

NOVICE ENGLISH TEACHER'S PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES IN IMPROVING YOUNG LEARNERS' MOTIVATION DURING ONLINE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Studies reveal concern about students' decreased motivation in the pandemic online learning, and novice teachers are especially vulnerable in this era as they still have little teaching experiences but have to teach in such a challenging environment. This paper investigates the problems a novice teacher faced in improving elementary students' motivation during online learning and the motivational strategies she used. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview and presented according to the narrative inquiry design. The results imply that the novice teacher had troubles related to the lack of access to a real-time, face-to-face communication platform that allows direct feedback, students' low motivation in submitting their tasks, and her lack of teaching experience. The novice teacher had used some motivational strategies which include relating the learning topic with the student's interest and context, utilizing various learning media and material, increasing the students' expectancy of success, and encouraging positive self-evaluation. The novice teacher had implemented the motivational strategies to some extent and handled the problems quite well; however, there is still a lack of variety in her motivational strategies and a lack of teaching experience. Therefore, the teacher should continuously self-reflect and improve her knowledge and practice, institutions must ensure that novice teachers are not left to adapt on their own, and policies must prioritize equitable access to learning technologies and family engagement strategies to support children's learning at home.

Keywords: *Teaching English for Young Learners, Motivational Strategies, Novice Teacher, Online Learning, Student's Motivation.*

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has become a popular choice of learning mode since the spread of the Covid-19 virus has forced digital transformation in many significant sectors in the world. Even after the global pandemic has been declared over, this mode of learning has remained highly relevant in the education sector. Besides, online learning has several benefits including more flexibility, encouraging students' active participation, increased collaboration between students, more effective exchange of ideas, more varied learning styles, and increased time management skills (Nasser & Perveen, 2023). However, there are several obstacles to the implementation of online learning, including the lack of strong student learning motivation (Azzahro et al., 2021). This lack of motivation may significantly affect their achievement since strong learning motivation improves the quality of student's learning achievement (Munawaroh, et al., 2022).

Motivation is the result of the interaction of the intensity of will, incentive value of the goal, and individuals' and others' expectations (Finn, 2020). Similarly, Dörnyei & Ushioda

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(2021) have stated that although there is still no theory that can provide extensive and comprehensive explanation on all sorts of possible motives, most researchers agree that motivation is related to “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain their activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it.”

In the context of language learning, many reports on motivation regard closely the factors that diminish learning motivation and several teaching strategies that will enhance learners’ motivation, especially through ICT. Furthermore, the emergence of the pandemic gave birth to a burning issue widely researched since 2020 regarding online learning as the result of forced digitalization in education. The lack of infrastructure to back up their impending needs further complicated the situation. For instance, Gustiani (2020) reported that the students who demotivated had blamed the poor external supporting facilities such as bad internet connection or the electricity that would occasionally go on and off during online learning.

Similarly, Meeter et al. (2020) report that the university students at a Dutch university rated online learning as less satisfactory than face-to-face learning and rated their motivation as having decreased. Another study also reports how the sudden change in the way of learning affects students’ motivation which eventually also affects their achievement (Rahardjo & Pertiwi, 2020). Interestingly, a study found that students’ intrinsic motivation is higher than their extrinsic motivation during online learning (Subakthiasih & Putri, 2020).

In the face of such a challenge, digging deeper into what truly motivates the students and how to elicit and maintain their motivation, particularly during online learning would be crucial. Novice teachers are especially vulnerable in this era as they still have little teaching experience but have to teach in such a challenging era for education. However, the urgent need to understand how novice teachers navigate online learning persists beyond the immediate pandemic context. As schools increasingly adopt hybrid and digital instruction formats (Putra & Herlina, 2023), novice teachers must be equipped not only with technological skills but also with motivational strategies suited for young learners. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep structural and pedagogical gaps in teacher readiness (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Addressing this challenge is crucial to ensuring sustainable teacher development and student engagement in post-pandemic education.

