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Exploring EFL Students' Attitudes Toward Online Learning: A Qualitative Study of Sixth-Semester Students at the Faculty of Language and Arts

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ABSTRAK

This study explores EFL sixth-semester students' attitudes toward online learning in English classes at the Faculty of Language and Arts, State University of Medan, and identifies the factors influencing those attitudes. Online learning has become an important part of higher education, yet EFL students often experience both benefits and challenges in digital learning environments, particularly in relation to interaction, motivation, and language practice. This research employed a descriptive qualitative design involving three participants for semi-structured interviews and 20 participants for an online questionnaire. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that students' attitudes toward online learning were shaped by cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitively, most students doubted the effectiveness of online English classes in improving proficiency, although they acknowledged some benefits in speaking practice and vocabulary exposure. Affectively, students generally showed positive feelings such as enthusiasm and comfort, but these emotions were strongly influenced by class atmosphere and interaction. Behaviorally, most students were active in attending classes and seeking additional learning resources, although participation sometimes depended on confidence and workload. The influencing factors were divided into internal factors, such as motivation, self-confidence, and previous learning experience, and external factors, such as internet connectivity, teaching methods, and the online learning platform. Overall, the study reveals that students' attitudes toward online learning are complex and shaped by both personal and contextual conditions.

Keywords: *Student attitudes, online learning, EFL students, English learning.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology has transformed the way education is delivered across the world, and online learning has become one of the most influential forms of instruction in higher education. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, online learning offers important advantages such as flexibility, easy access to digital resources, and opportunities for independent study. At the same time, it also presents serious challenges, especially in relation to interaction, speaking

practice, internet connectivity, and students' motivation. Because English learning depends heavily on communication and active participation, the online environment may affect EFL students differently from students in other disciplines. For this reason, students' attitudes toward online learning are not a trivial issue; they are central to understanding how online English classes are experienced and how effective they can be. Attitude is a significant factor in language learning because it shapes how learners think, feel, and behave in the learning process. In this study, attitude is understood through three interconnected dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive dimension refers to students' beliefs and perceptions about online learning; the affective dimension refers to their feelings and emotional responses; and the behavioral dimension refers to the actions they take in response to online learning. These three dimensions are important because they reflect not only whether students like or dislike online learning, but also how they evaluate it, how comfortable they feel in it, and how actively they participate in it. In EFL learning, such attitudes may strongly influence students' engagement, persistence, and achievement. Previous studies have shown that EFL students often hold mixed views about online learning. Some students appreciate its flexibility and the wider access to learning materials, while others complain about reduced interaction, technical problems, boredom, anxiety, and limited opportunities to practice English orally. Research has also shown that students' attitudes are shaped by both internal factors, such as motivation, self-confidence, and prior learning experience, and external factors, such as internet quality, teaching methods, and the online platform used. Studies such as Okyar (2023), Saputra et al. (2022), and Hernández Salinas (2024) are relevant because they confirm that attitudes toward online EFL learning are complex and context-dependent. However, most existing studies focus on general perceptions, different educational settings, or students from other countries. Fewer studies specifically examine the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of attitudes among sixth-semester EFL students in an Indonesian university context.

This gap is important because sixth-semester students are not novice learners; they have enough experience with online English classes to reflect meaningfully on the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environment. Their views can therefore provide a richer understanding of how online learning functions in actual EFL practice. In addition, the Faculty of Language and Arts at Universitas Negeri Medan represents a specific institutional context that may produce patterns of attitude different from those found in earlier studies. Preliminary observation in this setting showed that students did not respond to online learning in the same way: some were enthusiastic and active, while others were disengaged and unmotivated. They also reported problems such as unstable internet connection, limited speaking practice, and difficulty understanding materials. These observations indicate that a more systematic investigation is needed. The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on sixth-semester EFL students, its use of the tripartite theory of attitudes to examine cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously, and its attention to the internal and external factors that shape those attitudes. Rather than describing online learning only in general terms, this study connects students' responses to the conditions that produce them. By doing so, it offers a more detailed picture of how and why EFL students develop certain attitudes toward online English classes. This is expected to contribute to the existing scholarship by enriching the discussion of online learning in the Indonesian EFL context and by providing context-based evidence that may help lecturers improve their teaching strategies.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the types of attitudes held by EFL sixth-semester students toward online learning in English classes at the Faculty of Language and Arts, State University of Medan, and to identify the factors that influence those attitudes. Because this is a descriptive qualitative study, it does not test a statistical hypothesis; instead, it seeks to explain the phenomenon through students' own experiences and perceptions. The data were

collected through semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire, then analyzed qualitatively to identify the main patterns of attitude and the factors behind them. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a clearer understanding of students' online learning experiences and to offer useful insights for lecturers, curriculum developers, and future researchers.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore EFL sixth-semester students' attitudes toward online learning in English classes and to identify the factors influencing those attitudes. The study was conducted among students of the English Education Department at the Faculty of Language and Arts, State University of Medan. The population of the study consisted of sixth-semester EFL students who had direct experience with online learning in their English classes, and the participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: they had to be active sixth-semester students, have experience with online English learning, and be willing to participate in the study. The data were collected from two sources: three students participated in semi-structured interviews, while 20 students completed an online questionnaire. The interview functioned as the primary source of data, whereas the questionnaire served as supporting data to strengthen and triangulate the interview findings.

To gather the data, the researcher used an interview guide and a questionnaire as the main instruments. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions developed from the Tripartite Theory of Attitudes, covering cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes, as well as the internal and external factors that influence them. The interviews were conducted face to face, lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes for each participant, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim. The questionnaire was distributed through Google Form and contained statements related to students' attitudes toward online learning. Each statement used a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, so that participants would give a clear directional response without choosing a neutral option.

