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DISTANCE LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT HIGH SCHOOLS IN FRONTIER, OUTERMOST AND LEAST DEVELOPED REGIONS IN TIMOR NTT DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: Corona virus pandemic which hit the world soon after the launching of school digitalization policy in Indonesia, has forced teachers and students to teach and learn from home, hence from a distance, including teachers and students in *frontier, outermost and least developed regions* (***Daerah 3T***) such as those in TTU, Malaka and Belu of NTT Province of Indonesia. This research, therefore, is designed to investigate how English language teachers at high schools in the three regencies managed distance learning during covid 19 pandemic, the effectiveness of the distance learning, problems encountered and the solution: and the potentiality for future enhancement of distance learning. Descriptive method is employed in this research and data obtained were analyzed qualitatively throughout identification, classification, and validation stages. The result shows that English language teachers at high schools in the three regencies generally ran two types of distance learning: digital and non-digital; but both were not effective because of such problems as: the limited access to the internet, electricity supply and lack of skill of both teachers and students in digital learning platforms and education apps. It is to overcome these problems that, teachers also ran non-digital learning. Possibility for digital distance education to be developed and enhanced in the future is obvious because teachers have very strong willingness to collaborate with teachers, also to let their students be able to collaborate with students, from other schools through digital schooling in this era of education freedom (*merdeka belajar*).

Keywords: learning, distance, digital, non-digital.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education, some time also called distance learning, is a general term currently used to cover such education systems as, correspondence study, open education, online or virtual learning, e-learning, and m-learning (Simonson, Smaldino and Zvacek, 2015; Latchem and Jung, 2010; Harry, 1999). The term also covers some aspects of digital schools being introduced and implemented in Indonesia. In this research paper, the term distance education is used to refer to the overall distance education system whereas distance learning is used specifically to refer to the process of distance learning of a specific subject, covering the planning, the implementation, and the evaluation of the learning process of the subject, in this case of learning English language.

The current research on distance learning is particularly addressed to the distance learning of English language at high schools in the regencies of TTU, Malaka and Belu. The three regencies are the frontier, outermost and least developed regions (*daerah 3 T*) in Timor NTT. The research is triggered by two factors. First is school digitalization policy of Indonesian government, in this case the ministry of education, culture, research

and technology to reach frontier, outermost and least developed regions (*daerah 3T*) with qualified education.
(https://www.republika.co.id/berita/qoctas483/nadiem-daerah-3t-jadi-prioritas-digitalisasi-sekolah).

Unfortunately, no long after the launching of school digitalization, the world, including Indonesia, is hit by corona virus. Thus, the second trigger of this research is corona virus pandemic which has shut down all school buildings and forced teachers and students to teach and learn from home, hence learn from a distance. Five questions were then raised for investigation. They are (1) how do English language teachers of high schools in TTU, Belu and Malaka manage distance English language learning process for their students during covid 19 pandemic? (2) How effective is the management of distance English language teaching and learning during covid 19 pandemic? (3) What problems and difficulties are faced by English language teachers at high schools in the regencies of TTU, Belu and Malaka in running distance English language learning process during covid 19 pandemic? (4) How do English language teachers at high schools in the three regencies overcome problems and difficulties faced in running distance English

language learning process during covid 19 pandemic? (5) How possible it is to proceed and develop distance learning of English language at schools of the three regencies of NTT, as a part of school digitalization policy? This research is, therefore, designed to investigate the questions raised here and to achieve the objectives as stated below.

OBJECTIVES

Based on the questions raised in the introduction section, five objectives are set for this research to achieve. The five objectives are as follows.

1. To identify and describe how English language teachers at Senior high schools in Belu and Malaka regencies of the province of NTT manage distance English language learning process for their students during covid 19 pandemic?
2. To reveal and delineate problems and/ difficulties faced by English language teachers at Senior high schools in Belu and Malaka regencies in running distance English language learning process for their students during covid 19 pandemic?
3. To pinpoint and portray how English language teachers at Senior high schools in Belu and Malaka regencies overcome problems and difficulties faced in running distance English language learning process for their students during covid 19 pandemic during 2020-2021??
4. To learn and point out the effectiveness of the management system of distance English language teaching and learning during covid 19 pandemic by English language teachers in Belu and Malaka regencies.
5. To figure out and explain the possibility to proceed and develop distance learning of English language at remote schools in NTT?

