

An Analysis of EFL Students' Perceptions of Learning Difficulties in Digital Learning

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Abstract

The rapid integration of digital learning in higher education has transformed the landscape of language learning, presenting unique challenges for students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This study aims to analyze the perceptions of eighth-semester EFL students regarding the learning difficulties they face in a digital environment while taking English-based courses. Using a descriptive qualitative design, this study employed a dichotomous-scale screening questionnaire distributed to 12 respondents, followed by semi-structured interviews with six key informants selected through purposive sampling. The findings of the quantitative analysis indicate that participants experienced difficulties in communicating with their lecturers, with 91.7% experiencing problems with an inconsistent internet connection, and 91.7% reporting a decline in concentration and motivation. From a qualitative perspective, thematic analysis categorised these challenges into five main categories: technological infrastructure failures; boredom with the largely one-way nature of the learning process in the form of online lectures; mental fatigue due to excessive digital workload and anxiety; social isolation resulting from the lack of a tangible academic community; and language barriers arising from limited opportunities to speak and a fear of making mistakes. When evaluated through Krashen's Affective Filter Theory, Moore's Transactional Distance, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the findings of this study demonstrate how physical separation and rigid online systems contribute to a significant increase in the affective filter and transactional distance, which in turn hinders the effective development of English language skills. This study provides actionable recommendations for educational institutions and teachers on creating engaging, supportive and flexible digital language learning environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital learning has now become a cornerstone of global higher education, remaining an adaptive teaching method within diverse academic environments. A report from an organisation such as UNESCO (2023) indicates that universities worldwide are increasingly integrating online and hybrid learning models to enhance the accessibility and flexibility of education. In theory, digital learning broadens access to a variety of language resources and supports independent language development, particularly for those learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Putri & Sari, 2022). Garrison and colleagues (2000) emphasise that a successful digital learning environment must be grounded in robust, text-based collaborative research that transforms conventional teaching methods. In the context of learning networks, Connectivism (Siemens, 2005) suggests that digital technology changes the way knowledge is disseminated and interconnected, thereby encouraging students to become active navigators within these networks. However, the implementation

of digital learning over a longer period has revealed a range of complex academic challenges.

In practice, EFL learners face a double burden: they must master English as a primary language whilst also adapting to various digital learning platforms. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is generally studied for academic purposes or for international communication in places where English is not used in everyday interactions (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In such contexts, the classroom remains the primary source of exposure to the target language (Harmer, 2007). When this exposure occurs digitally, virtual delivery methods often lead to various learning difficulties that can hinder academic progress and undermine confidence in communication (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

To understand how learners cope with these challenges, an analysis of their perspectives is required. A perspective is defined as an active cognitive process in which an individual selects, organises, and interprets information received through the senses to construct a meaningful and subjective understanding of their environment (Robbins & Judge, 2017). In educational settings, students' perceptions directly shape their academic motivation, engagement, and coping strategies when facing learning barriers (Sun & Chen, 2016).

Academic challenges in virtual environments can be systematically categorized into technical, pedagogical, psychological, social, and linguistic dimensions. In practice, EFL learners face a double burden: they must master English as their primary language whilst also adapting to a variety of digital learning platforms. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is typically studied for academic purposes or for the sake of global communication in contexts where English is not used in everyday life (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In such situations, the classroom remains the primary source of exposure to the target language (Harmer, 2007). When this exposure occurs digitally, virtual delivery methods often give rise to a range of learning difficulties, which can hinder both academic progress and confidence in speaking (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). To understand how students cope with these challenges, their perspectives need to be analysed. A perspective is defined as an active thought process in which an individual selects, organises and interprets sensory input to create personal meaning and understanding of their surroundings (Robbins & Judge, 2017).

Numerous research papers have examined difficulties in online education, yet they frequently tackle these problems in a generalized manner or concentrate on specific, separate aspects. For example, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) pointed out overall technological obstacles and restrictions on engagement during abrupt transitions caused by crises. In the context of English as a Foreign Language, Agung et al. (2020) studied overall student views, discovering that restricted internet connectivity and insufficient interaction obstructed speaking abilities, although their study did not investigate the complex relationships among these obstacles. Similarly, Coman et al. (2020) examined general perceptions in higher education and concluded that digital success is heavily dependent on students' technological capabilities and the quality of online interaction. Moreover, Moore (2013) suggests that the concept of distance in education signifies a gap in both communication and psychology known as transactional distance which expands when educational frameworks are inflexible and interactions are restricted.