Most prior studies focus on online learning effectiveness (e.g., Meeter et al., 2020) or student motivation in general (Subakthiasih & Putri, 2020), but there is limited research on how novice teachers develop and apply motivational strategies in real-world, digitally-

constrained teaching environments for young learners. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a unique narrative account of a novice teacher's challenges and motivational strategies during online instruction in an Indonesian elementary school context. Therefore, the presented research-based paper aims to investigate the problems novice English teacher encountered related to improving and maintaining elementary students' motivation during an online learning and her strategies to improve and maintain the elementary students' motivation during an online learning.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The research used narrative inquiry as a research design. Narrative study with the type of biographical studies is a study of individuals where the researchers excavate data from the participants and write those data as narratives for further analysis. Moreover, it is the kind of study that most likely has co-construction of narratives and co-authorship with participants (Barkhuizen, et al., 2014). The design was chosen because it was suitable for eliciting rich data from the participants' narratives, and it allowed co-construction of narratives with participants to accurately interpret their narratives.

The criteria of the participant were selected in relation to the objectives of the present research which focused on investigating English novice teacher's problems and strategies in improving young learners' motivation during an online learning. In the case of the current study, the participant was a female novice teacher who graduated in October 2019 and began teaching English in a private elementary school in Surakarta in July 2020. She taught students from grade 1 to grade 3. Beforehand, her teaching experience was limited to private teaching for one elementary student and the school placement program from her university. She mentioned that since English is not a compulsory subject in the private school, it is taught as an extracurricular or a local content subject.

Since her first day of teaching, the novice teacher had been teaching English from online platforms, mainly through WhatsApp to communicate with her students, approximately until December 2020. Meanwhile, from January to June 2021, the school alternated between online and offline learning. They went back to online learning in July to August 2021 when the pandemic situation was getting worse. The novice teacher concluded that she had taught English in a full online learning environment for approximately 6 months in total.

The data was collected through an in-depth interview. The in-depth interview was conducted by the researcher with a semi-structured design using an interview guide to allow

even richer data in the collecting process. The interview guide was created based on Dörnyei's (2001) framework of motivational strategies (as cited in Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2021). It began with general questions such as how long the teacher had been teaching online, what they felt about teaching online, and so on. These questions aim to elicit details of the teacher's background. Then, more specific questions are listed which include the problems the teacher faced during online learning, the overall atmosphere of the classroom during online learning, how the teacher motivated the students and maintained that positive motivation throughout the lesson, as well as how the teacher gave feedback.

The interview was held in the language which the participant was most comfortable in. In the case of the study, the participant answered mostly in English while some words were mentioned in Bahasa Indonesia. The participant was given a consent form to ask for her consent to answer all of the questions, to be recorded, and to give permission for the information given by her to be published in a research-based paper. A voice recording was conducted throughout the interview to avoid missing any part of the participants' narratives. During the interview, a memo was used to record any observation throughout the interview to understand the context of the participant's account.

Next, the data was analyzed based on Dörnyei's (2001) framework of motivational strategies which was adapted in this research to suit the objective of investigating English novice teacher's problems and strategies in improving young learners' motivation during an online learning (as cited in Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2021). The procedure of analyzing the interview data was based on Shedivy's (in Barkhuizen, et al., 2014). In the case of the present study, the researcher firstly read the raw data (interview transcript) rigorously and highlighted significant statements in the transcript based on Dörnyei's (2001) framework of motivational strategies (as cited in Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2021). Then, the researcher interpreted each statement into meaningful data and classified them into two themes: the novice teacher's problems in motivating students during online learning and the novice teacher's strategies in motivating students during online learning. These themes would then be transformed into narrative descriptions in the research report. The participant was involved in the last stage to check the researcher's interpretation and to give comments. This process did not only strengthen the trustworthiness and verify the narrative data, but also related to negotiating ethical issues and anonymity with the participant.

However, this study has some limitations such as: a) it centers on a single participant, which restricts the generalizability of the results; b) the data collected relied on the teacher's

recall of her experience, which may introduce bias or omission; and c) the context is specific to a private elementary school in Indonesia, and thus findings may not reflect the experiences of novice teachers in other countries or public schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is inferred from the results that the novice teacher's main problems are related to the lack of access to a real-time communication which allows direct feedback, students' low motivation in submitting their tasks, and her lack of teaching experience. The first problem is related to the lack of facilities that would help maximize the learning process (Gustiani, 2020) as stated by the novice teacher during the interview.