FRAMEWORK
Brief History and Characteristics of Distance Education

Historically, distance education which is commonly also called distance learning can be traced back to the practice of **correspondence learning** in European countries and in the USA during 1880s. Post offices and postal correspondence played significant role during the practice of correspondence education and learning (Simonson et al, 2015: 36; Chaney, unpublished: 11-14; and Latchem and Jung, 2010). With the emergence of electronic communication, distance education and learning in the early 1900s was then dominated using audio recording and television. Satellite technology developed in 1960s has also made rapid expansion of distance education. Open universities and schools emerged in the USA and in many European and Asian countries, including in Indonesia. Indonesia open university, for example was established in 1984 on 4th of September, where radios and televisions played important roles at its earlier stage of development (Universitas Terbuka, http://www.ut.ac.id).

While distance education system at its early stage of development was dominantly carried out through one-way communication system via postal correspondence and radio and television broadcasting, two-way interactive distance education has now been growing rapidly and massively since the fiber-optic communication system was developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The internet and computer mediated communication has brought about various systems of distance education or distance learning under different names. Some of which as identified by Simonson et all (2015: 33) are *e-learning* or *e-training*, *virtual education* or *virtual schooling* and *on-line learning* or *on-line education*. In the current development there have also been such distance education systems as *m-learning* where cell phones equipped with cameras and internet connection play vital role in the learning process (Latchem and Jung, 2010: 5-6); and digital school. Indonesian school digitalization (*digitalisasi sekolah*) introduced and implemented in Indonesia since 2019 is also an attempt towards digital schoolings (http://www.kemdikbud.go.id/main/blog/2019/10/digitalisasi). Technology is reshaping distance education.

During the development of distance education, various definitions have been proposed along with the development of different types or different ways of distance learning. Currently, however, the generally accepted definition of distance education also called distance learning is that it is institution-based, formal education where groups of learners are separated, and where any system of interactive telecommunications is used to connect learners, resources, and instructors (Simonson, et al 2015: 6, 31). With the given definition, Simonson, et al claim that the term distanced education is an inclusive term which covers different systems or ways of distance education (Simonson, et al 2015: 33).

Four general characteristics of distance education are identifiable from the given definition (Simonson, et al 2015: 32-33). First, distance

education is conducted through institutions; it is neither a self-study nor a non-academic learning. The second characteristic of distance learning is concerning the concept of separation. Three aspects of separation are noticed here; they are separation in location, separation in time and separation in intellectual, i.e., intellectual gap between teachers and learners. The third characteristic is related to interactive telecommunications between teachers and learners, between learners and learners and between learners and learning resources, either synchronously (at the same time) or asynchronously (at different times). The term telecommunication is "communicating at a distance" using both modern electronic media and non-electronic media, including traditional forms of communication systems through postal correspondence (Simonson, et al 2015: 33). Surely, the use of electronic media in modern distance education is rapidly increasing and spreading along with the rapid growth of information and communication technology. In the current development of information and communication technology, various electronic communications, such as e-mail, cell phones and various e-learning platforms and education apps have come into use to connect learners, teachers, and resources (Churchill, et al, 2016: 83-94; Latchem and Jung, 2010: 5-6). The last general characteristic of distance education is related to the concept of interconnection within learning community. Like in any other education system, distance education has learning groups or communities, each consisting of a group of learners, a teacher who interacts with learners and instructional resources such as books, audios, videos, and the likes for learners to access. Resources should be developed and provided on the basis certain procedures of instructional design depending on learning objectives and expected learning experiences.

Types of Distance Learning

Based on the brief history and the characteristics of distance learning as described above, two major types of distance learning are observed. The very first and classical type is non-digital distance learning such as **correspondence learning.** Traditionally, post offices and postal correspondence played significant role during the practice of correspondence education and learning. The second type is digital distance learning which has now been growing rapidly and massively since the fiber-optic communication system was invented. There have been various systems of digital distance

education or distance learning under different names, some of which as identified by Simonson et all (2015: 33) are *e-learning* or *e-training, virtual education* or *virtual schooling* and *on-line learning* or *on-line education*. In the current development there have also been such digital distance education systems as *m-learning* where cell phones equipped with cameras and internet connection play vital role in the learning process (Latchem and Jung, 2010: 5-6). Another current development in distance digital education is digital schoolings like that of school digitalization policy (*digitalisasi sekolah*) in Indonesia (http://www.kemdikbud. go.id/main/blog/ 2019/10/digitalisasi). One of the school digitalization programs is "Rumah Belajar" (https://belajar.kemdikbud. go.id/).