There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how these five interconnected dimensions (technical, pedagogical, psychological, social, and linguistic) simultaneously affect advanced EFL students specifically eighth-semester undergraduates who have undergone multiple years of digital instruction. Drawing on the lived experiences of eighth-semester students who completed several courses entirely through digital platforms over a two-year period at Mandalika University of Education, this study

investigates: “What are EFL students’ perceptions of the challenges of learning in a digital learning environment?” The primary objective is to analyze and map their perceptions of these digital learning difficulties to assist educators in creating more adaptive, communicative, and student-centered virtual classrooms.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to gain a deep, contextualized understanding of students’ subjective experiences (Creswell, 2014). The research was conducted in the English Language Education program at Mandalika University of Education (UNDIKMA) in Mataram, Indonesia. The research participants were eighth-semester EFL students selected because their extensive academic history with both face-to-face and digital-based English learning enabled highly reflective and comprehensive evaluations. To ensure structured data collection, the researcher acted as the primary instrument, supported by two validated secondary instruments: a qualitative screening questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The qualitative screening questionnaire, distributed via digital platforms such as Google Forms, comprised a demographic section and 25 closed-ended multiple-choice statements (Yes/No) covering technical, pedagogical, psychological, social and linguistic challenges, followed by open-ended questions to identify initial patterns amongst a baseline group of 12 respondents. Put simply, frequency distributions were used to calculate frequency percentages, providing basic insights for this study. Subsequently, the semi-structured interview protocol designed with open-ended and flexible questions was used during one-on-one sessions to explore students’ emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and pedagogical recommendations. Based on the quantitative screening results, purposive sampling was then used to select six key informants (P1 through P6, as detailed in Table 2) who reported the most complex combinations of learning difficulties. Table 1 outlines the demographic profile of the questionnaire respondents, while Table 2 outlines the profiles of the selected key interviewees.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Questionnaire Respondents (N = 12)

Category	Characteristic	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	9	75.0%
	Male	3	25.0%
Age	21 years	2	16.7%
	22 years	5	41.7%
	23 years	4	33.3%
	24 years	1	8.3%
Class	Class A	5	41.7%
	Class B	4	33.3%
	Class C	3	25.0%
Experience	> 2 years	8	66.7%
	1-2 years	3	25.0%
	< 1 year	1	8.3%
Primary Platform	Google Classroom	5	41.7%
	Zoom	3	25.0%
	Google Meet	3	25.0%
	Others	1	8.3%

Source: Primary data from the baseline questionnaire, 2026

Table 2. Profile of Selected Key Interview Informants

Informant Code	Semester	Screening Characteristics from Questionnaire Results
P1	Semester VIII	Encountered significant technical issues, elevated educational stress, but exhibited strong self management skills.
P2	Semester VIII	Experienced considerable teaching repetition and felt deeply disconnected from the scholarly community.
P3	Semester VIII	Faced significant shortcomings in infrastructure in their suburban living environment
P4	Semester VIII	Recognized as introverted, experienced a marked reduction in the fluency of spoken English.
P5	Semester VIII	Endured substantial mental strain due to an overwhelming amount of online assignments each week.
P6	Semester VIII	Struggled with understanding intricate theoretical linguistics through asynchronous learning methods.

Source: *Results of purposive selection based on the questionnaire, 2026*

Qualitative information gathered from the interviews was transcribed, coded, and examined through the interactive framework suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña in 2014. This framework incorporates three simultaneous processes: data condensation, which involves selecting, concentrating, and streamlining transcripts; data display, which is the arrangement of data into elaborate narratives; and drawing conclusions and verification, which entails interpreting trends and affirming results with scholarly sources..

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This segment outlines the outcomes obtained from analyzing the data and offers an extensive conversation regarding the research goals. For better clarity, the results are arranged into distinct subsections, starting with the main research outcomes, succeeded by a thorough discussion.

a. Research Results

The preliminary quantitative evaluation of the 12 participants highlighted significant challenges: every single respondent reported having limited engagement with their teachers, 91.7% faced issues with consistent internet connectivity, 91.7% mentioned losing focus during online sessions, and 91.7% noted a reduction in motivation when studying on electronic devices. Following this initial evaluation, in-depth interviews with six primary informants provided thorough insights within context. The results are outlined below and are categorized into paragraphs that cover the five main areas of learning challenges. In terms of technological obstacles and barriers related to digital resources, the research showed that inconsistent internet service and data constraints often interrupted students' concentration. A sudden disconnection led students to miss important explanations, resulting in difficulty following the remainder of the lecture. This interruption was exemplified by P1 who described how technical problems like an abrupt loss of data or signal interruptions at home disrupted their thinking process, leaving them disoriented and unable to catch up once they reconnected. In more suburban settings, the situation proved to be physically challenging; as P3 shared, she needed to leave her home in search of a signal or spend additional money at Wi-Fi cafes just to participate in online classes, indicating that this struggle shifted her attention from learning English to ensuring basic connectivity. Additionally, the strict automation of online assignment platforms increased student stress. As P4 pointed out,

the system would automatically prevent access for students who were even a moment late due to minor connection issues or data limit problems, unfairly resulting in a zero score regardless of their efforts.

