



Exploration of Handling English Learning Difficulties on Junior High School Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various learning difficulties for students, including English language learning. Therefore, proper handling is needed to resolve these difficulties. This study aims to describe the handling of school principals, teachers, and parents in addressing English language learning difficulties of junior high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected through structured interviews with informants who are school principals, teachers, and parents of students at SMP Negeri 1 Tikala and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman qualitative analysis scheme, with stages of data collection, data reduction, data exposure, and conclusion drawing. Based on the interview with the school principal, handling was done by providing data quota assistance for teachers and students, providing free Wi-Fi in the school area, issuing policies for learning that can be done both online and offline. Based on the interview with teachers, handling was done by providing motivation to students through ice breaking activities and rewards, personal communication with students who have problems, presenting lessons using fun methods. Based on the interview with parents, handling was done by providing supporting facilities for student learning such as communication tools or tools that support English language learning, providing guidance to students, communicating with teachers to understand the student's progress, and finding solutions to any difficulties experienced by the students

Keywords: *English Learning, Learning Difficulties, Learning on Pandemic Covid-19*

Introduction

Education aims to develop one's potential and improve their skills and knowledge so that they can contribute positively to society. Another goal of education is to help individuals discover their interests and talents, shape their character, help them understand and respect cultural and moral values, prepare them to live and work independently, and assist them in achieving personal and professional success in their lives (Mabruria, 2021). Generally, education is divided into three categories: informal education, formal education, and non-formal education (Pohan, 2020). This indicates that education is not limited to one place/condition, but can be dynamic and flexible

The flexibility of education has been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced many formal educational institutions to find new ways to teach and ensure that students continue to receive quality education. As a follow-up, the government has issued policies for online or distance learning (Kemdikbud, 2020). Innovations such as distance learning and advanced learning technologies have become important in ensuring that students can continue to learn and develop despite the pandemic situation. However, their implementation has not been fully optimal.

The implementation of online learning still faces many obstacles that hinder its effectiveness, including issues with inadequate internet access and technology equipment, a lack of trained teachers in online teaching, and limitations in monitoring and ensuring that students continue to participate and understand the material (Pratama & Mulyati, 2020). One subject that has not been able to run optimally is English, as shown by previous observations and data obtained.

- a. The average student learning outcomes obtained from daily grades, mid-semester exams, and final semester exams are classified as low (below the Minimum Mastery Criteria).
- b. Many students still haven't memorized vocabulary and are unable to pronounce words in English, resulting in low English language proficiency, especially in the Reading component.
- c. Parents of students admit that their children have difficulty learning from home, especially in English language subjects, because they are not accompanied by a teacher and there is a lack of learning resources such as a dictionary.
- d. In online learning supported by applications like WhatsApp or Zoom, only 50% of the students are active participants in the class.
- e. Most students often submit assignments late, especially in English language subjects.

The indications mentioned above can serve as a guide that students are experiencing difficulties in the process of learning English. The learning difficulties faced during the pandemic, both in online and offline methods, can hinder the achievement of the learning process and outcomes of the students. Therefore, in-

depth research is needed to explore the forms of handling learning difficulties faced by students in distance learning. In this study, handling of learning difficulties is examined based on the actions taken by the school principal, teachers, and parents.

Literature Review

a. The learning during the pandemic.

Learning is the process of interaction between individuals and the environment that stimulates activities for learning. It involves conscious and unconscious thinking and acting to understand or learn new things or improve skills. Learning can occur through various means, including direct experience, formal training, and social interaction (Kurniasih, 2021).

The optimal learning process is influenced by factors such as:

- 1) Motivation: An individual's desire to learn and achieve goals is essential for optimal learning.
- 2) Learning environment: A comfortable and conducive learning environment can help strengthen the learning process.
- 3) School factors: School policies such as the implementation of learning and technology used in learning, teacher competency, where the quality and ability of the teacher greatly affect student learning outcomes, and learning methods, such as the selection of appropriate learning methods based on learning styles and the material being taught, are all important.
- 4) Learning resources: The availability of good and relevant learning resources is critical for effective learning.
- 5) Social support: Support from family, friends, and the community can help motivate and improve learning outcomes (Pangondian, Santosa, & Nugroho, 2019).

