

Exploring Online Learning Experiences among Students in Full Boarding School during Covid -19 Pandemic

Anis Diyana Halim^{1*}, Diyana Jamari²

¹Physics Department, Faculty of Science and Mathematics, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
35900 Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

²Sekolah Berasrama Penuh Integrasi Rawang, Bandar Tasik Puteri,
48020 Rawang, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: anis.diyana@fsm.upsi.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Students in full-boarding school respond in a variety of ways to the rapid transformation and rearrangement of learning modes during the Covid-19 pandemic. To understand their situation, this paper describes the scenarios and issues that rose in the daily academic activity of the full boarding school students as online learners. A qualitative exploratory research design was used to answer three research questions regarding students' experiences, problems with, and opinions on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 83 form four students (male and female) from three Ministry of Education full boarding schools in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur were chosen based on purposive sampling. An open-ended survey was used for data collection, while thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings show that experiences faced by students during online learning involved distractions from the environment, freedom in learning and self-exploratory learning. Problems faced by students during online classes were internet disruption, online learning devices and social interaction. Their experiences and problems have an indirect influence on their opinion and preference for online learning. These findings reveal that while children preferred to be in their own home, learning was frequently disrupted by outside factors. Despite having a good academic background, the obstacles faced in online learning by the full boarding school students were similar to those in regular school. In conclusion, intrinsic motivation and self-exploratory learning are important to ensure students are not lagging in academics when it comes to online learning.

Keywords: Online Learning; Pandemic Covid-19; Learning scenario and Boarding school

1. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has impacted various economic sector including education. The education systems of every nation in the world, including Malaysia, have been greatly affected by this crisis (Dhawan, 2020). Students were urged to change their mode of learning since they could not go to school and were required to stay at home due to the closure of schools in order to curb the spread of Covid-19 among students in Malaysia. Online learning has then become an alternative method for students to keep them on track with their learning in times of crisis.

A sudden change in the educational atmosphere during this time of crisis pushed students to adopt and adapt to online learning. Heng and Sol (2020), as well as Pokhrel and Chhetri (2020), reported that all levels of education, primary, secondary, and tertiary education claimed to have faced obstacles to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The major difficulty faced by students was a lack of internet access (Sofian et al., 2021). This problem depends on

the area of residence of the students. The students who reside in the city have better internet access than those who reside in rural areas (Sofian et al., 2021). Besides lack of internet access, other difficulties faced by students during the Covid-19 pandemic included too much distraction, issues with computers or devices, and a lack of communication between teachers (Alla & James, 2020).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed a full boarding school for excellent students to fulfil the need for human capital in science. The academic backgrounds of full boarding school students and regular National Secondary School (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan, SMK) students differ, since boarding school students are selected based on outstanding academic performance and co-curricular achievements. Full boarding school students need to stay in a hostel and follow the schedule that has been planned for them. They remain together with their friends and manage their daily lives independently. Full-boarding school students, who spend the majority of their time at school and in hostels, were particularly hard hit by the RMO. When the school is closed, these students not only need to practise a new learning mode but also shift their pre-planned hostel life to a much easier home life.

The current literature review shows sparse evidence focusing on issues for full boarding school students in Malaysia especially in terms of online learning during the RMO period. Since they are selected students with good academic background results, and their daily routine of learning was totally changed during this crisis, their scenario with online learning needs to be understood. Therefore, the objectives of this research are to answer the following questions: (a) What were the boarding school students' experiences regarding online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?; (b) What were the full boarding school students' problems regarding online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?; (c) What are the full boarding school students' opinions regarding online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Design

To answer the research questions, a qualitative exploratory design was used. This research design has been used to get a better understanding of the scenarios and difficulties faced by boarding school students during online learning. This research was done in the real-life setting of online learning without manipulating or changing the variables of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2.2. Research Sample

A total of 83 form four students (male and female) from three Ministry of Education full boarding schools in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur were chosen using purposive sampling. These three schools were selected because they are among the top ten full boarding schools in Malaysia. The two inclusive criteria were as follows: students must belong to the science stream and reside in the city. Purposive sampling was used to choose the students from full boarding schools to meet the objective of the research, namely understanding the changes in life routine among full boarding school students when their schools were closed during the pandemic.

2.3. Data Collection Method

The data were collected using an open-ended survey through online questionnaires. The survey was distributed using 'Google Form' as a platform. Due to the restrictions on movement during the pandemic, this was the best way to collect the data for this research. The survey

includes three sections to investigate students' experience, problems and opinions regarding online learning.

