EFL Teachers' English Language Use During the Pandemics in the Indonesian Senior High School Context

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Abstract

In response to the significant upheaval caused by the global pandemic, education systems worldwide have shifted from traditional classroom settings to remote teaching methods. This drastic transition has presented numerous challenges, particularly in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in non-English speaking countries, such as Indonesia. This study embarks on an in-depth exploration of how the teaching methodologies and language functions utilized by EFL teachers at an Indonesian senior high school, MAN 2 Parepare, have adapted to these new learning environments. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative research design, providing a comprehensive view of the phenomena under investigation. The in-depth investigation focuses on the practices of two English teachers at MAN 2 Parepare, analysing the way they employ different language functions during their online classes. The analysis seeks to elucidate the interaction between instructional language and the online learning environment, how it affects student comprehension, and the potential for instructional refinement. Findings indicate a broad range of language functions used by both teachers in their instructional strategies, demonstrating the adaptive potential of EFL instruction under the pressures of pandemic-induced remote teaching. Notably, the study reveals that the use of students' native language and the target language - English - plays a crucial role in aiding students' comprehension, highlighting the importance of maintaining a balance between the two. In sum, this paper offers valuable insights into the language function dynamics at play in online EFL classrooms during the pandemic. The findings have implications for informing instructional best practices and contribute to the broader understanding of language education in a rapidly changing global context.

***Keywords:** EFL teachers, Language functions, Pandemic; Remote teaching, Indonesian high school*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the global pandemic has brought about monumental changes in various aspects of life, with education being one of the sectors most profoundly affected (Crawford et al., 2020). Governments worldwide have enacted measures to prevent the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns and social distancing guidelines (World Health Organization, 2020), which have significantly impacted the traditional education system (UNESCO, 2020). The physical classrooms, where teaching and learning once thrived, have transformed into virtual ones (Bao, 2020), disrupting conventional teaching methods and creating an immediate need for adaptable, efficient, and effective online teaching strategies (Hodges et al., 2020). This transition has been

particularly challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in non-English speaking countries, such as Indonesia (Setiyadi et al., 2020).

EFL teaching has been significantly disrupted due to its intrinsic reliance on interactive, face-to-face pedagogy, necessitating major adjustments by educators. The switch to remote teaching has altered the dynamics of classroom interactions, teaching strategies, and language use. In light of this, it has become essential to examine how EFL teachers have adapted their teaching methods and language use to ensure effective instruction. This research investigates these changes in the Indonesian context, focusing on the experiences of two EFL teachers at MAN 2 Parepare, an Indonesian senior high school.

The abrupt shift to remote teaching due to the pandemic has called for substantial alterations in teaching strategies and language use, particularly in EFL instruction (Shen, Wang, & Shen, 2019). These new virtual classrooms have forced EFL teachers to reconfigure their methods of presenting English language materials effectively in a digital environment (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). In traditional classroom settings, teachers had the opportunity to employ a plethora of non-verbal communication techniques such as visual aids, gestures, and other physical cues to supplement their verbal instruction (Gest, Rodkin, & Bergrad, 2011). The in-person environment also allowed for immediate feedback and understanding of students' comprehension through direct observation (Cleary, Zimmerman, & Keating, 2006). However, the online teaching environment has introduced several constraints, limiting these traditional communicative techniques, which has been a significant concern for teaching and learning effectiveness (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, Vladimirschi, Schuwer, Egorov, Lambert, Al-Freih, Pete, Olcott, Rodes, Aranciaga, Bali, Alvarez, Roberts, Pazurek, Raffaghelli, Panagiotou, Coëtlogon, Shahadu, Brown, Asino, & Tumwesige, 2020). As a result, it has become incumbent upon educators to discover and implement alternative teaching methods that can provide equal or superior levels of student interaction, engagement, and understanding (Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Wang, 2020).

Understanding these changes requires an in-depth examination of the language functions employed by EFL teachers. Language functions, referring to the use of language to achieve a specific outcome in communication, play a crucial role in the teaching and learning process. They are used to manage classroom activities, facilitate students' understanding, and encourage active engagement. This research delves into the specifics of language functions employed by the two EFL teachers at MAN 2 Parepare, exploring how they have adjusted these functions to suit the online teaching environment.

