

General English for Vocational University Students during the Global Pandemic: Stages and Challenges

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To reach one of its aims in producing graduates with national and international standard competency, Politeknik Negeri Bandung (Polban) assigns English Department to teach General English subject to all study program as one of institutional mandatory subject. However, since the pandemic hits in the beginning of 2020, distance learning has been applied as the solution to keep the education process runs well. This study aims to identify the stages in teaching General English for vocational university student as well as to explain the challenges during pandemic. Qualitative method is applied for this study and to collect the data, observation and survey are done by using online platform. The results show that stages in teaching are similar compared to the conventional one: preparation, delivery, and evaluation. Things that differ each stage are the teaching media and the duration used during the class. Some challenges arise as this pandemic 'force' all level of educational institution to adapt with distance learning: the reduction of study objectives, the ease of assessment method, and the feedback delivery of student's assignment. Eventually, the urgency of improving English skills for all level of vocational students during this uncertain situation requires strong preparation and cooperation from the institution, lecturers, and students themselves.

Keywords: General English, Vocational, Covid-19, Distance Learning, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Recent news shows how the global pandemic affects the education system. It leads to a new era of teaching and learning as people are suggested to stay at home to diminish the case. The new terms of distance learning, e-learning, and online learning then arise as these methods offer a brand-new way in keeping the education alive. (Moore et al., 2011) define distance learning as the exertion of giving accessible approach for people who are willing to learn, but they have problems in distance geographically. Meanwhile, e-learning refers to the method of including not only internet or intranet but also audio and videotape, satellite broadcast and interactive TV in the process of learning (Ellis, 2004). Online learning then be identified by (Benson, 2002) as the improved or updated version of distance learning. The similarities from those definitions indicate two main characteristics: the environment of where the learning process happens, and the method used mostly in order to reach the learnings' objectives.

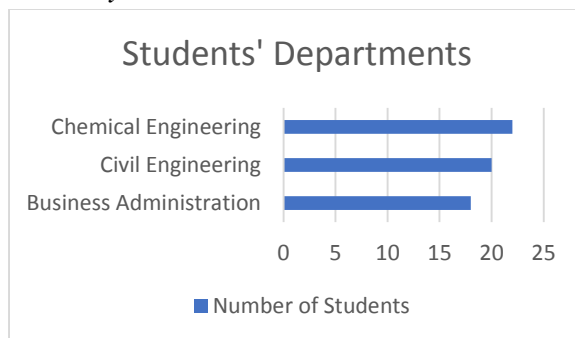
English is taught as one of main skills to be acknowledged by all level students in all department. In this subject, the learning objectives between one department and other might vary based on what competencies do the students need to master by the end of the semester. As the goal is to enlighten students with the use of practical English, it should be supported with the competency of linguistic skills as well as the attainment of certain information (Kitkauskienė, 2006). He also added that General English should not be contrasted to ESP or vice versa as ESP also derives from the knowledge of general English. One thing to be highlighted is that teaching language must be intended for particular learning and language use purposes of classified students (Johns, 1991).

Referring to Kepmendiknas number 232 published in 2000, General English (GE) is one of the main subjects under MPK (*Mata Kuliah Pengembangan Kepribadian*) category which should be given to enrich students' knowledge and deepen their understanding towards the subjects. As a the first year of their study time by name: GE 1 and GE 2. For some other departments, they also add the next level of GE, namely GE 3, GE 4, until GE 6 with their own characteristics depend on what study program the GE is applied. GE is taught by a group of lecturers from English Department who provide teaching service to all of study program in Polban.

METHOD(S)

This study takes place in Politeknik Negeri Bandung by involving students from 3 departments. 60 students were gathered to be observed and to join the online interview. The observation was done by using the variety of online teaching platform (see Fig.1).

Figure 1: Participants of the study



There are 2 open-ended questions and 3 questions with number of choices to be selected by checkboxes. To begin the survey, students were asked to choose what platform do they prefer to have distance learning. Second, they were asked to tick the differences that they felt between conventional and distance learning. The third question is to choose the learning preparation for distance learning. The fourth and fifth questions were required questions that ask the benefit and challenges they found during the distance learning.

During the observation process, students were asked to do the discussion and learning process as usual with the permission to record the activity. In one meeting, it usually takes around 60 – 100 minutes of learning, included the question-answer session. For the survey, students were asked to fill out the form which took around 5 minutes until the forms were filled in.