2.4. Data Analysis Method

After the data were collected, they were analysed using thematic analysis. There are six steps in analysing the data using thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarising yourself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing potential themes; (5) defining and naming the theme; and (6) writing a report.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Students' experience during online learning

In the study, five distinct student experiences during online learning were found. All the experiences were then categorised into three categories: (1) environment distraction; (2) freedom; and (3) self-exploratory learning.

3.1.1. Environment Distraction

When the school was closed due to pandemic Covid-19, students started to learn from home via various online platforms. The main complaint of students is that their home learning environment is less conducive than their school environment. Some students said that at home, they have other family members around, including much younger family members or siblings who interfere and cause chaos during their online class. The sound of crying babies or a noisy environment makes them feel distracted and uneasy when they are in an online class, as reported by students 1 and 2.

I can't focus in class because my sister always makes noise (Student 1).

My family members are taking an online class while also working. Even though the gadgets are enough, the sounds from family members make me feel uncomfortable during online class (Student 2).

Besides distractions from their surroundings and siblings, some students said helping around the house with house chores proved to be a burden during the online learning period. Their parents asked them to do the housework even though the class had started. Such a situation makes the student feel confused about whether to obey their parent's order or continue with the online class. This situation occurred for students 3 and 4:

My mother always asks me to collect things from the delivery man during online class (Student 3).

Five minutes before the class starts, my family invites me to eat. So, I am always late to join the class (Student 4).

Students who take an online class are exposed to various social networking services (SNSs) such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Students agreed that SNSs play a huge role in diverting student focus from learning to socializing. They were able to spend most of their time online watching TikTok videos or got hooked on Instagram and became unaware of time while browsing online. Student 5 and 6 both stated that they are easily distracted by social networking sites and that they occasionally browse their SNS accounts while taking online classes.

I will browse my Twitter and Instagram during class to release tension (Student 5).

Sometimes, during online class I watch Korean drama (Student 6).

3.1.2. Freedom

Boarding school students must comply with school and hostel rules. They have to follow the school's uniform code according to the specific day or event. Online learning at home gives them freedom, as they can eat while in class and are not required to wear school uniforms, as students 5 and 7 stated:

I always eat during class. I enjoy learning without wearing a school uniform (Student 5).
I always join the class without taking a bath (Student 7).

Being able to stay in one place or room was also reported as freeing. Students found studying in an online class flexible, as they were not required to move from one class to another, such as a science lab or computer lab, to attend each class.

3.1.3. Self- Exploratory Learning

Besides the learning sources provided by teachers, they also delved into YouTube, local and international university websites and other free educational webpages. Students 7 and 8 stated that the additional learning resources they discovered online were beneficial and capable of providing a more in-depth explanation to help them understand the concept or topic they were learning at the time.

If I did not understand in the class, I will browse a video on YouTube related to the concept and try to understand (Student 7).
I watch videos shared by the teacher or conduct my own search for the video and physics exercise (Student 8).

The success of remote learning is influenced by the internal motivation of the student from whom special efforts are required. However, the comfort that is expected to be the motivation to study also contributed to the change in the student's attitude. Students showed signs of inattentiveness, procrastinations and lack of discipline compared to the days before the pandemic. Watching drama was not a great option in boarding schools as everybody was busy completing assignments and participating in extracurricular activities. Previously, group study and peer learning increased the learning motivation, but with the RMO applied to the whole state, self-regulated learning has become prominent and plays a critical role in online learning (Jansen et al., 2020; Bao, 2020; Hong et al., 2021).

3.2. Student's problem during online learning

Per the analysis, there are three problems faced by students during online classes, namely: (1) internet disruption; (2) online learning devices; and (3) social interaction.

3.2.1 Internet disruption

Internet outages caused by poor or no connectivity have become a major issue for students taking online classes. Some less fortunate students reported that their internet data usage was restricted due to prepaid usage. They need to share data with other siblings as they have to attend their online class too. In order to ensure all children are able to get online, parents need more money to top up their internet data plans in the name of education. These actions can be quite burdensome during an economic crisis. Pre-paid internet data in the rural area is not as stable as in town. Due to logistical and technical problems, some students reported that

they have to go out of the house to attend the online class at a certain area, such as the mosque, in order to get good internet connectivity. Student 9 said:

I have to go to the mosque near my house to attend an online class (Student 9).

3.2.2. Online learning devices

Online classes can be accessed via many learning devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and computers. However, the number of devices owned by a family differs. As working and education have gone online, parents need to spend more to purchase these devices according to their budget and needs. However, not every family has this privilege, so students from low-income groups have found ways to share their devices among siblings. For example, student 9 said she needed to share and wait for their turn to use it.

