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ENGLISH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AT SMP NEGERI 23 TAKENGON DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This study described the difficulties faced by students in learning English during the pandemic at SMP Negeri 23 Takengon. The researchers applied a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach in this current research. Data were collected through several techniques comprising observation, interviews, and documentation. The study used three steps from Miles and Huberman's theory to analyze the data, including data reduction, data display, and conclusions. The results showed that the students face five difficulties in learning English amidst the pandemic comprising learning disorders, learning disabilities, learning dysfunctions, underachievers, and slow learners. Among those five, slow learners become the most dominant difficulty, while learning disorder is the least problematic aspect for the students. Several issues that are likely to cause difficulties are a continuous practice of multiple-choice questions without being given a context, avoiding class, lack of interest in learning English, weak ability to learn fast, and reduced learning hours.
Keywords: English, learning difficulties, pandemic, language learning

INTRODUCTION

English is a global language that most people must learn. In the era of globalization, learning English has become a necessity because English is used in modern communication in almost all aspects. For this reason, English is a crucial language to learn in Indonesian education, particularly for the younger generation. It is believed that mastering English will give individuals more benefits in acquiring knowledge, acquaintances, relationships, jobs, and opportunities. In Indonesia, learning English is considered a foreign language, not a second language. This is because English does not act as the official Indonesian language nor play a significant role in communication, business, governance, and education.

English in Indonesia is usually acquired through language lessons at school or language courses outside the classroom. At some point, the status of English as a foreign language may cause trouble for Indonesian students. It is widely believed that most Indonesian students use the local language in the school environment to communicate. However, English has become one of the mandatory subjects tested in the national exam. Since English is just taught as a compulsory subject but not used in daily communication, the students may have big tasks, especially in mastering four basic skills comprising listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

In the learning process at school, every student and teacher hope to achieve the best or most satisfactory learning outcomes. However, many students still need to achieve the expected learning outcomes. This can happen because students perceive English as a barrier, especially if the learning process is carried out in rural areas. Compared to students enrolled in several schools located in the major city, students in rural areas may achieve lower grades

in English due to several factors. Amongst those factors are learning facilities, teachers' competence, and lack of intrinsic motivation assuming that English is difficult (Adara, 2018).

Such difficulties in learning English have been challenged by the emergence of COVID-19, which hit almost all countries worldwide. Indonesia is without exception. The pandemic has spread since early 2020 and has affected all cities in Indonesia, including Takengon. Takengon is a town in Aceh that acts as the seat of the Central Aceh Regency. As Takengon is about 2,427 km apart from Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, the town could be categorized as remote. Similar to the students in major cities in Indonesia, the learners in Takengon also experienced learning from home as the government restricted all face-to-face activities. For several months, learning activities in Takengon have been done through online meetings.

As predicted, since no teacher can monitor at-home learning, the pandemic has made English even more unfamiliar to students. There needs to be more comprehension among students in English online sessions than in offline learning. Inadequate facilities and online health insurance can result in disappointing outcomes for students and educators. Students may exhibit laziness when studying English and thus need help answering even the most elementary queries. By the end of 2021, the government issued a new policy that permitted offline classes but with strict restrictions. To adapt to the new shift, the students must reorient themselves to the learning process, especially in English. Due to the uncertain policies and challenging learning adaptation, the student's academic performance, particularly in English, has declined (Syah 2020).

It is pivotal for the teacher or educator to help students in the learning process and identify learning difficulties to come up with plausible solutions. Based on the background described above, the focus of the problem in this research is to figure out the difficulties students faced in learning English during the pandemic at SMP Negeri 23 Takengon. The researcher used five classifications of difficulties by Mulyadi: learning disorders, learning disabilities, learning dysfunction, underachievers, and slow learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The coronavirus pandemic has generated changes in the teaching-learning process at school and has influenced the interaction between teachers and students. Due to the pandemic, schools were constrained to carry out their activities with students exclusively online. In this regard, the government took measures to avoid the spread of the virus and ensure the continuity of the educational process by adopting online learning. However, many students needed more time to prepare for this rapid change and found difficulties in learning several subjects, including English.

Each student is believed to possess unique skills related to adapting to a new environment and developing potential. Some pupils can accomplish it without difficulty, but many need help to overcome substantial obstacles. Students' laziness, susceptibility to discouragement, and apathy, compounded by a hostile attitude toward the teacher, may contribute to student learning difficulties. The students themselves can typically solve several problems. Some people may need to learn a good way to solve problems independently. Also, others need to learn what the real problem is. During the pandemic, the common situation teachers might face is that the students need help to maximize the learning process in or outside the classroom even though they have taken lessons seriously (Darimi, 2016).

The current research used the five classifications of learning difficulties by Mulyadi (2010). He suggests that learning difficulties can be divided into five types, namely:
1. Learning disorders
   A person is said to have a learning disorder if they have a condition in which their learning process is hampered due to inconsistent responses. In most cases, people with learning disorders do not experience a disruption in their learning achievement; inconsistent

responses somewhat hamper the learning process. Consequently, the actual learning outcomes attained will stay within their potential.