Once the data were gathered, each question then be classified into stages and challenges categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distance learning creates a whole new environment for both lecturer and students in the process of teaching-learning. The latest stages as well as challenges of teaching General English during the global pandemic to vocational university students are as follow:

1. Preparation Stage

The switching method of learning also leads to the updated preparation of teaching. Compared to the conventional one, the preparation during distance learning comprises the adjustment of learning objectives and the variety use of teaching media. The learning objectives are adjusted by reducing the weekly material and compacting the topic to fit the 16 meeting in a semester. The following table illustrates how the learning objectives for GE 1 are adjusted before and during the global pandemic:

Table 1: Learning Objectives for GE 1

Week	Learning Objectives	
	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic
1-2	Introduction	Introduction
	Meeting People	Meeting People
3-4	Describing people	Describing people and jobs
	Describing Places	
5-6	Describing Jobs	Describing Places
	Describing Objects and its functions	
7-8	Telling numbers and simple calculation	Describing objects
	Review	Review
9-10	Describing process	Describing process
	Asking for and giving directions	
11-12	Giving and Following Instructions	Asking and giving direction
	Requesting and Offering	
13-14	Asking for and Giving Opinion	Requesting and offering
	Asking for and Giving Reasons	
15-16	Agreeing and Disagreeing	Agreeing and disagreeing
	Review	Review

Before and During Pandemic

The adjustment on the learning objectives can be seen by the reduction of several topics in each week. The reduction is meant to anticipate students' confusion in handling the distance learning that requires them to adapt very fast with the use of various teaching media.

The variety use of teaching media is based on students' feedback from the previous semester's questionnaire. Students suggest lecturer to not only depend on one media but to combine various online platform based on the learning objectives. For example, the use of *Google Docs* in writing session can help students to collaborate with their group and at the same time, lecturer can also get involved to assess the process as the writing process is happened in a real time. Another example is the use of sharing feature in *Mindmeister* to get students' activeness in doing collaboration. Those web-based application sometimes help students to feel the engagement during the process of learning although the classroom is actually their own homes.

2. Delivery Stage

This stage somehow becomes a tricky phase for lecturer. In one side, the ability to control the virtual class during the delivery can only be done by using the features given by the LMS, for example raising hand, mute and unmute, or pin the speaker during the question-answer session. While in the conventional one, lecturers are freely to utilize the whole classroom by face-to-face meeting, distance learning compels lecturers to be creative in delivering the topics by using online teaching media. The switching delivery stage emphasizes on the inquiry learning method which comprises two things: lecturers act as facilitator and students take big role in doing the student-centered learning method (Budiyanto, 2016). The delivery stages are illustrated on the following table:

Table 2: Delivery Stage

NO	STAGES	LECTURERS' ROLE
1	Question making	Facilitating students in identifying questions
2	Hypothesis making	Facilitating students in deciding relevant hypothesis
3	Experiment planning	Facilitating students in sorting the stages
4	Experiment trial	Facilitating students in getting the information through experiment trial
5	Data collection and data analysis	Facilitating students in demonstrating the result
6	Conclusion making	Facilitating students in making conclusions

3. Evaluation Stage

The evaluation stage for General English subject during pandemic emphasizes on three things: students' active participation during online meeting, individual assignment and group project. The online meeting is not only the media for delivering the topic, but it is also the time to evaluate students' participation. As the meetings are done in 16 weeks, students can be evaluated each week and the percentage for this point can determine the final score. Students' participation during the virtual class require them to be actively involved from the beginning of the class until the class ends. They are also assessed through discussion session in which they should actively taking part in asking questions or stating answers. The next evaluation is the point for individual assignment by the help of Google Classroom. The features given by this LMS help lecturer as the admin of the class to maintain the deadline of each assignment as well as providing rubric to make the assessment be more effective and efficient. The comment features on each student's room also make it as a special LMS that students will be notified directly once the lecturer gives them comment or remark of the assignment. As well as the group project, the use of Google Classroom to collect the project has been a very exciting experience during the class. Students can choose what media they will use to upload their project and lecturer can also give direct feedback to each group's project.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that everyone should adapt quickly with the global pandemic, including the education field. Since the conventional teaching-learning method has been strictly limited by government, innovation and creativity of both institution and lecturers should be gathered harmoniously to keep the teaching-learning activity runs well from home. General English, as one of the subjects given to all students in Polban, also tries to cope with the limitation caused by the global pandemic by shifting the stages and facing the challenges. The switching preparation, delivery, and evaluation stages are effortlessly done to maintain the successful delivery of the learning objectives of General English. Challenges in teaching GE through distance learning varies from the reduction of study objectives, the ease of assessment method, and the feedback delivery of student's assignment. Those challenges are a very insightful experience, especially for the lecturer, to keep updated with recent technology that will help the education system runs well in any kind of situation.

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