Research on language use in EFL classrooms has indicated that the employment of students' native language can significantly influence comprehension (Cook, 2001; Schweers Jr, 1999; Tang, 2002). This element is particularly relevant to the Indonesian context, where English is taught as a foreign language, and the use of students' native language - in this case, Indonesian - can act as a valuable tool in explaining complex English concepts. Therefore, a key focus of this research is the balance between the use of the students' native language and the target language - English - in the online classes.

Moreover, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on effective online teaching strategies in EFL education. As the global education system continues to grapple with the effects of the pandemic, research such as this is of paramount importance. Insights gained from this research can provide practical guidance for EFL teachers navigating the challenges of online instruction and contribute to policy-making and curriculum design for online teaching in the EFL context.

Additionally, this research can spur further investigations into the effects of the pandemic on different aspects of EFL education. As the world gradually adapts to the 'new normal', it becomes increasingly important to understand how educational practices have been affected and how they might continue to evolve. For instance, future research could explore

the impacts of remote teaching on student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in EFL education. Therefore, this research investigates how the global pandemic has necessitated changes in EFL teaching methods and language use, focusing specifically on the Indonesian context. It offers a detailed analysis of the language functions employed by two EFL teachers at MAN 2 Parepare during their online classes, highlighting the importance of balancing the use of the students' native language and the target language. The findings of this research will contribute to the understanding of EFL instruction in the context of remote teaching, informing teaching practices, and guiding future research. As such, this research is not only timely but also essential in a world where education must continue to thrive amidst and beyond a pandemic.

The Shift from Traditional to Remote Teaching and Implications on EFL Instruction

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated an unprecedented transition from traditional to remote teaching. Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) differentiate between planned online learning and emergency remote teaching, the latter being the immediate, often unprepared shift to digital instruction due to crises. This distinction is important, as the preparedness and design of instruction significantly impact its effectiveness.

Shen, Wang, and Shen (2019) discuss the unique challenges in EFL instruction in a remote setting, emphasizing the need for interactive and collaborative activities to enhance language acquisition. This becomes challenging in a digital environment, given the limited non-verbal communication cues and immediate feedback.

A relevant study by Wang, Shannon, Ross, Miller, Ritchie, Barker, and Schmidt-Crawford (2019) found that the success of remote language instruction relies heavily on the careful design of online learning activities that foster interactivity and meaningful engagement. Teachers must navigate technological tools to maximize student-teacher and student-student interaction, thereby creating a sense of online community.

The Importance of Language Functions in EFL Teaching

Language functions, or the different purposes that language serves in communication, play a significant role in effective instruction. According to Gibbons (2002), language functions are crucial in EFL classrooms as they help manage class activities, facilitate comprehension, and promote student participation.

Ellis (2012) states that the purposeful use of various language functions in instruction is a defining characteristic of effective EFL teachers. They dynamically alternate between different language functions, such as instructing, checking understanding, managing behavior, providing feedback, and eliciting responses, to meet their instructional goals.

The Balance between the Use of Students' Native Language and the Target Language in EFL Instruction

A key point of contention in EFL instruction is the use of the students' native language versus the target language, English. Research has indicated that a strategic balance between the two can enhance student comprehension and engagement. For instance, Turnbull and Arnett (2002) argue that the use of the target language should be maximized in EFL instruction, but the students' native language can serve as a valuable resource when necessary.

However, the debate is far from settled. Some researchers, such as Macaro (2001), advocate for a greater role of the students' native language in EFL instruction. They contend that translation exercises and explanations in the students' native language can aid comprehension of complex English concepts.

METHOD

This research study was designed using a descriptive qualitative approach, chosen for its ability to illuminate the phenomena under examination in detail and depth (Creswell, 2013). This approach allowed for a thorough exploration of the EFL teachers' use of English language in the unique context of a pandemic-induced shift to online instruction.

