

Meaningful learning simply means that what learners are learning and have learned has meaning to their real life. It refers to learning the materials connected to learners’ daily lives [8]. The context of their daily life or environment should be brought into the classroom. By doing so, they learn things related to their lives, which will be used in their lives. Contextual learning is the learning which relates the materials with the real-life, including family, community, and environment, that help them see the connection of what they learn with its application in their real world [9]. Contextual learning could increase the learners’ interest in learning and is more effective in improving their skills [10]. Therefore, it can be emphasized that contextual learning is the learning which brings the context of real-life into the learning materials. It becomes meaningful because what they learn is connected to their real life. Thus, it is interesting, and as a consequence, it gives an effect to their maximum learning.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a new challenge for the teachers in conducting the teaching and learning process. This pandemic forces the teachers to shift their teaching mode from face-to-face instruction to online learning [11]. Many studies claimed that the use of technology in the classroom could enhance the quality of the instruction [12]–[14]. However, the case is quite different during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the instruction should be conducted fully online without any specific preparation. This sudden change causes many problems in the instructional process for both the students and the teachers [15], [16]. Several studies found that many teachers and students were not ready with online learning. Some reported that the senior teachers, especially the X generation, were struggling with the technology for conducting online learning [17]–[20]. In addition, the other studies found that both the students and teachers in developing countries normally had problems with reliable internet connections, so that they cannot use sophisticated learning management systems [21], [22]. The implementation of online learning should be supported by the teachers’, students’, and infrastructure readiness [23], [24]. Thus, considering the reality of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was difficult to make online learning to be effective and meaningful learning.

This paper aims to elaborate further on the nature of effective and meaningful learning, what to learn in EFL, language and culture in EFL context, technology in EFL online learning, and best practice of EFL through online learning.

2 Research Methods

This study is classified into a literature review. Specifically, the writers followed the systematic literature review method that consisted of four steps. Those steps were designing the review, conducting the review, analysing, and writing the review [25]. The data of this study were collected from books and scientific articles published in national and international journals. Since the articles were collected from the electronic journals, the researchers used specific keywords in finding the articles and used some specific criteria to select the articles. Those criteria include the year of the publication, the topic, and the indexed status of the publication. The books and articles should be published around the years 2011 to 2021. The books and articles should discuss effective and meaningful learning, students’ culture in the EFL context, and best teaching practices during the Covid-19 pandemic.
While for the indexed criteria, the journals should be indexed by Sinta, Scopus, or Web of Science. The collected data were analysed qualitatively using the interactive data analysis model by Miles et al. (2014). This data analysis model consisted of three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Effective and Meaningful Learning

Effective means that the knowledge learned has an effect. The effectiveness can be seen from the achievement of the objectives and the potency of knowledge use in the long run. The teacher is the key element in creating effective learning [27]. The effectiveness of the instruction lies on the teachers’ pedagogical competence [28] [29].

Meaningful learning is a learning method in which new knowledge to be learned is related to prior knowledge [30]. Meaningful learning happens if the learners are involved in selecting, organizing, and integrating in a coordinated way to make sense of the presented material [31]. Common characteristics of meaningful learning include active, authentic, constructive, cooperative, and personalized [32]. Meaningful learning can be promoted by lowering cognitive load while enhancing generative processing [33].

Creating meaningful learning through multimedia learning should combine behavioral and cognitive activities [34], [35]. Thus, in online learning, meaningful learning experiences can be promoted by connecting the online discussion to the other resources available on the internet or the students’ live experiences [36].

3.2 What to Learn in EFL

In general, four language skills should be mastered in learning a language. Those four language skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing [37]. Speaking and writing skills are productive skills, while listening and reading are considered passive skills [38]. All of those language skills are important for the learners on EFL, and each of those skills has its difficulties for the learners. In learning English as a foreign language, those four language skills can be learned separately or simultaneously in an integrated way. Besides the four language skills, there are also some language elements that the students need to learn. They are the vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar of the target language [39]. They are the foundation of language skills.