"The challenges teaching this way was, we couldn't communicate in two ways directly. Google meet or zoom provide two ways communication, but I couldn't use them because almost all the parents were working in those hours and the students didn't have the phone."

The students are still very young as the novice teacher is teaching children in grade 1 to 3 in elementary level (approximately 6-9 years old). Therefore, the students are fully reliant on their parents to use the device. Meanwhile, the parents are working by the time the students need the device to access certain platforms. As the device is not accessible all the time, using platforms that allow real-time communication is unattainable; therefore, they can only use limited platforms, mainly WhatsApp, which is not sufficient to do real-time and two-way communication.

Similarly, Daniela et al. (2021) state that devices are often shared in many families, which, consequently, makes it difficult for students to join a synchronous learning. On a similar note, a literature review study conducted by Efriana (2021) also lists that one of the problems EFL students in Indonesia encounter during online learning is that some students do not own devices to access the internet; if there is any, those devices are typically owned by their parents. Therefore, they usually have to wait for their parents to return home and their parents usually return outside of the typical school time. In conclusion, the lack of facilities that allows younger students to learn synchronously or in real time is a common problem during online learning, especially amidst the pandemic era.

The lack of the appropriate facilities (such as limitation only to WhatsApp, which actual usage is as a communication medium) to support students' learning process can render the whole process to be less meaningful (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020); moreover, children's learning achievements during the pandemic period rely on families' ability to provide them with the necessary technologies (Daniela et al., 2021). All in all, this problem is quite complex because

not all children are from a familial background that can provide all their learning necessities. Meanwhile, the teachers' hands are bound because the lack of facilities often limit them into a smaller pool of appropriate platforms to teach during an online learning which in turn may render the learning process to be ineffective. Moreover, apart from technical constraints such as online learning facilities and infrastructure, another constraint is that student culture does not yet support online learning (Yuzuliza, 2021).

Many of the students have low motivation, particularly in submitting the tasks. The teacher believes that other than the students' own diligence, their parents' lack of contribution in their school life plays a part in this matter. She classifies her students into three categories based on their motivation and the role of their parents in supporting their learning process: a) motivated students with supportive parents, b) motivated students with unsupportive parents, and c) unmotivated students with unsupportive parents. The teacher believes that these factors ultimately affect their task submission.

"This [motivation] varies among the students, and parents' support/accompanions playing big role in this situation. For diligent students with supportive parents, they are quite motivated to learn even [when] it was online. It showed, after I sent the video they would submit the task as soon as possible. For other students who had motivation but not quite supportive parents, they likely delaying the submitting of task. And then, there were students [who are not motivated] and not supportive parents, they didn't submit the task or for worse they didn't watch the video. They are unmotivated because online learning wasn't "real learning", so the students likely just playing and the parents working. They have the mindset of full online learning equals a long vacation. [...] They are also unmotivated to learn because they can't meet their friends."

This finding is in line with Singh et al. (2020) agrees that younger children need more attention from their parents compared to adolescents. They need their parents' physical presence, and parents have an important role to maintain their children's mental health during stressful and uncertain times such as the pandemic. Parents need to ensure their children engage in interactive play activities as well as to maintain a consistent routine such as maintaining a consistent bedtime for their children.

However, it does not coincide with Salamat et al. (2018) and Elsshareif & Mohamed (2021) findings that imply e-learning can motivate students to do their own work without others' help. While it is possible to utilize ICT to encourage the students to work independently, in the case of this study, the students are still very young; therefore, they still need guidance from the adults. Younger children in the initial level of education (6-10 years old) typically

need more parental involvement than the older children, and in this level of education, there is a significant difference in number between children who frequently need an adult (61.77%) or can take initiative but expect an adult's supervision (32.18%) and children who can perform task alone (6.05%) (Ribeiro, et al., 2021). It may imply that all of or most of the students in the case of the study are more motivated by extrinsic force rather than from an intrinsic drive.

The novice teacher has also recounted how the students score from standard to below average for the first half of the semester. Then, she did a reflection on how she teaches throughout the first half of the semester to find out what went wrong.

“For the first half semester, the average score for my students’ relative average to low. They said it was hard learning English in online learning. Later on, I tried to reflect my teaching, and I found out my questions were too hard for them since they learned themselves. This occurred because I was lack of teaching experience, I didn’t think about their condition during the pandemic that might have little knowledge about the materials. So, I should downgrade the level of the questions.”

