



Innovative Hybrid Responses to Emergency Remote Learning in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

With the coronavirus pandemic, educational institutions all over the globe have been forced to migrate to fully online instruction. This radical shift has come with significant challenges for ELT teachers around the world, especially those with limited access to internet connectivity and infrastructure as is the case in rural Indonesia. Indonesia had been suffering low and stagnant educational quality prior to the corona virus pandemic. Indeed, there had been no significant progress on Indonesian students' performance in the Program for International Students Assessment, or PISA, between 2003 and 2018 [1]. This situation has worsened with educators' forced shift to online learning. Many teachers and students in Indonesia who live in poor rural areas lack internet access and smartphones and have thus been struggling to conduct online instruction [2]. However, in spite of harrowing scenes in the international media, the Indonesian people have been resilient and innovative in the face of the "new normal" [3]. Many teachers in rural areas are striving to improve their own online literacy, to support their students, and to facilitate their students' learning in creative and responsive ways. This study explores teachers' innovative practical and pedagogical responses to the monumental constraints represented by rural poverty. Based on these innovative responses to emergency conditions, recommendations for preparing and supporting teachers to teach English through hybrid forms of learning are discussed.

Keywords: *online language teaching, emergency remote learning, innovative hybrid learning, blended learning, remote learning, ELT, rural Indonesia.*

1. Introduction

With the corona virus pandemic, schools in more than 50 countries remain fully closed affecting over 870 million students globally [5]. To ensure that students still have opportunities to access education during these school closures, many countries moved their instruction to online learning. However, the migration has come with significant challenge for ESL teacher all over the globe, especially in the rural areas where access to internet connections and electronic devices is very limited. In an archipelagic country such as Indonesia, the challenge to ensure all students have equal access to remote learning is enormous. Socioeconomic and educational inequality had been a concerning issues in the country prior to the pandemic. These disparities have increased since the school closures due to unequal access to educational infrastructure and inexperienced teachers trying to conduct online learning. For urban schools, conducting remote learning has been less of a challenge due to adequate equipment and internet connectivity. In contrast, for schools in rural areas where internet connections and electricity are a luxury, the migration into remote learning have limited what teachers and students can do. Hence many teachers in rural areas are working with powerful limitations. Rural Indonesian English teachers are striving to improve their online literacy, to support their students, and to facilitate their students' learning in creative and responsive ways.

2. Methodology

To explore teachers' innovative practical and pedagogical responses to these constraints, we surveyed and then interviewed two teachers from different educational and generational backgrounds teaching English in rural Central Java. By probing these subjects' distinct educational and generational backgrounds, we aim to gain deep sense of what was important to each teacher as they improvised and innovated during this transition to online instruction. We explore with each teacher their evolving online teaching practices and how these developed. Two research questions guided the inquiry:

1. How do teachers' knowledge, perceptions and experiences guide their online ELT teaching under emergency migration conditions?
2. What innovations do they evolve to meet their local challenges and constraints?



3. Subjects

The two subjects for our case studies were recruited through the authors' professional networks and asked to participate in two forms of data-gathering: first they completed a written questionnaire that directed them to articulate their perceptions and practices (Appendix A); second they were invited to participate in a synchronous online interview with one or more of the authors

3.1 The older teacher: Joko

Joko is a self-taught polyglot and has been teaching EFL at the same middle school in a small village in Central Java for seventeen years. Whereas he reports knowing five languages, his proficiency is limited to reading and writing. He attended four years of college where he majored in English Education. Prior to the pandemic, he had neither experience taking courses nor teaching online. He does not see himself as proficient in online socialization other than in WhatsApp groups. However, he responds to the emergency migration by using personal approaches with both students and parents in his class in order to support them.

3.2 The younger teacher: Siti

Siti was a former translator, businesswoman and marketing agent prior to changing her profession to ELT. She teaches at a public middle school in a small village in Central Java. She has been teaching EFL for two years at this school. Her formal training background is comprised of four years of college in English Education and two years of college in Business and Marketing at the graduate level. Although she has limited experience teaching EFL, she experience taking online courses and is very comfortable using online communication platforms and social media. She reports knowing four languages at different proficiency levels. However, she is not proficient enough in the native language in her current area due to her status as an immigrant teacher there. Hence, she tries to learn the local culture through day-to-day communication with her neighbors and her students' parents in order to adjust her teaching materials and strategies. She believes that the ideal language teacher is one who encourages students to use the target language as much as possible in contexts that are familiar to them.