Various ways and systems of digital distanced education and learning as mentioned so far can, indeed, be classified into three types based on certain specific or idiosyncratic characteristics (Winstead, 2021). The first is **e-Learning** (electronic learning), which gives emphasis on the use of electronic means of learning without necessarily having synchronous teaching-learning activities. Various learning platforms or Learning Management System (LMS) educational applications, including videos and YouTube are widely available for use in e-Learning (https://www. Educationalapp store.com/). The second is **v-Learning** (virtual learning). The idiosyncrasy of v-learning is frequent synchronous learning activities via learning platforms. Some learning platforms can be used for both e-leaning, when they are used dominantly asynchronously, and v-learning, when they are used dominantly synchronously. The most common media for virtual learning is zoom. The last type of digital distance learning is **m-Learning** (mobile learning) which emphasizes on the portability or mobility characteristic. Currently portable tablet and notebook computers and cell phones or iPads equipped with cameras and internet connection play crucial roles in m-learning and is currently very popular in most countries of the world (Basak, Wotto and Be´langer, 2018; Pedro, Barbosa, and Santos, 2018; Latchem and Jung, 2010: 5-6).

Effectiveness of Digital Distance Learning

Many studies have claimed that technology enhance learning (Lytras, et al, 2010). This particularly true for all type digital learning, including blended and distance digital learning with respect to efficiency, beside effectiveness. Yet, digital learning should be, if not more, then at least

as effective as traditional face to face classroom learning. However, the successes and failures in the implementation of any digital learning are very dependent on several factors. For distance-digital learning, it is recommended that careful and systematic planning concerning such factors as learners, course contents, instruction strategies and instruction media and learning environment are considered (Simonson, et al 2015: 126-165; Dick et al., 2011, Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2012).

With respect to learners and learning environment, for example, an instruction designer has to make sure that every learner has means of telecommunication capable of distance digital learning. Moreover, the place where s/he lives must have adequate internet network and electricity supply. Learners and teachers also must have adequate knowledge and skills in information and communication technology, especially learning platforms, education applications and means of telecommunication planned to use in a distance digital learning.

Effective instruction and interaction strategies are also vital for the success of a distance digital learning. Learning tasks and activities should be dominantly problem-based and project-based. Cooperative learning and collaborative learning such as group or pair works are, therefore recommended. Evelyn (in Akyol and Garrison, 2011) raise eleven factors to be consider in planning instructional interaction and communication. The factors are instructor-student interaction, instructor-student communication, instructor evaluation, instructor responses, student-student interaction, student-student communication, online discussion, written assignments, learning style, prior computer competency, and time spent on a course (Evelyn in Akyol and Garrison, 2011). For these reasons of instruction and interaction strategies, it is necessary to consider and select suitable learning platforms and/or education applications and media which must be also familiar for teachers and students to operate.

METHODOLOGY

Distance learning, which has been running, particularly in the regencies of TTU, Malaka and Belu of NTT province of Indonesia since covid 19 hit the world, is considered a naturally existing phenomenon. A descriptive method with heuristic or data-driven type of objective is therefore, chosen as the appropriate method to investigate the phenomenon of distance learning in the three regencies whereby both data collection and data

analyses were carried out along hand-in hand during investigation (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:31). Techniques used to collect data are survey questionnaires and interviews while data obtained were analyzed qualitatively.

There are three stages of investigation, i.e, data collection and data analyses, following the model proposed by Watson-Gegeo (Allwright and Bailey, 1991:36). At stage one, the comprehension stage, opened interviews were conducted with few English teachers, who are also members of Undana English Study Program alumni WhatsApp group, to gather such data as high schools and English language teachers in the three targeted regencies, contact numbers and email addresses of the English teachers and some initial data concerning how the English teachers in the three regencies ran the teaching and learning process in the time of covid 19 pandemic. A list of high schools and English teachers in the three targeted regencies was made and some general figures of what, why and how the English language teachers conducted the teaching and learning process in the time of covid 19 pandemic were derived at this stage.

At the second stage, topic-oriented (or hypothesis-oriented) stage, Google form survey questionnaires were distributed to 33 English teachers of the regencies. Data collected were, then analyzed to identify and classify the how, what, and why of the implementation of the distance learning during covid 19 pandemic in the three regencies. The results of the analysis were then used for structured interviews held via zoom meetings, for verification or, if needed, for revisions of findings.

