Distance learning in the time of Covid-19: Exploring students' anxiety

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Article Info

Abstract

Performing sudden and uncertain distance learning can be difficult and complicated experiences for students as they may suffer from anxiety. The study of anxiety in Indonesia typically concentrated on the relation of anxiety with speech production (Anandari, 2015), gender differences (Nurhaeni, 2019), four basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) (Male, 2018) and its impact on language learning (Budiman, Ngadiso, & Suparno, 2017). The study of anxiety in distance learning especially in the time of crisis, like the outbreak of Covid-19 is rare. Thus, the study to examine the distance learning anxiety faced by higher education students in the time of crisis (Covid-19) and explore the cause of those anxieties is important. The data of this study was collected using two instruments, a questionnaire and an interview. To get the data, the researcher modified the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire (FLCAS) by Howitz and Young (1991) which is commonly applied to determine the level of anxiety. Since the study concentrated in distance learning, the researchers also decided to adopt an "On-line Language Learning Anxiety (OLLA) Inventory" (Majid, Othman, & Rahmat, 2007). Findings revealed that students experienced higher anxiety levels in the beginning stage of distance learning. A year after the implementation of distance learning, students had adapted well and the level of anxiety they encountered was reduced. Yet, technical problems like unstable internet connection and devices' malfunction that occurred during distance learning still triggered much anxiety among students since that condition made them lose the opportunity to receive some important information and chances to actively participate in online activities as well as improve their skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Distance teaching is an instructional method in which teaching behaviors and learning behaviors are performed separately so that teacher and learner communicate by making use of printed, electronic, or mechanical devices (Moore, 2013). Distance education offered a method of education which physically separates learner and teacher. This type of education can be applied for individual purposes, or in conjunction with other forms of education, including face to face (Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek 2015). Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek (2015) also outlined the early history of distance education, they explained that the concept of distance education was firstly introduced in 1833 by means of an advertisement of Swedish newspaper. Seven years later, Issac Pitman offered shorthand instruction via correspondence but distance education in the form of correspondence study was established by Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt in Germany in 1843. The development of distance education was then introduced by Keegan (2000), he claimed that the start point of distance education as research projects began in 1967 when the world's first distance education research centre was established in Germany. In that year, the two pioneer scholars of distance education, Guther Dohmen and Otto Peters published their works. Moreover, Keegan (2000) emphasized that the rapid advances of electronic telecommunications in the 1980s and 1990s have prospered the development of distance education. The foundation of Asian distance teaching universities has started its operation since 1980s. In the 1990s, some universities offered professional qualifications at degree level for distance education. In the 2000s, technologies such as audio connections, videotapes, and television began to be utilized by many institutions to help lessen the demand of travel for faculty and students (Meyer, 2002).

As an alternative option to traditional teaching practice, distance education has proved its significant existence by supplying students with numerous advantages, such as study from everywhere and anytime, easy commuting, save time and money, freedom to choose, and earning while you learn (Sadeghi, 2019). Although distance education offers greater opportunity for people to access higher education, distance education still has lots of limitation and drawbacks. A study taken in an Australian University between 20013 through 2007 by Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, (2009) showed that distance education of remote students issued some problems including feeling isolated due to minimum face-to-face interaction and the lack of digital literacy. Time differences, poor internet connection and staffs' limited knowledge toward the uses of technology also hampered the implementation of synchronous learning. The matter of isolation was as well found in Croft, Dalton, & Grant's (2010) study, saying that the matter of isolation can be the indirect or direct source of influence to students' learning experience. Leontyeva (2018) added that parents-teachers' unreadiness, inadequate references, insufficient academic mentors, unsuitable managerial structure and inefficient facilities affected how distance education developed. Apart from the struggle of social interaction, distance education brings high chances of distraction, displays complicated technology, and offers limited chances to get jobs with online degrees (Sadeghi, 2019).