3.3 Language and Culture in EFL Context

Language is a part of the human culture. Thus, learning a language cannot be separated from learning its culture [40]. The previous concept of learning EFL suggests that the students have to learn the target language and its culture [41], [42]. Thus, authentic materials which are taken from the real communication of the English native speakers are highly recommended to be used during the teaching and learning process [43]. Then, it moves to cross-cultural understanding, which means both the student’s culture and the target language should be introduced to build cultural awareness [44], [45]. Cross-cultural understanding in the EFL context is crucial for the learners to help them become intercultural beings [46], [47].

In addition, the importance of intercultural understanding has something to do with the status of English that becomes a lingua franca where the number of English users is more than the number of its native speakers [48]. It means that English has become a global language that
unites people around the globe to be global citizens [48], [49]. Thus, education should promote both the national and international culture to prepare the students to become global citizens with a profound cross cultural understanding [50]–[52]. The development of the concept in integrating culture in EFL is presented in Figure 1 below.

![Fig. 1. The development of the concept in integrating culture in EFL.](image)

Considering the EFL class condition in Indonesia, dealing with a cultural aspect, teachers may start by introducing learning materials that integrate the students’ culture first. When their English proficiency is getting better, more English materials with target language culture and international culture may be introduced without neglecting the students’ culture. The use of learning materials with the students’ culture will help the students to learn English better and easier when the students are at a beginner level. Integrating their indigenous culture in the learning material will activate their prior knowledge on the topic they are studying. Building students’ prior knowledge is important in the EFL context because it will help them understand the learning material better and improve their language skills [53], [54].

However, when their English proficiency is getting better, they should learn the target language and international culture to become global citizens. It is because, nowadays, English is already a global language or lingua franca [55], [56]. The suggested stages in integrating cultural content in EFL learning materials are described in Figure 2.

![Fig 2. The Suggested Stages in Integrating Cultural Content in EFL Learning Materials.](image)

**Technology in EFL Online Learning**

Technology has been pervasively used in the teaching and learning process since the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. The use of technology in this situation brings the advantage that it keeps the learning going on though it is done from homes. It makes learning more flexible, which can be done in different places and unlimited time. Allen and Seaman [57] defined learning through technology as online learning, that is a learning process that takes place through the internet. Through internet access, there are several tools for developing and delivering materials that can be easily applied. This allows users to operate the teaching and learning
environment more flexibly [15]. Technology in the education field has some advantages, such as the students can acquire the knowledge and information quickly [58]. It also helps them practice more on their ability to collect the information from many sources. Thus, the existence of the internet and technology is very helpful and supports the online learning process [59], [60].

Furthermore, specifically on the use of online learning in EFL, some studies also have proven that online learning have some advantages. In this digital era, most of the EFL students have a positive attitude toward the implementation of online learning [61], [62]. For the students, online learning with various materials and strategies makes the EFL teaching and learning process interesting [63]. In terms of the students’ achievement on language skills and language elements, some studies also confirmed that the use of online learning could help the students to improve their competence in those language skills and elements [64]–[67]. However, technology is merely a tool that helps the teachers deliver the instruction. The effectiveness is not influenced by what technology is used but how the technology is used by the teachers [68]. Thus, to create meaningful learning, teachers should make sure that they equip themselves with appropriate teaching strategies in conducting online learning.

**Best Practice of EFL through Online Learning**

Several aspects need to be taken into account when it comes to the implementation of online learning. Those aspects include teachers’ technological pedagogical competence, teachers’ attitude toward the use of technology in education, and the infrastructure that support the implementation of online learning [20], [69]–[71]. The pedagogical aspect is very important in delivering online learning. Technology is only a tool. How the teachers use the technology is the one that matters in conducting effective learning [58]. Thus, technological pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK) becomes a must in ensuring online learning success [72], [73]. However, not all teachers in Indonesia have good technological pedagogical competence [6]. That situation influences the teachers’ attitude toward the implementation of technology. Since integrating technology is difficult for some teachers, they have a negative attitude toward using technology in the learning process [74]. In addition, the lack of infrastructure also creates another challenge for the teachers to conduct online learning in Indonesia [75], [76].