2. Learning disabilities

   Learning disabilities relate to the signs of a person's handicap that cause students to be unable to learn (avoiding learning), which results in their learning outcomes being lower than their intellectual potential.

3. Learning dysfunction

   Learning dysfunction refers to situations in which a student shows symptoms indicating that the learning process is not functioning correctly. No signs of mental abnormality, sensory disturbances, or other psychological disorders exist. These students may have dyslexia or another form of learning disability.

4. Underachievers

   Underachievers are students with an intellectual capacity above average, but academic accomplishments are below average. This type of student is referred to as having poor achievement.

5. Slow learners

   Slow learners move through the learning process slower than other students with the same intellectual capability level. These difficulties cause the learning process to take longer.

A variety of researchers have conducted several studies on English learning difficulties. The first study is *Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Learning English at SMA Negeri 1 Batauga f*rom Sultra and Baharudin (2020). The research used a mixed-method design to discuss the low level of learning achievement and the factors contributing to learning challenges. Twelve students were involved in this study, where the data were elicited through the test and interview. Data were then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's theory, including data reduction, presentation, and conclusion or verification. The results showed that the level of students' learning achievement was low, which might be caused by students' low motivation or interest in learning English.

The second study is from Mulyawan (2020), entitled *Problematika Online Learning: Hambatan Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris Siswa*. In this study, Mulyawan examined issues that have the potential to prevent students from acquiring knowledge through online instruction. The researcher was exclusively concerned with learning hurdles, whether internal or external. The data were elicited through observation and interview techniques from 15 subjects. The results revealed at least three aspects causing students' difficulties: students' lateness in participating in an online class, a tendency not to pay attention carefully to the teacher, and a lack of guidance in the learning process.

The third previous study is *An Analysis of the Factors Causing English Learning Difficulties* by Hasibuan et al. (2013). The study's objective was to examine the most influential aspects that cause difficulties in learning English, both from internal and external factors, and to analyze the relationship between the two dominant factors to the occurrence of learning difficulties in students. The data were collected through a questionnaire from 122 students at SMPN 22 Pontianak. The results showed that the most dominant internal factor is confidence at 76,37%, while the most significant external factor is learning facilities at 80,89%.

Based on the previous studies mentioned above, the researcher discovered that many studies focus on difficulties in learning English within various subjects and levels. However, this current study examined students' difficulties in learning English at SMP Negeri 23 Takengon during the pandemic. This research also used the main theory from Mulyadi (2010), including five classifications of learning difficulties, to analyze the data. Thus, these aspects make the current study differs from the previously mentioned studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied a descriptive qualitative study with a phenomenology approach. A qualitative study is a procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior (Abdussamad, 2021). The researchers used the term "informant" because qualitative research departs from a particular case that is a crucial informant and main informant.

In this study, the informants were selected through specific criteria: students with high learning outcomes, students with medium learning outcomes, and students with low learning outcomes. This study used two instruments, namely observation, and an interview sheet. This research used a structured interview by Guttman's measurement scale. The researcher prepared structural interviews before going into the field. The researcher employed structured interviews because the results obtained were more focused than if the researchers had used other types of interviews (Sugiyono, 2011). An example of interview sheet is displayed as follows.

Table 1: Interview Sheet

No	Type of Difficulties	Question	Yes	No
		Score	1	0
I	Learning Disorder	a. Do you read English text haltingly? b. Do you need help when reading English text? c. Do you often forget the vocabulary? d. Do you need help when writing English text? e. Are you confused about pronouncing English text?		
II	Learning disabilities	a. Do you miss English class? b. Do you often go to the canteen while English class is delivered? c. Do you have any problems with the school distance from your home? d. Do you often sleep during English class? e. Do you often chat in English class?		
III	Learning Dysfunction	a. Is English not the subject you are interested in? b. Does the English teacher's strategy make you bored?		

		c.	Do you often miss the dictionary during English class?
		d.	Do you often speak local language in English class?
		e.	Do you miss an English textbook during English class?
IV	Under Achiever	a.	Do you often avoid when the teacher ask you during English class?
		b.	When the teacher asks, do you answer randomly?
		c.	Do you rarely repeat learning English at home?
		d.	When the teacher asks you directly, do you often give a wrong answer ?
		e.	Do you often not focus on learning English?
V	Slow Learner	a.	Are you often late in submiting English assigments?
		b.	Are you burdened when you are given an English assignment at a certain time?
		c.	Do you need a long time to understand English material?
		d.	Do you often cooperate with your friend in doing assigments?
		e.	Do you always have a low score in English assigment?