Unfamiliarity and incapability in performing some tasks as well as the difficulty in functioning social interaction can be the cause of anxiety among students in distance learning. In the study of Tuncay and Uzunboylu (2010), the students resisted to do distance learning for not being able to do face-to-face communication. The study also found that girls were more anxious than boys in participating in distance learning. A study of Allama Iqbal Open University argues that the anxiety among male students was slightly higher than female students (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019). Bolliger and Halupa (2012) stated that the level of anxiety of students in online learning was correlated with the degree of students' satisfaction toward the courses. On the other hand, Majid, Sharil, Luaran, & Nadzri (2012) mentioned that readiness and cognitive ability caused a lot of anxiety among adult learners. Whereas the study of Bollinger (2017) about foreign language anxiety in traditional and distance learning foreign language classrooms confirmed that distance learning created more anxiety than traditional classes. Moreover, anxiety could affect the academic performance among distance learning students (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019).

The development of distance learning in Indonesia also has its own bitter sweet experience, but not many researchers studied its practices in Indonesian contexts. One interesting study of distance learning in Indonesia only explored the part of instructional media and technologies used in the learning process. Yaumi (2007) stated that English instruction for distance learning in Indonesia made use of printed materials, radio, telephone, audiotapes, television, and computer-based technology in supporting the learning system. The other study of Indonesian researchers mainly focused on online learning. A study by Rahmawati (2016) that examined the benefits and the drawbacks of e-learning in

Indonesia exposed typical findings, in line with the study by Sadeghi (2019) and other distance learning researchers. The benefit of online learning is related to flexibility and the drawbacks involve decreasing social interaction, internet connection problems, increasing the possibility of plagiarism or cheating, lack of actual or direct teachers' feedback, and lack of technological skills. The differences between Rahmawati's study and previous study were on how the study found out that online learning could help less active students to be active students and it would be a costly learning.

Distance learning does not only support remote or working students but also support students in the time of crisis. Meyer and Wilson (2011) highlighted the importance of emergency plans for institutions to handle emergencies like H1N1. The study investigated the websites of the 50 state flagship higher education institutions to know how distance learning was included in the institutions' emergency plans. Only one institution mentioned online learning as the emergency plan and the other institutions gave no reference and the rest said that the emergency plan will apply another methods of delivering courses by utilizing technology or particular tools. A college of Business impacted by earthquakes in 2011, in New Zealand (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017) revealed that the implementation of technology during the crisis helped breaking through barriers to learning in hard times. The students' engagement and familiarity with technology as well as the infrastructure capability to afford continual services are crucial to its implementation. More stories like this may happen in the future and online learning and related technology can offer practical solutions to higher education institutions hit by disasters in the future (Meyer & Wilson, 2011). In sustaining equitable experiences for students in times of crisis, "institution can evaluate and improve the resilience of their academic programs by identifying and maintaining resilient communication channels, preparing staff to use blended or online learning strategies, preparing students to work independently and online, ensuring resources are readily accessible in alternative formats" (Mackey, et.al., 2012).

Since March 24th, 2020, due to the Corona outbreak, the Ministry of Education has enacted the shift of the educational system from traditional classroom meeting or blended learning to completely online learning mode. This rapid sudden major shift of teaching and learning delivery has left students and teachers unprepared. The recent study by Noor, Isa, & Mazhar (2020) showed that both students and teachers encountered many barriers during online learning in the time of Covid-19. The challenges occurred during online learning were devided into three types, technology-related, teachers-related and students-related challenges (Noor, 2020). Some common challenges that refered to technology were low digital literacy (Alamzova et. Al, 2020), lack of devices, and poor internet connection (Noor, 2020). In addition to technology-related challenges, high internet quota price also affected the learning performance of students with low financial conditions (Noor, 2020). During the shift of teaching from classroom setting to online learning, teachers needed to adapt the curriculum, teaching materials, and methods to fullfil the goals of online learning. However, teachers experienced problems like digital literacy, poor interaction with students, poor material development, and the limited time for teaching preparations as well as giving feedback (Noor, 2020). Besides, students have some problem in mainting positive attitudes, interaction (Alamzova et. Al, 2020), motivation, and cooperation during online learning (Noor, 2020) that caused the feeling of isolation (Kaisara & Bwalya, 2021). Inconducive home environment also interfered the teaching and learning process (Kaisara & Bwalya, 2021). Home during the online learning was usually noisy.