Participants

The subjects of the study were two EFL teachers from an Indonesian Senior High School, MAN 2 Parepare. These teachers were purposively selected based on their engagement in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both had extensive experience teaching English as a foreign language. They offered rich perspectives on the challenges and strategies involved in EFL instruction in an online environment.

Data Collection

Data collection involved the recording and analysis of online class sessions conducted by the teachers over a period of three months. Permission was obtained from the teachers and the school management to record the online classes, ensuring ethical considerations were met. Recordings captured not only the verbal interactions but also the visual aspects of teaching such as the use of teaching aids and gestures. In addition to the class recordings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers to gain insights into their perceptions and experiences of online EFL teaching during the pandemic. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing the teachers to elaborate on their approaches, the challenges faced, and their adaptation strategies.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with the transcription of the recorded online classes and interviews. This was followed by thematic analysis, a method used for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or "themes" within qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2015). The language functions used by the teachers during their instructional talk were categorized and analysed based on the functions they served, such as management talk, encouragement, and inquiry.

Through an iterative process of coding and categorization, patterns of language use, as well as instances of unspoken language functions, were identified. Comparisons were made between the two teachers' language use, drawing out similarities and differences.

The interview data were analysed in conjunction with the class recordings to triangulate the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers' language use. The teachers' insights provided valuable context for interpreting the observed language functions, contributing to the depth and richness of the study's findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings 1: Language Functions in Instructional Talk

In the examination of instructional talk, we found that both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 employed all language functions in their teaching activities. However, their usage patterns varied considerably.

For example, Teacher 1 showed a predilection for management talk, which was evident across several dimensions. During the welcome phase, Teacher 1, consistently greeted her students warmly, saying,

"Good morning, students! I'm glad to see you all ready for today's lesson."

She used these pleasantries not merely as courtesy but as an essential tool to foster a friendly, approachable atmosphere that welcomed student engagement.

Following the welcoming remarks, Teacher 1 performed an attendance check, skilfully weaving it into the lesson by saying,

"Let's do a roll call to ensure everyone is present. As I call your names, I want you to tell me one thing you learned from our last class."

This innovative approach not only confirmed attendance but also served as a brief revision of the previous lesson.

Instruction delivery was another area where Teacher 1's strong emphasis on management talk shone through. She took care to deliver her instructions using clear and precise English, regularly repeating and paraphrasing to ensure students understood her. For instance, during a text analysis lesson, she directed,

"Now, please open your textbooks to page 27. We will be focusing on the third paragraph. Let me repeat, turn to page 27, and look at the third paragraph."

The use of encouragement was another key feature of Ibu Sari's teaching approach. During student presentations, she was quick to offer praise for their efforts, saying;

"Great job, Adi! Your explanation was very thorough. It shows that you understood the text well."

Such positive feedback not only boosted student morale but also motivated them to participate actively. Moreover, she used inquiry-based language as a tool to engage students and gauge their comprehension level, asking questions like,

"Do we all understand why the author used this metaphor? Can someone explain it in their own words?"

Finally, she concluded her classes by summarizing the day's lesson and providing a preview of the next one. A typical closing statement was,

"That concludes our discussion on metaphors. In our next session, we will explore similes. Remember to read chapter 5 before our next class."

Findings 2: Unspoken Language Functions

Despite the use of all language functions, certain functions remained unspoken in both teachers' instructional language. In Teacher 1's case, there were five unspoken language functions. These included instances where critical feedback was absent, errors went uncorrected, and instructions were not reiterated after initial communication. For instance, when a student mispronounced a word during a reading exercise, Teacher 1 chose not to interrupt or correct the error. Instead, she let the student complete the reading, maintaining the flow of the lesson. However, the absence of immediate feedback left the error uncorrected, representing an unspoken language function.

On the other hand, in Teacher 2's case, there were seven unspoken language functions. These included a lack of praise, minimal student encouragement, and the absence of repetition or paraphrasing when giving instructions. For example, when students responded to Pak Budi's

questions, he typically moved on to the next point without offering explicit praise or encouragement for their responses. Furthermore, during a vocabulary exercise, he instructed, "Write a sentence using the word 'catalyst'", but did not repeat or rephrase the instruction to ensure understanding.