We have only one laptop at home. I need to share the laptop with my brother, who studies at the university if I want to do my assignments (Student 9).

Fortunately, most lessons can be recorded and reviewed for reference. So even though a student is not present during class, they are still considered to have not missed the class as the recorded lesson can be accessed for later viewing. Some students have an old gadget that is no longer functional. The processor of the device is slow, and it cannot support the online classes for a long time in a day. This situation interrupts the lessons, as described by student 10, because he could not follow the lesson until the end because the laptop shut itself down in the middle of the class.

One day, I felt disappointed when my laptop suddenly shut down and I couldn't follow the class (Student 10).

3.2.3. Social interactions

Online learning promotes online discussion between students and teachers. This can be achieved via WhatsApp and other online messenger services. Students actively share information and relay messages regarding their learning activities during and after online class. For example, student 7 said this situation helps her because she can ask teachers whenever she has a question.

I can text my teacher at any time to ask a question (Student 7).

Gadgets and technical issues are synonymous with online learning (Agoestyowati, 2020). The disparities in continuing education with online learning that arise between students who live in urban areas and those who live in rural areas, as well as between different income bracket backgrounds to equip themselves with the proper gadget and access the internet, will widen during the pandemic (Dawadi & Simkhada, 2020; Xie et al., 2020). An absence of internet subscriptions and the need to share devices with family members are common among underprivileged families. Because internet service is poor or unavailable in some areas, some people have reported relying on limited internet data or having to go out and find free wi-fi-friendly premises just to get online (Agoestyowati, 2020). It is suggested that necessary technical changes must be made in online learning design to facilitate peer interaction, support and socialisation in the online learning environment (Hasan & Khan, 2020). A smooth process of communication and interaction will hinder students' frustration and boost their belief in online learning (Mukhametshin et al., 2021).

3.3. Student's opinion on online learning

From the analysis, there are two opinions regarding online learning. Some prefer face-to-face learning to online learning, while others prefer online learning to in-person learning. These two opinions on online learning are affected by several factors.

3.3.1. Prefer in-person learning over online learning

Students' online learning experiences influence their attitudes towards it. Students who have had a bad experience with online learning prefer face-to-face learning as their medium of learning. They may prefer face-to-face learning over online learning due to uncomfortable situations such as distractions from the environment, internet deviations, device problems, and a lack of interactions. Despite the fact that they agreed that learning at home gave them more freedom than learning at school or in hostels, their primary concern was their learning, so they preferred face-to-face learning over online learning. For example:

I want to learn physics at school. I feel uncomfortable learning at home because there are so many distractions (Student 11).

3.3.2. Prefer online learning than in-person learning

Conversely, students who get full support from their family in terms of space and facilities and have fewer issues regarding distraction during online learning would prefer to continue studying online rather than face-to-face. During online learning, they love the freedom they have while learning at home and manage to arrange their own learning schedule. As they are an adult learner who has more responsibility for their learning, online learning gives them the opportunity to determine their own learning styles that will best suit them. Student 10 mentioned that she learns best at home. She can learn in her own way without having to adhere to the rules of the school.

I enjoy online classes because I can learn whenever I want. If I do not understand the topic, I can watch another online video (Student 10).

In the pre-pandemic education system, remote learning was uncommon in primary and secondary education. Students thus had no or minimal exposure to online learning (Subedi et al., 2020; Dawadi & Simkhada, 2020). However, after Covid-19, both students and teachers must adapt in order to ensure that the learning process continues during the RMO. Since the sample in this study involved full boarding school students, some may find this situation an advantage in terms of convenience and comfort. Their preference for online learning is in line with their situation, attitude and motivation when they learn at home during RMO. During RMO, there was a lot of opportunity to communicate directly with their teachers on an online platform such as WhatsApp and other messaging apps, Zoom and Google Meet. This situation gives students an opportunity to ask the questions directly to their teacher since during face-to-face, they need to make an appointment with their teachers whenever they want to ask a question. This flexibility facilitates their learning and may be a factor in their preference for online learning over face-to-face learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Even though full boarding school students spend most of their time at school and hostel with a planned schedule and have a good academic background, they also face similarities in

their situations with students in the National Secondary School (SMK). This research gives information to teachers and parents of full boarding school students about their students' and children's situations if online learning is chosen as one of the modes of learning for full boarding school students. Even with a good academic background, students still need full support from parents and teachers in their learning. They have the capability to study on their own, but this depends on their motivation which is affected by other factors, such as the environment at home and the technical issues of internet connection and devices used during online learning.

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