From an educational perspective, students experience extreme boredom as a result of the highly monotonous and one-sided teaching approach in online classrooms. Without interactive elements, virtual sessions turn into tedious affairs in which lecturers merely present the content of their slides. This passive situation was highlighted by P1, who noted that the majority of lecturers simply share slides and deliver lectures non-stop, whilst students sit silently as passive listeners. These structural limitations are further exacerbated by a lack of variety in digital teaching methods, as stated by P2, who noted that many lecturers simply replicate their face-to-face teaching habits on Zoom without adapting to interactive digital features. Furthermore, the quality of teaching materials converted to digital format is often poor; P3 described textbook pages that had been photographed or appeared pixelated, making them unreadable on mobile devices, which made abstract linguistic theories even more difficult and tiring to understand.

The combination of technical demands and tedious teaching methods quickly leads to mental exhaustion and a serious loss of interest in learning. Long sessions staring at a screen, compounded by noise at home, create a highly stressful learning environment, in which P2 reported feeling constantly anxious, guilty about material they could not understand, and physically exhausted before every online session. This sense of helplessness is exacerbated by the fact that academic grades are perceived to depend on the quality of the internet connection rather than on cognitive ability; as P3 put it, their motivation is completely sapped by the poor signal that determines their course marks, creating a constant fear of being labelled as non-compliant students by their lecturers. Socially, the digital format severely isolates students from their academic environment, reducing active conversation amongst students to mere message exchanges. P1 felt disconnected from university life, describing their relationship with lecturers as stiff and formal, whilst interaction with other students was limited to group assignments, making them feel like grade-generating machines rather than actual learners. This loss of physical proximity undermines the natural support system amongst students; P2 explained that conversations with fellow students are largely confined to academic questions, leading to a lack of friends with whom to share the difficulties of university life, which ultimately dampens their academic enthusiasm.

From a linguistic perspective, the lack of traditional, in-person classrooms significantly impeded the enhancement of effective English speaking abilities. In serene online environments, learners experienced heightened self-awareness and were apprehensive about committing errors in pronunciation or grammar; P1 noted that the absence of immediate responses from classmates led to feelings of intimidation when it came to speaking or raising inquiries, a problem made worse by technical issues with sound. This lack of spoken practice had serious academic consequences for upper-semester students who were expected to speak spontaneously. P4 recalled how they were completely taken aback in their third semester when asked to speak off-the-cuff, resulting in highly stilted speech due to a total lack of prior interactive practice.

b. Discussion

The findings from the qualitative interviews reveal that these five areas of difficulty do not exist in isolation; rather, they interact to create systemic barriers for language learners. These challenges can be analyzed through three key theoretical frameworks:

First, the technical and psychological barriers can be understood through Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Krashen states that emotional variables—such as high anxiety, low motivation, and low self-confidence can act as an invisible barrier that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition system in the brain. In digital environments, technical stress (such as unstable connections or strict submission deadlines) increases students' anxiety levels. This thick affective filter makes students hesitant to participate, leading them to mute their microphones and turn off their cameras to avoid making mistakes in front of the class. As a result, language input is less effective, and opportunities for productive output are reduced.

Second, the pedagogical and linguistic difficulties align with Moore's (2013) Transactional Distance Theory. Moore explains that distance in online learning is more than just physical separation; it also involves psychological and communicative gaps evident in the relationship between dialogue (interaction) and structure (course design). When online teaching is bound by rigid structures and one-way instruction such as lectures, interaction between teachers and students is reduced. This widens the transactional distance, making it difficult for students to understand complex theoretical material and leaving them feeling alienated. To bridge this gap, online courses need to adopt interactive designs and direct dialogue.

Finally, social and linguistic challenges relate to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which posits that language learning is an inherently social activity, developing through collaborative dialogue and the negotiation of meaning. In Vygotsky's framework, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates the difference between what a student can achieve independently and what they can attain with support and collaboration. Social isolation in online classrooms removes this peer support. Without natural, unplanned social interaction, pupils find it difficult to improve their fluency in speaking, which can lead to increased digital fatigue and reduced motivation to learn.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, several major conclusions can be drawn regarding EFL students' perceptions of digital learning difficulties. First, technical challenges particularly unstable internet connections and rigid automated submission systems are the primary sources of academic anxiety and cognitive disruption among students in their final semester. Furthermore, the prevalence of monotonous, one-way lectures that lack interactive digital tools significantly widens the psychological transactional distance between instructors and students, ultimately leading to screen fatigue and a severe decline in learning motivation. Finally, the prolonged lack of organic, face-to-face academic interaction leads to deep academic isolation, which consequently raises students' affective filters and severely restricts their opportunities to practice and develop their spoken English skills.

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