Performing sudden and uncertain distance learning can be difficult and complicated experiences for students as they may suffer from anxiety. Tuncay and Uzunboylu (2010) in their study of "Anxiety and Resistance in Distance Learning" affirmed that among some types of anxiety in distance learning, such as online-test anxiety, internet anxiety, talking in virtual groups and computer anxiety, the highest level of anxiety ranks belonged to online-test anxiety and internet anxiety. Many Indonesian researchers have focused their study to online or e-learning as a part of instructional methods but few researchers have started to study the practice of online learning as part of distance learning in Indonesia. A study that captured the face of Indonesian distance learning only exposed the instructional media and technologies being utilized in the learning process (Yaumi, 2007). Whereas, the study of anxiety in Indonesia typically concentrated on the relation of anxiety with speech production (Anandari, 2015), gender differences (Nurhaeni, 2019), four basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) (Male, 2018) and its impact on language learning (Budiman, Ngadiso, & Suparno, 2017). The study of anxiety in distance learning especially in the time of crisis, like the outbreak of Covid-19 is found rare. Thus, this study aims to examine the distance learning anxiety faced by higher education students in the time of crisis (Covid-19) and explore the cause of those anxieties.

METHODS

Students majoring Indonesian Literature and English Education at one of public universities in Semarang, enrolled in some English courses which were initially blended learning but due to the outbreak of Coronavirus, the course fully shifted into online distance learning. The course made use of Google classroom platform, YouTube and WhatsApp as the medium of instruction during the distance learning. English is not a new thing for them since they have had the subject during their compulsory secondary schooling years. Although they have experienced online learning through blended learning, all of the participants were considered as first-time distance learning students. They never had a learning system with the absence of face-to-face interaction. A total of 42 students who joined the course in the even semester were asked to complete a survey which includes anxiety items. Then, in the second cycle of data collection, the same survey was carried out to check the changes of their answers. Out of 42 students who joined the study, eight of the participants were selected for further interviews.

The data were collected using two instruments, questionnaire and interview. The study modified the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire (FLCAS) by Howitz and Young (1991) which is commonly applied to determine the level of anxiety. The FLCAS was based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale originally consisted of 33 questionnaire items which were categorized into communicative anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and anxiety of English class or classroom. The questionnaire involved 33 statements which were divided into the following categories: 8 items (1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29, 32) were linked to communication anxiety, 9 items (3, 7, 13, 15, 20, 23, 25, 31, 33) to fear of negative evaluation, and 5 items (2, 8, 10, 19, 21) to test anxiety. Whereas the 11 items remained, they were organized as anxiety of English classes (Zhao, 2007).

Since the study concentrated in distance learning which was mostly implemented online learning, the researchers decided to adopt an "On-line Language Learning Anxiety (OLLA) Inventory" to examine anxiety level (Majid, Othman, & Rahmat, 2007). This model was designed based on Language Learning Anxiety Inventory (Howitz and Young, 1991). Adjustments were created during the design to involve distance learning. There were 33 items which reflected 7 constructs. The breakdowns of the constructs are as follows. Likert scale of 1 to 5 was used, 1 as strongly disagree and 5 as strongly agree. Domain 1 was associated with the attributes of distance English language learning and corresponded to questions on the negative perception that the participants have towards distance language learning. Domain 2 linked to the motivation for distance English language learning. The statements helped the participants to distinguish their positive attitude towards distance language learning programs. The third domain was about the confidence in distance English language learning where the statements allowed the participants to measure their confidence level when undergoing distance language learning. The fourth domain was on experiencing distance English language learning. This domain was used to identify the level of comfort, the participants felt during distance language learning. Domain five was related to the fear of the distance English language learning which helped the participants to identify their fear in the distance learning process. Domain 6 examined the cognitive ability of the participants in distance English language learning. The last domain was on the readiness in distance English language learning, which studied the learners' perception of their readiness to uncover distance language learning experience.