Eventually, the novice teacher found that the questions she had created for the test were too hard for the students as they usually learn by themselves without help at home; even though the students themselves have little background knowledge about English because of little to no exposure to English before elementary school. She reflected that this problem happened because of her lack of teaching experience, particularly on the designing of a test without taking her students’ condition during the pandemic era into consideration. In support of this finding, Daniela et al. (2021) also found that parents often mention that the tasks teachers assign to their children are so difficult that they would not have been able to complete them without their parents’ help.

The novice teacher has also mentioned how it was difficult to give feedback via online platforms, specifically through WhatsApp. She illustrates this challenge with a recount where she had to correct the students’ pronunciation through the voice note feature in WhatsApp.

“Another problems, to teach pronunciation since it was one way communication it was hard for me to give them feedback directly regarding pronunciation. It is also sometimes hard to know their understanding. I usually correct their pronunciation through the voice note feature in WhatsApp. After that, it will depend on the students if they want to really correct it or not [practice to pronounce the right way]. Most of them when I ask to pronounce it once again, they are still incorrect. So [feedback through] voice note is temporary [the result is not sustained for long-term].”

The novice teacher reflects that giving feedback in a one-way communication is problematic as she could not monitor whether the students really practice the correct way of pronouncing the words or not. When she asked the students again to pronounce the same words, she found that the students failed to correctly pronounce them. This finding is in line with Rasmitadila et al. (2020) who report that teachers are less enthusiastic in online learning as they cannot teach directly and interact directly with the students. They have expressed that it is often difficult for them to gauge the students' understanding through the screen.

Thinking of solutions to these problems should not only be imposed on the teachers whose workload is already overwhelming them, especially in uncertain times such as the pandemic era. Dhawan (2020) coaxes educational institutions to analyze the situation using Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges (SWOC) analysis. The strengths of online learning which include time and location flexibility, wide availability of content and courses combined with the opportunities to innovate pedagogical approach and strengthening problem solving, adaptability, and critical thinking skills may help institutions to plan how to move forward and how to anticipate when a similar situation happens once again.

Regarding the matters of improving and maintaining the students' motivation, the novice teacher has used some motivational strategies in Dörnyei's framework to some extent such as: relating the learning topic with the students' interest and context, utilizing various learning media and material, increasing the students' expectancy of success, and encouraging positive self-evaluation. The novice teacher makes an effort to create a meaningful learning experience for her students. Therefore, she tries to relate the learning material with her students' interest and context.

"I tried to make my teaching meaningful for students. I tried to relate the materials with the current condition so the students could get a better understanding or they knew the contexts. For example, in second grade the material about body and hygiene, I tried to relate it to the fact that we need to wash our hands after and before doing some activity, we need to brush our teeth at least twice, etc. The other example, in first grade about pets, I ask my students do they have any pets? And relate it to the materials."

This strategy falls into the second dimension: generating initial motivation. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) states that "one of the most demotivating factors for learners is when they have to learn something that [...] has no seemingly relevance whatsoever to their lives." On a similar note, Amalia & Albiansyah (2023) state that students prefer real life topics that they can relate to their daily lives and background knowledge. By relating the learning material with

the students' interest and context, it will boost the students' interest to know more about the topic. However, the teacher's choice of materials and media is still lacking more variety to it. The teacher could improve it by expanding her pedagogical knowledge through reading, joining seminars or workshops on the topic.

In the same second dimension, the novice teacher has also implemented the strategy of increasing the student's expectancy of success. She has realized her error in creating a test that is above her students' level and eventually downgraded the level of difficulty. She has also created an opportunity for the students to relearn about the materials they find difficult. Students are more likely to be motivated when expected to succeed, and as Brophy (1998) summarizes, "the simplest way to ensure that the students expect success is to make sure they achieve it consistently" (as cited in Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2021).

