# Adapting to Online English Learning: Voices of International Students on Challenges and Opportunities

**Azizah Maulina Erzad[*1], Nuskhan Abid[2]**
**Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kudus, Kudus, Indonesia[1,2]**
azizahmaulina@iainkudus.ac.id[1]
nuskhan@iainkudus.ac.id[2]

## *Abstract*

*The transition to online learning has significantly reshaped the educational experience, offering opportunities and obstacles, particularly for international students. This study explored the perspectives of Thai students in an Indonesian Islamic university, examining the challenges they faced and the potential benefits of online learning. Three international students volunteered to participate in this study. Data was collected through qualitative interviews conducted via Google Forms and WhatsApp. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that students encountered several key challenges, including language barriers, technological accessibility, internet connectivity issues, and motivation levels. Despite these challenges, online learning offers benefits such as flexible learning schedules and broader access to educational resources. This study highlights the need for universities to implement targeted strategies to enhance student engagement and academic achievement. Recommendations include the development of policies that support digital infrastructure, tailored learning methodologies, and initiatives to maintain student motivation. Further research is encouraged to explore practical pedagogical approaches and institutional frameworks that can optimize online learning experiences for international students. This study impacts universities by improving digital infrastructure, enhancing learning strategies, boosting student motivation, and optimizing online education for international students.*

***Keywords:*** *English learning, online learning, challenges and opportunities, international students.*

### A. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educational institutions to shift all activities online. It was also experienced by all levels of education in Indonesia. Starting from elementary school to college. All activities, including learning and teaching, had to be stopped, resulting in changes in the implementation of learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). The teaching and learning process previously carried out offline has changed to online. The sudden change in learning methods gave rise to unpreparedness in implementing learning. Teachers and students must learn to adapt to online learning in a short time (Flores & Swennen, 2020). This transition created a challenge that many educators had never faced (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). Several obstacles, such as difficulty adapting, mental health, and technical problems, emerged when implementing online learning. Technical constraints and low physical interaction occurred during online learning (Hazaymeh & Prof, 2021). Not only that, but teachers also experience many technical and non-technical obstacles (Coman et al., 2020). Maqableh and Alia (2021) reported the negative impacts of online learning, including technology issues, mental health, poor time management, and low balance between life and education. The existence of mental health issues during the online learning process is also a concern for researchers. Students who experience stress will affect their engagement during online learning (Quigley et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, many educational institutions, teachers, and students also experience obstacles related to online learning (Nugroho et al., 2020). Low planning and preparation create obstacles during online learning (Atmojo et al., 2020). Obstacles in internet connectivity, device availability, student enthusiasm, and student netiquette are obstacles experienced by educational institutions in rural areas (Kusuma, 2022). Ariani and Tawali (2021) reported a different thing: Students experienced four obstacles during the online learning process during the pandemic: the first was the lack of video media from YouTube, the second was that students had difficulty explaining the material, the third was that students had difficulty doing the assignments given, and the fourth was limited access to Zoom. Sudden changes, lack of planning, limited preparation time, and technical obstacles are the leading causes of obstacles in online learning during the pandemic.

Educational institutions experience obstacles, and teachers and students experience the same thing. The obstacles faced by students vary widely, ranging from stress (Quigley et al., 2022), difficulty adapting (Flores & Swennen, 2020), unequal distribution of digital learning devices (Ariani & Tawali, 2021), and mental health

(Maqableh & Alia, 2021). All students worldwide have experienced the pandemic, including international students studying in Indonesia. Several studies related to the obstacles faced by international students in the online learning process during the pandemic have been reported by many researchers. One study reported that language barriers are the main obstacle international students in Indonesia face (Srikandi, 2022). International students from Thailand experience obstacles in pronouncing phonemes, little time to study and practice, lack of self-confidence, complex learning materials, cultural backgrounds, cultural differences, and lack of materials that can be accessed online (Srikandi, 2022). Another study also reported that Thai students studying in Indonesia have difficulty understanding the language of instruction used in class. In addition, differences in customs are also obstacles during the learning process. The different cultures certainly impact Thai students' social interactions in Indonesia (Wirantaka & Mardiningrum, 2023). Another obstacle faced by Thai students in Indonesia is intercultural communication. In more detail, their obstacles are perception, language, and motivation. In addition, the language of instruction used at universities is also a significant obstacle for Thai students in Indonesia (Siregar & Hsb, 2020).