The first cycle data collection was carried out three months after distance learning due to Covid-19 outbreak while the second cycle data collection was done a year after that emergency remote teaching. Before administering the questionnaire, a brief written instruction was given to assist participants in filling out the questionnaire. The researcher also opened opportunities for students to ask questions via WhatsApp groups if they failed to understand the instructions stated in the questionnaire. Then, the questionnaire was distributed by the researcher to students via Google forms. The researcher asked the students to select the choice that best describes their experiences and feelings during distance learning. The students were also notified that their responses are confidential and will be used for research purposes only. The students took around 20 – 30 minutes to finish the questionnaire. During that time period, the researchers were prepared to answer any question asked by students, and explain some items which were considered confusing by the students.

After distributing the questionnaire, an interview was administered to a number of students who were willing to share their experiences and anxiety during distance learning. A recorded phone call was used to facilitate the researcher interviewing the participants. The interview questions were originated from some written statements on the questionnaires. The interview was done to further

discover the causes of anxieties experienced by the participants. Each participant spent almost one hour or more for the interview section.

To check the validity and the reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher used Pearson Product Moment Correlations and Cronbach's alpha, calculated by SPSS. The researcher also applied triangulation by source. The same technique (interview) was employed to different sources to get the validity of the data. The data analysis of the study was done in two techniques. To analyze the collected data from questionnaire, the researchers employed the descriptive statistic technique by tabulating the data obtained. The data collection from the interview was transcribed, analyzed and used to validate the data obtained through the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of seven domains of distance English language learning are presented in Table 1 and 2. From the first data collection cycle, it showed that among 6 items of attributes of distance English language learning, most of students' anxiety were derived from "worried being left behind because program runs so quick". The second rank of students' anxiety came from "overwhelmed by the number of process have to go through". The data also revealed that most of the students did not really bother with the statement "dislike working with machines smarter than me." Interestingly, in the second cycle of data collection, most of the students' anxiety were derived from cognitive ability. They were worried a lot about not being able to fully understand the knowledge obtained during distance learning. The other source of students' anxiety was related to readiness. Students tend to experience anxiety when they were not ready enough for online learning, especially when their lecturer started discussion activity that demanded them to answer or respond to certain topics directly. Technological anxiety did not become the issue of anxiety among the students but the internet anxiety did. Student had mastered the basic technology skills like using word processing, spreadsheets, working with communication and presentation software programs and navigating the internet (Kay, 2008). In this case, internet anxiety did not relate to the cognitive skills on how to navigate the internet but the anxiety was associated with technical problems occurred during online learning that caused ineffective performances both receiving knowledge and demonstrating abilities. This result was differ from what Halupa (2004) found in his study that the students had a slightly positive attitude toward internet and online learning. Whereas, meaningful learning could not be realized if the internet connection was still in trouble. This obstacle did not meet the basic requirement of online learning where learning performed assisted by electronic devices with internet connection (Gonzalez & Louis, 2018).

Table 1. Online Language Learning Anxieties Cycle 1

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attributes	3,49	0,87
Motivation	3,21	0,70
Confidence	3,46	0,82
Experiencing	3,11	0,88
Fear	3,33	0,87
Cognitive	3,28	0,88
Readiness	2,51	0,70

Table 2. Online Language Learning Anxieties Cycle 2

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attributes	3,22	0,96
Motivation	3,67	0,85
Confidence	3,51	0,968
Experiencing	3,39	1,14
Fear	2,95	1,18
Cognitive	3,48	1,04
Readiness	3,12	1,09