Moreover, the study subjects were nine students taken by purposive sampling technique, and the primary data were elicited through observation, interviews, and documentation. The researcher conducted direct observations at SMP Negeri 23 Takengon to find out the process and environment of learning English at that school. The data obtained were classified based on Mulyadi's theory (2010) and then analyzed using the idea of Miles and Huberman (Schwandt 1996), comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section focused on showing and discussing the data findings based on the theoretical framework, as stated earlier in the introduction. First, the researcher explained the findings of difficulties experienced by the students at SMP Negeri 23 Takengon during the pandemic. Next, the researcher classified such difficulties into five types, as Mulyadi (2010) suggests. Based on the interview results, the following is the distribution of difficulties in learning English, classified into five types.

Table 2: The Distribution of Difficulties in Learning English

Types of Learning Difficulties	Interview Questions					Total
	a	b	c	d	e	
Learning Disorders	5	2	5	1	2	15
Learning Dissabilities	4	3	3	5	6	21
Learning Dysfunction	6	4	8	6	4	28
Underachievers	3	4	7	3	-	17
Slow Learners	6	7	8	7	1	29

Based on the table above, it is interesting to note that of the five difficulties found in research informants, there are three types whose results were at the top: slow learners accounting for 29 difficulties, learning disabilities, and learning disabilities responsible for 28 and 21 difficulties, respectively. However, learning disorder has the lowest type of difficulty, with 15 data followed by underachievers reaching 17 data. The table below displays the total difficulties experienced by the students so the reader can have a clearer look at such difficulties.

Table 3: Total Difficulties in Learning English

After displaying and classifying the students' difficulties in learning English, the next pivotal step is to discuss the most plausible causes. The difficulties here refer to difficulties that the students cannot solve alone. These difficulties are characterized by the presence of several problems that teachers in the classroom often find. This is fundamental, so the students are aware of such difficulties in learning to maximize the learning output. The followings are the discussions of sources that are likely to cause difficulties.

Learning Disorder
Based on the field observation conducted by the researchers, one possible source that may cause learning disorder is that when English lessons begin, students are more often given assignments in the form of multiple-choice practice questions. The students need to be given introductory materials to know the context. As a result, some students are less familiar with the discussed topic.

Learning Disabilities
Regarding the causes of learning disabilities, the researchers found that students need help understanding the material even though the teacher explains the lesson well. Consequently, the students often need more effort to digest the materials; such efforts are made through discussions with classmates. However, as materials are perceived as complicated, the students prefer to avoid class by going to the school canteen.

Learning Dysfunction
Based on the observation results, the researchers noticed that students are less interested in learning English. This is evident as most students prefer regional languages to English, influenced by fellow students who belong to the same tribe and the fact that the regional language is their first language. The lack of interest in English happens due to the online learning process. Before the pandemic, the students are conditioned to practice English in class and within the school environment. When the government decided to implement studying from home, the students needed more opportunities to practice English, and instead, they spoke the local language. As the pandemic rate declined gradually and school was open, their habit of not speaking English remained.

Underachievers
In the field, the researchers found that the students tend to get low achievements even though some students have good learning achievements. In this type of difficulty, students try to give the best response, but when the teacher asks a simple question, the students cannot respond properly to the learning outcomes. This condition may happen due to the impact of the pandemic, where the students experience a continuous decline in their English achievements.

Slow Learners
The last type is the most dominant difficulty compared to its four counterparts. The researchers found that the students show a slow learning process as they need help to understand the explained materials quickly, and most of them cannot finish the in-class written practice on time. This condition is worsened as the government allows face-to-face interaction in school but with limited hours. In normal conditions, the students need more time to comprehend the lesson from the teacher. Thus, reducing learning hours undoubtedly affects the students' learning process.

Those difficulties are also confirmed by the English teacher at school, Mrs. RKS. In the interview, she said, "Students at this school have a slightly different mindset than other excellent schools; students tend to be more ignorant about learning English because English is a difficult lesson. Consequently, I need to put more effort into teaching English. Especially after the pandemic, even though offline learning has been applied, the students seem accustomed to bringing offline-learning habits, which is getting used to speaking locally. Furthermore, regarding the reduced learning hours, I have to find ways to make time and learning efficient because students are classified as slow in learning." Hence, based on the teacher's confirmation, the students are believed to have difficulties learning English. The three most dominant difficulties are slow learners, learning dysfunctions, and learning disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The students at SMP Negeri 23 Takengon experienced different difficulties during the pandemic. The study found 110 data of difficulties classified into five types: learning disorders, learning disabilities, learning dysfunction, underachievers, and slow learners. Based on the results, learning disorders are the least likely to be experienced by the students with 15 data, followed by underachievers with 17 data. Meanwhile, slow learners, learning dysfunctions, and learning disabilities are the three most dominant difficulties comprising 29, 28, and 21 data, respectively. Several possible aspects cause these difficulties, including the continuous practice of multiple-choice questions without being given a context, avoiding class, lack of interest in learning English, weak ability to learn fast, and reduced learning hours. The changing educational policy by the government during the pandemic may also result in learning difficulties as the students are forced to adapt fast with minimum supervision.

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