The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the condensation stage, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly, coded, and grouped into themes related to the research problems. The questionnaire responses were tabulated and summarized to support the interview data. In the display stage, the findings were organized into descriptive narratives, themes, and tables. In the conclusion-drawing stage, the researcher interpreted the patterns and compared the interview and questionnaire findings to produce well-grounded conclusions. Triangulation was used to improve the credibility of the findings by comparing data from the two instruments. Because this study was descriptive qualitative, no statistical hypothesis testing was conducted; instead, the research focused on explaining the students' attitudes and the reasons behind them in a context-specific setting.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study found that EFL sixth-semester students at the Faculty of Language and Arts held mixed attitudes toward online learning, but the overall pattern was more positive in the affective and behavioral dimensions than in the cognitive dimension. Cognitively, most students were skeptical about the effectiveness of online English classes in improving overall English proficiency, as 85% of respondents disagreed that online classes were effective for this purpose. At the same time, 95% agreed that online classes still provided sufficient opportunities to practice speaking English, which shows that students did not reject online learning entirely but evaluated its effectiveness selectively. The interview data supported this mixed pattern: some students considered online classes helpful for vocabulary exposure

and comprehension when lecturers used clear materials, while others felt face-to-face teaching was easier to understand. This means that students' cognitive attitudes were not uniformly negative, but rather depended on what aspect of learning they were evaluating.

In contrast, the affective findings were clearly more positive. Most respondents reported that they felt enthusiastic and motivated during online English classes, and all respondents stated that they felt comfortable and free from anxiety when participating online. However, the interviews showed that these positive emotions were not fixed; they depended strongly on classroom atmosphere and peer interaction. When the online class was active and interactive, students felt more energetic and willing to participate, but when the class was quiet or monotonous, their enthusiasm declined. This suggests that the emotional quality of online learning is shaped less by the platform itself than by the social climate created in the class. The behavioral results were also generally positive, because 90% of respondents said they attended every session regularly and 75% said they independently sought additional learning resources outside class. Even so, the interviews showed that participation was still influenced by confidence and workload: some students felt braver online because the setting reduced social pressure, while others became less active because they were afraid of making mistakes or felt overwhelmed by assignments. Taken together, these findings indicate that online learning can support participation, but only when students feel emotionally safe and academically manageable.

The factors influencing these attitudes were found to come from both internal and external sources. Among the internal factors, motivation, self-confidence, and previous learning experience were the most important. Motivation was generally strong, but the interview data showed that it was often extrinsic, especially the desire to avoid missing course material and to maintain grades. Self-confidence also played a central role: some students felt more confident online because they were less nervous than in face-to-face settings, while others still felt anxious when asked to speak suddenly. Previous learning experience, especially the long period of pandemic-era online learning, also shaped current attitudes. Most participants described gradual adaptation, but one participant reported lingering fatigue from prolonged online learning, which still affected motivation. Among the external factors, teaching method, internet connectivity, and the learning platform were the most influential. Students responded more positively when lecturers used interactive, discussion-based teaching, and they became bored when instruction was lecture-dominated. Poor internet connection caused panic, reduced focus, and disrupted participation, while the platforms used, especially Zoom and Google Classroom, were generally seen as practical, although task overload sometimes created confusion. These findings show that students' attitudes were formed through a combination of psychological readiness and learning conditions, not through one single factor alone.

These results are consistent with earlier studies, but they also add a more context-specific understanding. The present findings fit Okyar's study, which also reported that EFL students often had mixed or negative cognitive views of online learning while appreciating its comfort for shy learners and its flexibility in some cases. They also align with Saputra et al., who found that Indonesian EFL students valued accessibility and flexibility but still faced internet problems, reduced interaction, and difficulty understanding materials online. What this study adds is a clearer separation of attitude into cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and a more focused look at sixth-semester students in one Indonesian faculty context. That focus is important because it shows that students can doubt the academic effectiveness of online learning while still feeling emotionally comfortable and behaving responsibly in online classes. In other words, attitude toward online learning is not a single fixed position; it is layered, context-bound, and shaped by both the design of instruction and students' own prior experiences.

The main implication of the study is that improving online English learning requires more than simply providing digital access. Lecturers need to create interactive classes that support speaking, reduce boredom, and encourage student confidence. Institutions also need to pay attention to internet access and the usability of platforms, because even motivated students may struggle when technical conditions are unstable. The study is limited by its small qualitative sample, since it relied on interviews with three students and a questionnaire with 20 students from one department, so the findings should be understood as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable. Even so, the study contributes useful evidence that can help lecturers, curriculum developers, and future researchers understand how online EFL learning is experienced by students who have lived through both pandemic-era and post-pandemic online instruction.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows that EFL sixth-semester students' attitudes toward online learning are complex rather than uniformly positive or negative: cognitively, many students doubt its overall effectiveness for improving English proficiency; affectively, they generally feel comfortable and motivated in online classes; and behaviorally, they tend to attend regularly and participate responsibly. The findings also make clear that these attitudes are shaped by a combination of internal factors, especially motivation, self-confidence, and previous learning experience, and external factors, especially teaching quality, internet connectivity, and the learning platform. This matters because it shows that online EFL learning is not only a matter of access to technology, but also of instructional design, emotional climate, and students' readiness to engage. The study supports and extends previous research by confirming that online learning can be flexible and supportive, while still producing doubts and difficulties when interaction is weak or technical problems occur. Its value lies in showing that improving online English classes requires attention to both learner psychology and classroom conditions.

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