Attributes of distance learning
Attributes of distance learning were questioning the notion that talked about students' attitude toward working with smart machines, understanding responses, receiving feedback, and cognitive performances during the process of online learning. Differ from what Majid, et. Al (2007) found in her study that the respondents mostly disliked working with the machines which are smarter than them. This study found out that the students were pretty comfortable working with smart machines (80%). They are in an era where technological developments are very well received. Whereas, the other attributes of distance learning, such as have to be a genius to understand all the special; get upset when I don't understand the responses; afraid to receive negative responses; worried being left behind because program runs so quick; overwhelmed by the number of process have to go through showed similar patterns. Those attributes were quite frustrating for the students. The high contribution to anxiety was linked to inability to understand responses (70%) and follow the tight online learning process (70%). From this result, it can be concluded that the attributes of distance learning were pretty intimidating for the students. The shift from face to face learning to emergency remote teaching that limit the interaction both between lecturers & students and also students & students affects how messages deliver and receive. During the process of communication in distance learning, information can be interpreted differently from one person to the other that can cause frustration and misunderstanding.

Motivation for distance learning
Respondents appeared to have a positive attitude toward distance learning (80%). They were also eager to have extra online learning for the sake of developing and improving their knowledge and skills but in the process of learning they still thought about other unrelated things. Even if their motivation in doing distance learning was high, they still had some difficulties to not lose focus during the process. The students' motivation in doing distance learning is originated from the desire of their own self-fulfillment to be able to successfully excel the knowledge and skills of the subject they learn (Gill et. al, 2001). The tendency to think of unrelated things could come from the unconducive environments, fatigue, or double responsibilities as students, children, or employers (Knowles, 1990).

Confidence in distance learning
The result of the study revealed that 50% of the respondents were confident to learn through distance learning and the half of the respondents were not. Even though the percentage of confident respondents was quite high, the respondents still had a tendency to doubt their own capability. They also get nervous with the facts somehow in learning, they could forget the things they have known before (70%). Moreover, the study exposed the reality that online learning gave more tense and nervousness to the students. They hardly felt sure and relax during distance learning (66.7%). Technical problems like device malfunction and unstable internet connection as well as a lot of disturbance got the students less confident toward their knowledge and skills they gained during distance learning. They were afraid of getting none that could improve their English skills. Majid, et. al (2007) claimed that learners could fail in learning in distance learning environment due to difficulties in dealing with tools, machines, or new circumstances. Before the distance learning was conducted, students had their own insecurity toward their psychomotor and cognitive skills of English. Yet, the sudden changes of learning environment into online learning with limited interaction and some technical problems increased their worries. They needed to cope with not only their inner confidence problems related to knowledge and skills but also with external factors that were associated with limited or delayed interaction, devices' malfunction, unstable internet connection, limited time of synchronous learning, and overwhelmed materials and assignments. Even if, higher education students had the capacity to move from dependence to independence in learning (Knowles, 1990), the change into fully autonomous learners could take long time. The students of distance learning need the full attention of their lecturers in providing advice, guidance and support (Dembo & Lynch, 2004). Those roles can help institutions to maintain students' confidence during the tough process of distance learning (Lake, 1999).

Experiencing distance learning
Adapting the change of learning mode from face to face learning into emergency remote teaching could be hard and burdensome at first. In the first cycle of data collection, the students expressed that distance learning was not an exciting activity (66%), although they claimed that the challenge of

learning was exciting and they believed that distance learning will be more comfortable as the time goes by. That belief was true since in the second cycle of data collection, the students had changed their perspective toward experiencing distance learning. They had felt the exciting experience during distance learning, even if some respondent stated that distance learning was monotonous. Nothing has changed since the beginning, lack of interaction was the issue. Some technology had applied to substitute the missing exposure of interaction between lecturers and learners as well as learners and learners, but for some of respondents, those interactions could fully complete the missing parts that face to face interaction used to give. The negative feeling that related to isolation was the challenge (Croft et. al, 2010). Moreover, the opportunity to get guidance and feedback during distance learning was limited that caused some students' difficulties and problems unsolved.