The last stage is validation stage, at which the researchers visited and gathered the English language teachers in each of the three regencies to have off-line face to face structured interviews. Findings were validated after having off-line face to face interviews with all teachers of the three regencies who took part in the research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The result data gatherings and analyses show that English language teachers at high schools in the three regencies or TTU, Malaka and Belu generally ran two types of distance learning: digital and non-digital; or to be more precisely three types of teaching and learning process during covid 19 pandemic, namely distance digital, distance non digital and non-distance non-digital teaching and learning process. Among these three types of teaching and learning activities, distance digital learning is the most common type exercised by

English teachers in the three targeted regencies. This distance digital learning was held most through WhatsApp groups (simplified version of m-Learning). Few teachers also used Google classroom - mostly as electronic means to facilitate learning, hence e-Learning and zoom meetings, that is virtual learning (v-Learning). There were, however, many problems and difficulties encountered in the implementation the distance digital learning. Teachers, therefore, also ran distance non digital and non-distance non-digital (off-line face to face) learning as solutions to problems and difficulties encountered. Detailed description with discussion is presented in the coming sections.

Distance Digital m-Learning Activities: *The use of WhatsApp groups*

The use of cell phones equipped with camera and internet access for learning activities, known as m-Learning (mobile learning) has been very popular for some years in many developed countries. M-Learning activities are, indeed growing very rapidly and massively all around the world not only with the use of cell phones but also with the use of iPads, tablet computers and mobile notebook computers. Moreover, it is run not only by individuals and private institutions and companies but also by formal and state learning institutions as in Japan and in the US. More than 5000 educational applications (education apps), including videos and YouTube have been widely available for use in m-Learning.

For teachers in the three targeted regencies, however, the use of cell phones institutionally for learning purposes is a new and current phenomenon mainly caused by the closing down of school buildings during covid 19 pandemic. Yet the most common cell phone application used among students and teachers is also ony WhatsApp. The communication and interaction via WhatsApp were also dominantly one-way. That is, teachers copied learning materials and assignments mostly from students' textbooks and sent them via WhatsApp groups for students to learn and do the assignments. Some teachers also sent learning materials and assignments in, videos, pictures or in PDF formats that they had downloaded previously. After completing the assignments, students then sent them back to their teachers. Feedbacks, explanations, and instructions were provided by chatting with students in WhatsApp groups. Few teachers also made group video calls to give explanations, instructions, and feedbacks but this way was very rare.

The use of cell phones and WhatsApp had,

indeed, helped to keep running the teaching and learning processes during covid 19 pandemic. It must be acknowledged, however that this simple system of distance m-Learning is not very effective. As described in the last section of this paper, there were many problems encountered which had prevented the successful use of cell phones for m-Learning.

Distance Digital v-Learning Activities: *The Use of Zoom Application*

In general, zoom application is the most common application used for virtual meetings, including virtual classes world widely. For English language teachers in the regencies of TTU, Malaka and Belu, zoom application is the second common application used for v-Learning during covid 19 pandemic. Unfortunately, teachers were not very familiar with the functions of all features of zoom application. Consequently, they mostly used zoom application for giving students explanations and instructions, rarely with screen sharing. Students were never asked to share screen, for example to share their completed assignment for discussions. Zoom whiteboard was never used; breakout room – for example, for small group discussions were never held. Student-teacher communication and interaction, therefore, was mostly one-way.

Most education scientists, including distance and digital learning scientists have affirmed that problem-based and project-based learning strategies with multi-way learning interaction, such as in pair and group discussions and group works are the most effective way of interaction and learning strategies. Therefore, many Learning Management Systems and Education applications, including zoom application are equipped with features that enable multi-way student-teacher and student-student interactions as well as problem-based or project-based learning activities.

As stated in the section on the use of WhataApp and previously in this section that communication and interaction employed in distance digital learning exercised by English language teachers in the regencies of TTU, Malaka and Belu is dominantly one-way interaction. There were also no project-based and/or problem-based learning activities. This is partly because of the teachers are lack of knowledge and skill in information and communication technology, particularly in Learning Management Systems (LMSs) and education applications, including Zoom application and Google classroom, as described below.

Distance Digital e-Learning Activities: *The use of Google Classroom*

As has been previously mentioned, while m-Learning gives emphasis on the mobility or portability of learning activities and v-Learning emphasizes on the synchronous face to face class meetings, e-Learning refers mostly to the use of electronic means to facilitate learning activities. There are many learning platforms or learning management systems (LMSs) which, indeed can be used for both e-Learning and v-Learning purposes. One of them is Google classroom.