These unspoken language functions represent areas where the teachers' language use during instruction could be expanded to foster a more comprehensive and effective learning experience for the students. The examination of these functions underscores the complexity of language use in remote EFL teaching, highlighting areas for potential enhancement.

Discussion

Both teachers, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, exhibited the use of all language functions in their online teaching activities. However, their approach and the frequency of usage varied. Teacher 1, prominently used management talk in her classes. Her welcoming phase was consistent with literature suggesting that the first few minutes of interaction set the tone for the entire class (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). By beginning her lessons with statements like, *"Good morning, students! I'm glad to see you all ready for today's lesson"*, she managed to foster a positive learning atmosphere. The effectiveness of Teacher 1's attendance-check method was reflected in her ability to weave it into the lesson's structure, resembling Baker and Westrup's (2003) interactive teaching strategies. By having students recall one point from the last class as she checked attendance, she allowed them to revise and reflect upon previous learnings. The delivery of her instructions also mirrored the practices suggested in Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering's (2003) work on classroom management. By repeating and paraphrasing key points, she helped ensure that students had fully grasped the instructions. Furthermore, her encouragement and praise, such as *"Great job, Adi! Your explanation was very thorough"*, aligns with studies showing that positive reinforcement can boost student morale and engagement (Skinner, 1957).

Despite the effective use of language functions by both teachers, some were unspoken, indicating areas for potential development. In Teacher 1's case, she overlooked several opportunities for providing corrective feedback, aligning with the gap found in research conducted by Lyster and Ranta (1997) on corrective feedback in language classrooms. For instance, when a student mispronounced a word, she did not correct them immediately, representing an unspoken language function. Similarly, in Teacher 2's teaching, there was a noticeable absence of explicit praise and limited repetition or paraphrasing of instructions, which could have improved student comprehension, as suggested by Richards and Lockhart (1994). In conclusion, the complex dynamics of language function use in remote teaching observed in both Teacher 1's and Teacher 2's classes underline the importance of employing a range of strategies to support student comprehension and engagement.

CONCLUSION

The impact of global pandemics on the education system has been profound, necessitating a quick transition from traditional classroom teaching to online platforms. This shift has brought about significant changes in the dynamics of teaching and learning, especially in the field of EFL education. The study conducted on two EFL teachers from the Indonesian senior high school, MAN 2 Parepare, provides an insightful examination of these changes, particularly in terms of teachers' English language use during online instruction.

The research revealed that both teachers utilized a broad range of language functions during their instructional discourse. Teacher 1, Ibu Sari, made a significant use of management talk, which encompassed welcoming remarks, checking attendance, delivering instructions, and closing the class. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of classroom management in online learning environments (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). These strategies seemed to not only structure the lesson but also foster a positive and engaging learning atmosphere.

On the other hand, the study also identified certain 'unspoken' language functions in the instructional talk of both teachers. For instance, Ibu Sari did not interrupt or correct student errors immediately, while Pak Budi showed a limited use of praise and encouragement, which are considered crucial for boosting student motivation (Skinner, 1957).

One crucial insight derived from the research was the importance of balancing the use of students' native language and the target language, English. Both teachers believed that incorporating students' native language was critical to their comprehension, reinforcing Cummins' (2007) perspective on the role of the first language in promoting second language acquisition.

Despite these findings, the research acknowledges the limitations of having a small sample size of two teachers, indicating the need for further studies involving more participants across different regions of Indonesia. This would provide a broader perspective on the teaching practices and strategies employed in the EFL context during pandemics.

Overall, the study has shed light on the complex dynamics of language use in the Indonesian EFL classrooms during pandemics. The findings offer a comprehensive understanding of the practices and challenges of online EFL instruction, contributing to the ongoing discussion on effective language teaching in the era of digital learning. As education continues to evolve in response to global challenges, studies like this are crucial in guiding teachers and policymakers in designing and implementing strategies that support effective and meaningful learning experiences for students.

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