Moreover, boosting the learners' self-confidence is an important element of initiating motivation. Shelton-Strong and Mynard (2020) investigated confidence-building diary (CBD) as a means to promote motivation among the Japanese university students learning English in Japan. Throughout the study, the students wrote language related activities inside and outside the classroom such as reading, singing, work-related, reflecting, and so on. Then, they would write how they felt after doing the activity. The process of writing and realizing their own feelings on what happened had resulted in positive feelings such as feelings of competence and a sense of pleasure. It also allows autonomy as they chose to engage in, relating to and matching their own interests and goals which implies the existence of intrinsic motivation. This method may be applicable as well for younger students to increase their expectancy of success; however, studies may have to be conducted to be able to ascertain its effectiveness.

The teacher also implements the third dimension of the motivational strategies: maintaining and protecting motivation. As motivation can be fickle, conducting maintenance should be a very crucial part in learning process. The teacher has utilized various learning media and material to avoid the monotony of learning as well as making the tasks more stimulating (e.g. through the online quiz).

"Besides video, I used quiziz.com to scaffolding the materials. I liked the site because it gave experience like we're playing a game, not like google form. And, some of my students liked it too, they gave comment "It's fun! Can I answer again?" and so on. For the materials, I try to use songs so my students didn't get bored with the video about materials."

In support of that, Azmi (2017) reports that the utilization of ICT in the EFL classroom can in fact motivate learners to continue their learning as well as stimulate their passion and

creativity. Furthermore, a wide variety of ICT also allow teachers to create various activities with the technology and media that they have. Moreover, researchers and practitioners have a consensus that “the higher the quality of the learning experience, the more learner engagement and persistence we can expect” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Similarly, Meeter et al. (2020) also finds that students who implied that there was a lot of interaction during online meetings tended to report higher motivation.

The novice teacher has also applied a component of the fourth dimension of the motivational strategies which is encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. She has done this motivational strategies dimension through promoting attributions to effort rather than to ability.

“About the lack of confidence, for first and second grade, they seemed didn’t really think about it. But, for the third grade some of students gave comments like “Miss, it’s too difficult. I’m afraid I will get a remedial.” When this happened, I tried to elaborate the material again, asking which part they found difficult, and give motivation like “at least you have to try, whatever the outcome. I’m already happy if you just try answer one question rather not trying at all”. [...] Or, when they submitted the task I would write down the feedback on the paper. The feedback not just about the material but some like “keep up the spirit!”.”

The novice teacher emphasizes on the students’ effort in doing their best rather than the ultimate outcome. She has also mentioned that no matter what the outcome is, she would acknowledge their best effort as their progress toward their own betterment. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) has mentioned, “it is easy to see that [...] failure that is ascribed to stable and uncontrollable factors such as low ability hinders future achievement behavior [...], whereas failure that is attributed to unstable and controllable factors such as effort is generally regarded by the learners as less detrimental.” In other words, students tend to see their own lack of ability to achieve something as more urgent than the maximum effort they have mustered throughout their learning process.

CONCLUSION

The results imply that the novice teacher’s main problems are related to the lack of access to a two-way communication which allows direct feedback, students’ low motivation in submitting their tasks, and her lack of teaching experience. The novice teacher had also implemented several motivational strategies in improving and maintaining the students’ motivation which include relating the learning topic with the students’ interest and context,

utilizing various learning media and material, increasing the students' expectancy of success, and encouraging positive self-evaluation. However, the novice teacher had not applied the first dimension of the motivational strategies, and a lot of the components of other dimensions were still absent in her practice. There were still problems regarding students' motivation which remained unaddressed; however, many of the problems would need interventions from other parties such as the school, the parents, the government, and so on.

In conclusion, the novice teacher had implemented the motivational strategies to some extent and handled the problems quite well; however, there is still a lack of variety in her motivational strategies and a lack of teaching experience. Therefore, the teacher should continuously self-reflect and improve her knowledge and practice on her teaching by joining relevant seminars, workshops, or training. Institutions must ensure that novice teachers are not left to adapt on their own. Mentorship programs, access to technological tools, and training in using interactive platforms are essential, especially during online or blended learning phases. Finally, policies must prioritize equitable access to learning technologies and family engagement strategies to support children's learning at home.

To build on this study, future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies involving multiple novice teachers across different school types and geographic regions. An investigation on students' and parents' perspectives on motivational strategies used by novice teachers can be conducted to gain a more holistic understanding of what works and what doesn't, and so on.

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