4. Results

With limited access to infrastructure and internet connectivity, both teachers tried to provided materials that were accessible for their students. This chiefly occurred via *WhatsApp* or other low bandwidth platforms. Both Joko and Siti believe that participation is the key to language instruction as well as when it comes to measuring students' understanding and engagement. Therefore, they make the most of their instruction to encourage their students to participate in their online class. In Joko's case, he used a *WhatsApp* group as a medium to give one-way instruction, examples, and for students to submit their work. When the students did not respond or when they did not read the discussion, Joko would directly message them to make sure that they were online when the class was in session. On the other hand, in addition to their instruction group, Siti created a "student group discussion forum" to where students' could strategize their challenges. Here students could communicate with their classmates without teacher intervention. Siti also assigned daily tasks such as sharing five new English words that they found either while the class in session or from outside the class. Students thereby were responsible to keep learning.

These two teachers' educational and generational backgrounds influenced how they considered the online media and ELT. For a person who had not engaged in many online interactions prior to the pandemic, Joko was consequently pessimistic about the efficiency of online teaching in his region. Especially with only *WhatsApp* as the primary tool with which to teach, he was limited to one-way communication with his students. Joko did not have the capacity to set up student collaborations of any kind. As a consequence, he was limited to focusing on grammar along with limited instruction in reading and writing. In addition, due to his students' limited English vocabulary, he rarely used English as the medium of instruction. He argues that the students needed to understand his instructions clearly in order to be able to do the task This practice was also reflected in the fact that most of the written instruction was in Indonesia.

"It is difficult to teach English online because students need more explanation in Indonesian Language. Prior to covid, my students had many challenges to understand the materials from English subject.



They also have low motivation to learn. The main problem that my students face is the limited inventory of English vocabulary”

On the other hand, Siti was very determined to use the target language when her classes were in session. She believes that English language learning is easier to do online because most learning platforms such as *WhatsApp*, *Google Forum*, *e-learning Madrasah* or the internet in general use English as the language of instruction. Therefore, she could make use of students’ internet funds of knowledge to develop her online instruction.

I feel that learning English has become easier because the internet uses a lot of terms in English.

To ensure students understood her, she broke down complex questions into simpler questions. When no one responded to her, she would provide an example of a possible answer using a short sentence so that the students could follow the model and respond to her questions.

Unlike Joko, Siti provided speaking and listening activity as part of their homework. She had students submit their homework via direct messaging instead of group sharing which would put too much demand on bandwidth. She also gave one-on-one online listening and speaking tests using *WhatsApp*. This practice represents one of her efforts to remind students that the school was in session and that their teachers were still there to support their learning.

To support his students, Joko emphasizes the importance of knowing students’ backgrounds in terms of their language proficiency, economic background, geographical background and online literacy. He believes that communicating with students both online and off strengthens rapport and enhances emotional engagement, something that helps to overcome digital/distance ambiguities and that can foster motivation [4]. In developing his online instruction, he adjusts the teaching platform based on what students can afford and understand. He also adjusts his teaching by using the national language (Indonesian language) to make sure that his students will not be overwhelmed. He is truly interested in and learning from his interactions with his students online. He also blends his instruction by regularly calling his students’ parents or doing home visits to support students’ well-being and check on their understanding of course content. For him, a teacher should be flexible in emergency online migration to create a comfortable learning environment for the students and develop a safe learning community for them.

On the other hand, Siti emphasized the importance of tailoring her teaching materials with students’ interests, funds of knowledge, and fun activities. She tailored her lesson plan to align with students’ interest and backgrounds. These she learned about via the children’s parents and neighbors. At every opportunity, she interweaves students’ interests and passions into the conversation:

*When I teach present perfect tense, I use the expression from Mobile Legend game which is **“Enemy has been slain”**.*

Instead of using pizza, spaghetti, or hamburgers for content as illustrated in the course textbook, she modifies this to fried rice, chicken noodles, or chicken satay. This way her students can both identify with, and thereby learn relevant new vocabulary. Students go on to understand the meaning of English words like spicy, delicious, hot, cold, etc. through the funds of knowledge that they possess. In addition, she gives trivia quizzes to stimulate students’ background knowledge and make connections in English. She believes that she can keep her students’ interested and participating in her online class while tracking their language development through their conversational participation.

5. Conclusion

Remote learning is a challenge for teachers and students in poor rural areas. Hence, there is much to learn from teachers’ experiences, strategies, and perspectives in these extraordinary times. Joko and Siti’s responses to emergency migration to remote learning inform us about their resilience and their efforts to support their students and their communities. Such experiences and responses say much about the intellects and dedication of professional educators and more research that conceptualizes



the of teaching languages online in the rural area is sorely needed. This can contribute to an understanding of the interrelations between technology practice, students, teachers and successful instructional activity generally and in the rural areas in particular.

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