Some English language teachers in the regencies of TTU, Malaka and Belu also used Google classroom to maintain their teaching and learning processes during covid 19 pandemic but only for e-Learning, namely as electronic means to store learning materials and assignments for students to access, either to download or to learn from. No virtual meeting was held through Google classroom. Even the *Class Forum* feature of Google classroom was also only used to store learning materials and assignments, either typed or uploaded. Few teachers used **material** feature in Class Assignment room to upload learning materials and assignments but other features such as **quiz**, **assignment** and **question** were never used.

Like the limited use of zoom, the limited use of Google classroom was also caused by teachers are lack of knowledge and skill in running Google classroom. Teachers were, indeed not yet prepared to run distance digital learning activities. Yet, distance digital learning was also not in the plan of local governments and education institutions, including schools. It took place suddenly as an alternative solution to maintain schools' teaching and learning process in the time of covid 19 pandemic. Consequently, there were many difficulties and problems encountered in the implementation of the alternative distance digital learning. The following section described in detailed problems encountered and solutions.

Problems Encountered and Solutions: *Distance non-Digital* and non-*Distance non-Digital Learning*

Problems encountered in the implementation of the alternative distance digital learning by English language teachers in the regencies of TTU, Malaka and Belu are classified into three main categories. They are the limited access to the internet, electricity supply and, most crucially, lack of knowledge and skill of both teachers and students in information and communication technology pertaining to the digital learning platforms and education applications. As for problems related internet access, many teachers and, especially most students do not have did not have best quality cell phones or computers to be used to access the internet for distance digital learning purposes. Pursuing best quality cell phones was costly and was difficult for most students to afford ones. Even if they had ones, most students and teachers did not have WiFi at their homes for the internet access. Being dependent on the internet quotas was also very costly for most students and teachers. Unstable and frequent cut off internet network also made it difficult to run distance digital learning activities effectively. Related to the problem of limited internet access is the electricity supply. Like with the internet network, electricity supply was also frequently cut off which automatically also cut off the internet network.

As has been described previously, teachers', and students' knowledge and skills in various learning platforms and education applications were also still very far from enough for running digital learning. Among more than 5000 education applications and learning platforms widely available on the internet, mostly accessible and downloadable for free, they knew only a few but with very limited skill to operate.

All problems and difficulties described so far made it very difficult to run distance digital learning effectively and successfully. To solve the problems and difficulties, teachers, and their students, therefore turned to the classical offline class meetings in two ways that I call *distance non-digital* and *non-distance non-digital* learning activities. With the former one, teachers put students in small groups, equipped with sets of learning materials and assignments, and placed in one student's home for group learning. After learning and completing one assignment, one of the students in each group was asked to submit the completed assignment and collected next set of learning materials and assignments from their teachers. Only very rarely teachers did home visit to every group of students to control the group learning activities and to bring next set of learning materials and assignments as well as to collect students completed assignments. Not all teachers did this system of distance non-digital learning, most teachers did the second system, i.e., the classical off-line face to face class meetings, which I have called non-distance non-digital learning system in this paper. With this system students were still put in small groups to come to their schools in shifts. The classical off-line

face to face class meetings were, then, held in shifts of small groups at schools. This system was considered by most teachers to be more effective than the others that they also exercised.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

It cannot be denied that the distance digital learning in TTU, Malaka and Belu, the three frontier, outermost and least developed regencies in NTT of Indonesia during covid 19 pandemic, was not effective and not successful because of such problems as limited access to the internet, electricity supply and most importantly teachers are lack of knowledge and skills in learning platforms and education. To solve the difficulties and problems, especially to maintain teaching and learning processes during covid 19 pandemic, however, teachers have run classical off-line face to face learning held with small groups of students at schools in shifts of at students' home.

Although, on one hand, many problems and difficulties have made distance digital learning, neither effective nor successful, on the other hand, teachers of the three regencies have been very successful in maintaining their teaching and learning process during the very difficult and hard time due to the covid 19 pandemic. Therefore, they deserve acknowledgement and appreciation. Moreover, they have even taken the hard time of covid 19 pandemic as an opportunity to make a response to the government's school digitalization policy. At the time of researchers visit to the three regencies, around 30 English language teachers of each of the three regencies requested some training. A brief training on creating lesson videos was then held with the groups of teachers. From observation and some open interviews with teachers held during the training, it was found that teachers have burning desires to know many learning platforms and education applications to use in their teaching and learning practices - in collaboration with teachers from other schools in the coming years of this digitalization era, the era of freedom in learning (*merdeka belajar*). Teachers' enthusiast and their strong willingness to be able to run collaborative effective distance digital learning, is a very obvious evidence of the future prospects of school digitalization policy, particularly for future enhancement of distance digital learning activities.

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