Learning strategies used during the Covid-19 pandemic involve learning from home by implementing the concept of distance learning. This is done to prevent the spread of the Corona virus (Covid-19) in society, especially for students and university students. Distance learning is a learning process carried out without direct interaction between teachers and students. This can be done through the internet, telephone, or other media. Distance learning allows students to learn anytime and anywhere, without being bound by class schedules and geographical locations (Saragih & Ansi, 2020). Some examples of distance learning methods are:

- 1) E-learning: Learning via the internet, using teaching materials such as videos, presentations, and online assignments.
- 2) Online training: Training conducted through the internet, with a teacher or trainer providing materials and answering questions via video or telephone.
- 3) Home visit: Learning at home, with the help of parents or private tutors (Warsita, 2019).

Distance learning has several advantages, such as flexible time and location,

easy access to teaching materials, and lower costs. However, it also has some limitations, such as a lack of social interaction and dependence on reliable technology.

b. Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties are a specific condition experienced by students that hinder the smooth learning process of the individual. This particular condition may be related to the individual's state and may also be related to an environment that is not conducive to their learning. These learning difficulties are not only experienced by slow learners but can also affect students who are intelligent or smart (Fatimah, Wirnawa, & Dewi, 2020). Signs of student learning difficulties can be seen as follows:

- 1) Low academic achievement: such as poor grades, slow and incomplete completion of tasks.
- 2) Lack of interest and motivation: such as a lack of interest in learning or not being interested in certain subjects.
- 3) Lack of concentration and attention: such as easily distracted, difficulty maintaining attention on the subject matter, or struggling to focus.
- 4) Behavioural disturbances: such as easy to get angry, stressed, or depressed (Pribadi & Hiariey, 2020).

The factors that cause learning difficulties are not easy to determine because they are complex. Even though these factors cannot be known, they affect the brain's ability to receive and process information and the ability to learn specific subjects (Basar, 2021). However, broadly categorized, the factors that cause learning difficulties can come from within and outside the student. These factors include:

- 1) Perception problems: difficulty in understanding new information or processing information
- 2) Concentration disorders: difficulty in focusing and maintaining attention on the subject matter
- 3) Genetic disorders: such as ADHD, dyslexia, or other developmental problems
- 4) Stress and pressure: such as pressure from parents, teachers, or peers to perform
- 5) Low motivation and interest: lack of interest or motivation to learn about specific subjects
- 6) Poor learning environment: such as an unsupportive home environment or lack of support from parents.
- 7) Learning facilities and infrastructure such as inadequate learning media or resources (Ginting, Irawan, Nainggolan, & Pauli, 2020).

c. The Roles of School Principals, Teachers, and Parents in Student Education

Every education stakeholder has an influence and a role in the learning process of individuals. The school principal also has a role, including:

- 1) Be a supervisor who leads and directs education in the school to achieve educational goals.
- 2) The school principal also acts as a policy maker in order to create a conducive and quality school environment.
- 3) The school principal is also responsible for planning, managing, and evaluating educational programs.
- 4) Responsible for managing school resources, maintaining good relationships with parents, the community, and external parties.
- 5) Leading efforts to improve the quality of education in the school (Nilda, Hifza, & Ubabuddin, 2020).

Overall, the school principal plays a very important role in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the education received by students. Similarly, teachers also have roles in the education process according to Ki Hadjar Dewantara, including:

- 1) Teachers as leaders and community developers. Ki Hadjar Dewantara believed that teachers not only teach academic subjects, but also play a role as transmitters of values and culture to students.
- 2) Teachers must set a good example for their students. Therefore, teachers must have high moral and intellectual qualities and must show a positive and dedicated attitude in their work.
- 3) Teachers play a role in developing students' full potential through quality and meaningful education. Teachers must provide support and motivation to students to achieve high achievements and help them to build self-confidence and useful life skills (Samho, 2019).

Besides teachers and school principals, parents as the closest party to students play a very important role, including:

- 1) Supporter: Parents should provide emotional and financial support to their children in learning and achieving academic success.
- 2) Mediator: Parents should help their children overcome problems that arise in learning and facilitate effective communication between children and teachers.
- 3) Role Model: Parents should be an example of how to behave and think positively and productively for their children.
- 4) Assessor: Parents should monitor and evaluate their children's academic performance and provide feedback that helps their children to learn and grow.
- 5) Goal Setter: Parents should help the children to setting goal of education and

facilitate to making a plan for carrier the child.