Therefore, teachers need a simple technology that can be used easily without any specific training to solve those problems. If teachers believe that using technology is not difficult, it may build their positive attitude on implementing technology. In addition, the technology should not require specific infrastructure so all teachers can use them. Thus, based on the writers’ experience in delivering online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, the writers proposed to use simple and user-friendly media and the MAHA ESA method to deliver online instruction. This method was inspired by flipped learning approach [77], and the steps of the MAHA ESA method can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two pedagogical Concepts</th>
<th>Learning Activities</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manage the use of technology</td>
<td>(1) The teacher gives the link of the material (narrative text/story) learned through the YouTube video</td>
<td>1 or 2 days before classroom session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) The teacher asks the students to watch the YouTube video and try to understand the story</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3) The teacher asks the students to check the difficult words and</td>
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Table 1. MAHA ESA Method.
If we see from the five characteristics of meaningful learning that consists of active, authentic, constructive, cooperative, and personalized [32], those activities in Table 1 can be explained as follows.

1. Active
   The activities in the MAHA ESA method activate the students to involve during the teaching and learning process. It can be seen from the activities during the help, acquire, engage, study, and activate steps. Those activities show that the instruction is conducted through a student-centered approach. In addition, those activities provide the students with opportunities to build their understanding. In other words, the activities are in line with active learning, i.e., guiding the students to be actively involved in the learning process to create their own understanding of the subject they are studying [78]. Thus, the result of active learning relies on the quality of the inquiry process [79].

2. Authentic
   The authentic part can be seen from the teaching and learning process materials that integrate the students' culture. The materials were made in videos and delivered through social media (YouTube). In the MAHA ESA method, the use of authentic materials can be seen in the step of manage of the use of technology activities. The content of the learning materials that contain the authentic culture of the students will help the students build their prior knowledge.
on the topic they are studying. This prior knowledge will help them understand the materials easier [80]. Besides, using authentic materials can help students be more active during the instructional process [81].

3. Constructive

Constructive learning can be defined as a method to activate students’ participation in constructing their knowledge [82]. This concept overlaps with active learning since in constructing their own knowledge, they have to be active learners. Specifically, for the constructive process, in the MAHA ESA method, the activities have been started from the stage of manage the use of technology activities. Then it is strengthened in the stages of acquire, engage, and activate activities. All of those activities guide the students to construct their own knowledge.

4. Cooperative

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that involves small teams and uses various learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject [83]. Social media can be used as an alternative application to conduct effective cooperative learning since the students are familiar with the social media application, and social media facilities which support cooperative learning implementation [84]. For example, it provides a group chat facility. In the MAHA ESA method, the cooperative activities are done in the engage activities to discuss their task.

5. Personalized

Personalized learning is an educational approach that aims to customize learning for each student’s strengths, needs, skills, and interests [85]. In the MAHA ESA method, the students have their control over their learning. For instance, in the step of manage the use of technology, the students are free to explore the materials given and to use any online tools that can help them understand the material better. Personalized learning is one of the online learning strengths, because in online learning the teachers can set a chance for the students to learn the materials on their learning style [86]-[88]

4 Conclusion

This paper concludes some important points. First, integrating technology in the teaching and learning process will positively affect the students to achieve a maximum learning when the teachers can apply the technology properly. Since not all teachers have good competence in using sophisticated educational technology, a simple and user-friendly technology like social media can be used as an alternative technology to conduct online learning. Second, in the EFL context, besides technology, culture also becomes a fundamental issue since language cannot be separated from culture.

However, it is suggested that the integration of cultural knowledge should be started with the students’ culture for EFL learners. As their English proficiency is getting better, more target language cultures need to be introduced, as well as the international cultures. Third, the MAHA ESA method can be used as an alternative way to conduct an effective and meaningful online learning. Since this paper is written through a systematic literature review method, a profound study that evaluates the effectiveness of social media, students’ cultural knowledge, and the MAHA ESA method to create meaningful online learning needs to be conducted.
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