Studies on international students' problems only focus on language (Wirantaka & Mardiningrum, 2023), culture (Srikandi, 2022), and communication barriers (Siregar & Hsb, 2020), however no one focuses on the experiences of international students from Thailand. This gap opens an opportunity to study the opportunities and challenges of international students in online learning. This study explores the role of universities in implementing appropriate strategies to overcome obstacles faced by students, especially international students from Thailand. In addition, the results of this study are expected to be recommendations for university administrators in developing technology-oriented policies supported by digital infrastructure. In addition, developing flexible learning methodologies is also an important thing that will support online learning for international students.

### B. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach to analyze the experiences of Thai international students enrolled in an Indonesian Islamic university. Qualitative research focuses on studying things in their natural state (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The study focuses on three key aspects of online learning: (1) language barriers, (2) technological accessibility, and (3) motivation levels. In addition, this study covered the benefits and opportunities of online learning as well. This study employed a narrative inquiry

approach (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mertova & Webster, 2019) to explore the experiences of international students in online learning. By collecting personal stories through interviews and open-ended questionnaires, the research aimed to understand their challenges and perspectives. Narrative inquiry allowed participants to share their experiences in-depth, providing rich and detailed insights. Several instruments were utilized in this study, including observation, questionnaires, and documentation. The researchers observed students' online learning experiences and collected data using open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms and WhatsApp. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method (Robinson, 2014), focusing on international students experiencing online learning. Two Thai students voluntarily participated in this study through an email invitation, providing insights into their challenges and experiences. This study used thematic content analysis (Fullana et al., 2016) to analyse the data. The researchers identified recurring patterns and key themes from participants' responses, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their experiences. This method helped categorize data systematically, providing meaningful insights into the challenges and benefits of online learning for international students.

### C. Result and Discussion

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Indonesia and many other countries sought to implement online EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. By mid-March 2020, educational policymakers in Indonesia mandated the nationwide transition to online learning. The pandemic compelled the Ministry of Education to introduce virtual learning for both schools and universities. During the COVID-19 crisis, the entire education system, including English language instruction in universities, shifted to an online format. As a result, traditional face-to-face learning was replaced by digital and virtual methods (Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020). This change required educators and practitioners to develop technological proficiency and adopt innovative teaching strategies for online instruction. Various digital tools and applications have become essential for teaching English effectively. Edmodo, an online discussion platform, has been found to improve EFL students' skills in writing argumentative essays (Lam & Chiu, 2018). Educators also developed several digital tools (Gecu-Parmaksiz & Hughes, 2023). Another obstacle is related to financial problems such as expensive tuition fees (Widiasih & Ermiati, 2020). Adaptation experiences and challenges for international students also occur in Indonesia which are explored through direct

research and literature review. Indonesia has become a study destination country for foreign students, especially Southeast Asian students.

Most international students face several obstacles and challenges when they study abroad. One of the main obstacles is the language barrier during the lecture process in class and adaptation to social interactions, especially difficulties in socializing with domestic/local students (Le & McKay, 2018). The adaptability of culture and learning systems also becomes an obstacle for international students (Novoselova et al., 2020). Participants also experience language barriers. They cannot understand the explanation given by the lecturer, so what the lecturer said cannot be recorded and remembered in their memory. Participant 3 explained her experience in detail:

…I am not confident in asking the question because my Bahasa is really broken. I'm worried that the lecturer will not understand my text and will make my classmates waste time, too…

In another story from Participant 2, she also found language difficulties. She explained her experience in detail:

*"Sometimes I understand, But sometimes I do not understand."*

What was conveyed by Participant 2 and Participant 3 is a form of anxiety and obstacles in understanding the language of instruction during lectures. Participants felt that language barriers damaged their confidence and that these obstacles would disrupt the lecture process. Participants were also worried that the communication they did would lead to miscommunication. The existence of these obstacles would waste lecture time because the lecturer had to set aside special time to provide understanding to participants. Anxiety eventually emerged within the participants, so that interactions with classmates became disrupted.