Overall, the role of parents is to help their children develop and reach their potential as educated and quality individuals. This involves helping children build self-confidence, life skills, and facilitating quality and meaningful learning.

Method

This research design uses qualitative exploratory/descriptive analysis, which is used to explore and describe phenomena, events, or experiences in depth. The main purpose of this design is to understand and explain the phenomenon being studied through data from subjective sources such as interviews, observations, and documents. In qualitative exploratory/descriptive analysis, researchers collect and analyse data to identify emerging patterns and themes, and make interpretations of the data. This method is often used to understand complex phenomena or to explain the experiences and perceptions of research subjects.

The data was obtained from informants who are school principals, teachers, parents, and students from SMP Negeri 2 Tikala, North Toraja Regency. Non-probability sampling technique with purposive sampling type was used to determine the informants. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting samples by considering specific purposes in the research. Sampling was done by selecting individuals or units that have certain characteristics considered relevant to the research.

Data was obtained through direct interviews with the sources. The interviews conducted in this study were structured interviews where the researcher had prepared a series of questions so that the interview process could run effectively. With this structured interview, each informant was given the same questions and the researcher recorded or recorded the answers from the informant.

Interviews were conducted with the school principal, homeroom teacher, parent/guardian, and grade IX students of SMPN 2 Tikala. In conducting the interviews, the researcher used an interview guide consisting of general questions designed to elicit opinions, views, or answers from the informants to find out more about the difficulties experienced by students and how to handle them in learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview process will be conducted directly by the researcher to obtain the required data.

The data obtained was then analyse qualitatively using the Miles and Huberman analysis scheme through several stages. The first stage is data reduction, which involves selecting relevant and meaningful data that focuses on the research questions/problem statement. The data to be reduced includes interview and documentation results. The purpose of data reduction is also discovery-oriented, meaning that any new/foreign findings in this study will be noted. The second stage is data display, which is used to facilitate understanding of what is happening and plan future actions based on what is observed in the field. Data can be presented in the form of tables, graphs, images, and the like, derived from interview and

documentation results, in order to illustrate the data as a whole. The final stage is data verification or drawing conclusions based on the presented data.

Results and Discussion

a. Result of interview with principal

To the school principal as the leader, the first question asked was:

"How was the implementation of learning in this school during the Covid-19 pandemic?"

"So far, the implementation of learning in our school is a combination of online and limited face-to-face learning. It is adjusted according to the needs of the learning process."

"Are there any signs of students experiencing difficulties during the learning process? What are they like?"

"Yes, there are low grades of student learning outcomes, many subjects remain incomplete, and many teachers complain about difficulty finding the right teaching methods."

"How about in English language learning?"

"More or less the same, the students' grades are low. Based on the teacher's reports, many students have difficulty memorizing vocabulary, which affects their ability to learn especially in reading components."

As a leader, the principal has a role in monitoring and supervising all aspects of learning activities, including addressing students' learning difficulties.

What policies have been implemented by the principal to address students' learning difficulties?

"In general, the school provides maximum support for learning by providing mobility such as free credit, and there is also Wi-Fi in the school that students can use if they don't have data. There is also a school program for visiting students at home, of course, during online or offline learning, both at school and at home. There is also a program for teachers to visit students at home. Not only students who experience difficulties but all students are monitored and listened to regarding their complaints."

Then, when asked specifically what was done to address learning difficulties in English, the principal responded, "We always coordinate with subject teachers regarding what is needed, and moral support is always given to make learning easier. In addition, the school also supports learning facilities and COVID-19 prevention measures. When face-to-face learning takes place, the school always

monitors whether health protocols have been implemented properly."

The school principal plays a very important role as a leader in education, as they are directly involved in educational programs. The implementation of these programs depends on the approval of the principal as the leader of the institution. The success of a school reflects the success of the principal. Therefore, they must be able to observe, supervise, and determine policies, especially school programs related to student learning difficulties.

The school principal has several important tasks and responsibilities in addressing students' learning difficulties, including:

- 1) Identifying problems: The school principal must understand the problems that students experience in learning and find appropriate solutions.
- 2) Providing learning facilities and resources: The school principal must ensure that the school has adequate facilities and learning resources for students.
- 3) Encouraging teacher collaboration: The school principal must motivate teachers to work together and collaborate in helping students who have learning difficulties.
- 4) Providing guidance and training: The school principal must ensure that the school has guidance and training programs for students who need them.
- 5) Implementing effective teaching strategies: The school principal must ensure that the school implements effective teaching strategies that are appropriate for students' needs.