The fear of the distance learning
The respondents' fear during distance learning was related to something technical like unstable internet connection and device' malfunction. There was no big issue that was correlated with digital literacy. Few first year respondents admitted that university LMS was a bit confusing at first but later on they had mastered in navigating it after some guidance. Differ from what Majid et. al (2007), in this study, the respondents were still afraid of making mistakes during distance learning (76.2%). Yet, the issue relied on the idea of making mistakes. Making mistakes was still connected to low cognitive skills that for some respondents could be considered as something embarrassing. In their learning, they were expecting that the process and the result should be successful in order to achieve intended goals. Avoiding making mistakes was also students' strategy in obtaining an optimal score in learning.

Cognitive ability of the participants in distance learning
The result of the study revealed that respondents had difficulties in understanding the process involved in distance learning (67.9%). Shifting the mode from face to face learning to online learning can be challenging with the struggle of reducing mistaken understanding (Weller, 2002), facilitating critical online discussion, helping students' anxiety (Hughes & Daykin, 2002), fostering active participation (Gibson et al., 2001), and meet the demands quickly (Hughes & Daykin, 2002). Instead of material delivery challenges, distance learning also faces the needs of continuous and structured support, feedback, and guidance from the lecturers to the students to fully support students' cognitive development. Moreover, the demands of self-study were getting bigger but the time was limited. The students should be able to deal with the learning expectations and requirements to do some reading, finishing assignments, doing projects, reviewing materials, doing quizzes or tests and also doing revisions or improvements on some works (Croft, 2010). With the diverse courses, they took every semester, those processes could be overwhelming and hinder their capability in understanding something.

Readiness in distance learning
The respondents claimed that they experienced cultural shock during the shifting between face to face learning to distance learning. The absence of direct interaction between lecturer and students got them nervous since in some cases, the information about some courses was limited or unclear. In addition, when the internet connection was not stable, the information was only shared during synchronous meetings, the students had tendency to feel anxious. The anxiety also occurred during lecture and discussion sessions. The students stated that understanding lecturer's material delivery during distance learning was harder, especially at the moment the device was error, the internet was lost, the fatigue caused by overtask, and noisy environment. The result of the study showed that the student would not avoid distance learning (85%). Moreover, they were willing to take more distance learning (85.8%). Those findings prove that even though the students experienced some difficulties in adapting with the mode of distance learning, as the time went by they could build readiness in learning through distance education. Distance learning obliges the students to be fully independent, but in fact not all students are ready to learn and work independently (Leontyeva, 2018). The university itself is facing the struggles of adjusting the curriculum, technology, and lecturers to fulfill the demands of distance learning.

CONCLUSION
The shift of face to face learning to distance learning caused some anxieties to students. Moving the mode of learning from classroom activity into learning with the use of electronic devices, educational

platforms, social media and internet connection needed great efforts and habituation. The old practices that used to be done through classroom setting must be substituted by online learning activities synchronously and asynchronously. The challenges developed from technology, internet, devices, materials, material delivery, assignments, feedbacks and assessment. The absence of direct interaction between lecturers and students as well as students and students also brought the feeling of isolation toward the concept of learning. Therefore, distance learning was claimed as monotonous, boring and frustrating by some of the students. Technical problems like unstable internet connection and device's malfunction also contributed to the ineffective process of distance learning since it opened the high possibility of mistaken understanding and unequal distribution of materials' mastery. Those were the main sources of anxiety faced by the respondents of this study. Moreover, distance learning demanded the high independence of students to learn not only from the given materials and lecture but also some further self-study. Thus, the anxiety that occurred due to students' lack of readiness during distance learning can be minimized. During distance learning, doing collaborative learning with peers proved to be significantly helpful to overcome confusion, difficulties and problems that lecturers could not offer due to time constraints. The future study of anxiety in the time of pandemic can explore the possibility of anxiety among lecturers, education experts and education policy makers as well as the sources and solution.

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