The data conveyed by Participant 2 and Participant 3 reflect a form of language anxiety and lack of confidence in students. This anxiety is related to the language of instruction used during learning, namely Bahasa Indonesia. Finally, students become hesitant to participate actively in the lecture process. Concerns are that they will waste lecture time and cannot understand the lecturer's explanation. Fear of miscommunication creates social pressure for international students. This anxiety also results in decreased engagement of international students during online learning.

The main problem of anxiety experienced by international students comes from the lack of Indonesian language skills. The majority of teachers use Indonesian, so there

are communication barriers. However, this anxiety is not an obstacle for students to get the positive impact of online learning. Jiang et al. (Jiang et al., 2023) stated that online learning positively impacts the motivation, anxiety, and attitudes of participants. This means that because of online learning, their motivation increases, their anxiety decreases, and positive attitudes are formed towards L2 learning.

Teachers can help international students overcome their anxiety. Teachers' motivation and approaches will excite students and eliminate their anxiety. Teachers' friendliness, jokes, English accents, and frequency of speaking English in class are the formulas for overcoming student anxiety (Yuan, 2023). Participant 1 also revealed that online learning actually did not make him anxious. Participant 1 revealed that he enjoyed the online learning sessions.

"Enjoy online lectures because studying in a regular classroom often results in problems with students missing or skipping classes. There are all kinds of false claims. But when studying online, Even if you are not seriously ill, you can still open the internet program to study, study with you, and help with work at home. Take care of parents who return to study and can learn to compensate because every online program can be saved during the course. If you don't understand, you can press go back and look at it. Those who miss school can come back to study later."

Although there are language barriers that make international students anxious, this cannot be used as a basis for online learning always to cause anxiety. What Participant 1 said is evidence that online learning does not necessarily cause anxiety. This statement is reinforced by Yuan's (2023) findings on anxiety in online education.

Another obstacle international students face is the lack of equipment for online lectures. Students have difficulty getting adequate devices, slow internet connections, or outdated software. These obstacles limit students' participation in online lectures and limit internet access, resulting in poor video and audio quality. Students struggle to follow lectures, interact, or complete assignments efficiently. The lack of adequate equipment also has the potential to create gaps in students' learning experiences. This gap will reduce student motivation to attend lectures. Therefore, policies are needed that can accommodate all students. Flexible learning methods allow students to achieve fairness and equality.

International students lack access to or opportunities to use online learning resources, which results in decreased participation, engagement, and overall learning experience (Erzad et al., 2024). Additionally, slow internet connections and outdated

software prevent students from fully engaging in lectures, interacting with peers and instructors, and completing assignments efficiently. Ferri et al. (2020) stated that poor internet connections and a lack of necessary electronic devices among many students. It was also revealed that the obstacles to online learning include personal, technical, logistical, and financial barriers (Abuhammad, 2020).

International students face limited access to devices, poor connectivity, and outdated software, affecting their academic participation and engagement. Ferri et al. (2020) and Abuhammad (2020) note that these barriers extend beyond technical issues, including personal, logistical, and financial obstacles. Universities must have policies that support international students. The university must increase digital accessibility, provide necessary support systems, and adopt flexible learning methods. Ultimately, this will create an equitable online learning environment to achieve academic success for all students.

### D. Conclusion

Online learning presented both challenges and opportunities for international students. The experience of Thai students in an Indonesian Islamic university have been examined in this study. Through interviews conducted via Google Forms and WhatsApp, the research identified key obstacles, including language barriers, technological limitations, and motivation issues, which can hinder their academic success. However, online learning also provides significant benefits, including greater flexibility, access to diverse learning resources, and opportunities for self-paced learning. With proper institutional support, these advantages can be maximized while minimizing the existing barriers. To enhance learning outcomes, universities should implement language support programs, improve digital accessibility, and foster interactive online learning environments. This study is limited by focusing only on Thai students from one university, which may not fully represent the experiences of all international students. Additionally, the study focused only on short-term experiences without examining how students' experiences evolve over time. Future research on how students adjust to online learning over time could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of current policies and teaching approaches.

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