By doing these things, the school principal can help students overcome learning difficulties and help them achieve their maximum learning potential (Tanjong, 2017).

b. Result of interview with teacher

An interview with English teacher was conducted to provide an overview of the difficulties and how they are being handled. In response to the first question about how English language learning is being conducted during the pandemic, the teacher answered,

"English language learning is conducted once a week in face-to-face meetings. Students are separated or spaced out. In addition, they are also required to wear masks before entering the classroom to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The rest is done online."

What are the obstacles or difficulties experienced in English language learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?

"There are many problems that have arisen since online learning. One of them is that the students' vocabulary is very low, making it difficult for them to do

reading texts. If the learning difficulties that arise in students can be seen from low grades. the learning outcomes are not achieved. There are also many students who are slow in submitting assignments since they are required to learn online."

According to the observation, what are the factors causing the difficulties in learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic?

"In my opinion, the internal factor is the lack of motivation. But the most important factor is the lack of tools or media used for online learning, and parents find it difficult to guide their children. Teachers also find it difficult to reach them during learning."

The low motivation to learn English among students is caused by, among other things, their lack of exposure to or practice with English (Sari, 2018). During the pandemic, learning English intensively became difficult, and students were not given the opportunity to practice what they learned. This made it even more difficult for students to understand English language learning.

The limitations of technology, such as poor internet connection and lack of learning tools, also pose a problem. The cost of acquiring online learning tools is not cheap, and the cost of data and phone credit is also a hindrance to the smoothness of online learning.

How does the as a teacher respond and handled the learning difficulties experienced by the students?

"The approach I take is direct, if I notice they are not motivated, I do an ice breaking activity during the lesson, and then I reward the students. I also directly chat with students if I feel that there are students who do not understand. The approach I usually use is to find fun learning models that can increase student motivation, and I also try to visit students' homes if they cannot learn in the classroom, so that I can understand their difficulties."

The use of ice breaking in learning can provide positive and constructive feedback to motivate students and build confidence. In addition, this activity will create a comfortable learning atmosphere in the learning process. Direct communication with students personally will form a closeness between teachers and students, so that they can delve into the learning difficulties experienced by students and then find solutions and treatment.

c. Result of interview with Parent

Parents as the closest parties to students have an important role in dealing with learning difficulties. This study also collected data from parents about what handling has been done.

When learning English, do children have complaints, and what do they usually complain about?

"There are many complaints, they don't understand many lessons. Also, the network is bad when learning through the phone. The child is not motivated to learn English because it's too difficult," said two parents, and the problems or obstacles faced tend to be the same. Online learning is very dependent on telecommunications networks, and network stability becomes an important aspect because it determines the quality and accessibility of learning. Without a stable network, online learning can experience technical problems such as buffering or connection disruptions, which can affect the quality of learning and make learning ineffective.

The next question explores what actions parents take to help their children and overcome the difficulties they face. One parent's response was:

"I have offered to have English lessons, but it's difficult because it's far away in Rantepao. But since I bought a dictionary and now there's Google Translate, it's easier to understand."

Another parent answered, "Usually, I talk to the teacher if my child starts complaining about English lessons. I can't help much because I don't understand it myself."

Overcoming a child's learning difficulties requires the role of parents. Parents have a great influence on students' success, including identifying and addressing the learning difficulties experienced by their children. In the process of understanding a student's learning difficulties, parents play a role in understanding the problems their child is experiencing. In addition, parents play a role in providing support and motivation to their children, including giving praise for progress made. Maintaining a healthy diet and sleep pattern helps to focus attention and improve memory (Khalimah, 2021).

Conclusion

Based on the interview, the handling done by the principal is by providing assistance in data quota for teachers and students, providing free Wi-Fi in the school area, and issuing a policy that learning can be done through limited online and offline methods.

Based on the interview with teachers, the handling done is by giving motivation to students through ice-breaking and rewards, communicating personally with students who have problems, and presenting lessons through enjoyable methods.

Based on the interview with parents, the handling done is by providing supporting facilities for student learning such as communication tools or tools that support English language learning, providing assistance to students,

communicating with teachers to find out students' progress and finding solutions to any difficulties experienced.

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