

EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ONLINE LEARNING AMONG EFL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: April 2025 Revised: June 2025 Accepted: September 2025 Published: October 2025	<i>Online learning has become an essential part of higher education, offering flexibility and wider access to students worldwide. Yet, in practice, many learners, especially those in EFL contexts, continue to face significant challenges that are often overlooked in existing research. This descriptive quantitative study explores the challenges and opportunities of online learning for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education, specifically focusing on the English Department at Universitas Sulawesi Barat, Indonesia. Using a cross-sectional survey of 85 students, the research aimed to identify common obstacles and advantages in online learning while uncovering students' expectations and suggestions. The results revealed that technical issues (87.1%), lack of social interaction (67.1%), and difficulty understanding course material (52.9%) were the primary obstacles faced by students. Conversely, cost-effectiveness (62.4%), unrestricted access to course materials (49.4%), and reduced social demands (42.4%) were identified as key advantages. Notably, 79% of respondents expressed reluctance to engage in future online learning. This sentiment reflects persistent structural and pedagogical gaps. To improve the online learning experience, students proposed enhanced technological infrastructure, more interactive engagement, and increased instructional support. The findings underscore the need for institutions to reevaluate their online education strategies to ensure student-centered and sustainable learning environments.</i>
Keywords Online learning; EFL students; Learning difficulties; Higher education;	
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INTRODUCTION

The swift expansion of online education has transformed how students access and interact with learning materials. The convenience and flexibility of online learning platforms have attracted a diverse population of students, from the elementary to university level to working professionals seeking to upgrade their skills (Castro & Tumibay, 2021; Isma et al., 2022; Isma, Basri, Abduh, et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2020; Tarrayo et al., 2023). As online learning becomes more popular, there is an increasing demand for a thorough understanding of the challenges and opportunities students face in this digital education environment (e.g., Aldulaimi et al., 2021; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Isma, 2023a; Isma, Lestari, Rohimajaya, et al., 2024; Sathish & S., 2022). Online learning is marked by its dynamic and evolving nature, introducing students to a spectrum of obstacles and advantages as they engage in this mode of education (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Paudel, 2021). Identifying and analyzing these factors is vital for both educational institutions and policymakers. Understanding these issues is integral to

improving online education quality and ensuring that online education remains an accessible and effective learning tool.

Although the realm of online learning is vast and continually expanding, there remains a gap in the research that requires additional investigation. While prior studies have shed light on various aspects of online education (e.g., Aguilera-Hermida et al., 2021; Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Bollen et al., 2022; Isma et al., 2022; Isma, Basri, Abduh, et al., 2024; Isma, Sudewi, & Amrang, 2024; Liu et al., 2020; Mandasari, 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Paudel, 2021), there is a need to comprehensively examine the perspectives and experiences of students across different contexts and variables. A deeper understanding of the common challenges and benefits they face is vital for shaping the future of online learning. This study seeks to bridge the aforementioned gap by thoroughly investigating the experiences of EFL students pursuing online education. By identifying the common challenges they encounter and recognizing the advantages they appreciate, this study intends to provide insights into the present status of online learning. Moreover, this study aspires to unearth the expectations and suggestions of students, thereby contributing to the enhancement of EFL online education.

This study sets out to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by students involved in online learning. The primary aims of this study are twofold. Firstly, it aims to identify and comprehensively catalog the common obstacles and advantages encountered by EFL students in the English Department at Universitas Sulawesi Barat, Indonesia, as they engage in online learning. Secondly, it seeks to uncover the expectations and suggestions of these students concerning online education. The significance of this research stems from its potential to improve the quality of online education. As the education system evolves, it is critical to understand the perspectives of the students driving this change. This study seeks to offer a detailed exploration of the challenges and benefits online learners face, supporting educators and institutions in adapting their approaches to meet contemporary student needs. Furthermore, by shedding light on students' expectations and suggestions, this study can inform practical improvements, ensuring that online education remains a valuable and viable mode of learning, today and in the future.

Unlike previous studies that primarily examine online learning in broader or international settings, this study situates itself within a local Indonesian EFL context, providing a nuanced understanding of students' lived experiences in a developing country's higher education system. This local perspective addresses a gap in the literature by offering context-specific insights into students' perceptions, challenges, and suggestions regarding online learning. To guide the investigation, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the common obstacles experienced by EFL students in online learning? (2) What are the perceived advantages of online learning among these students? and (3) What are students' expectations and suggestions for improving the online learning experience?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to explore students' perceptions of online learning, focusing specifically on the challenges they encounter, the benefits they experience, and their recommendations for improvement. By utilizing this design, the study aimed to gather clear, quantifiable data that could be used to summarize the overall experiences of students in an objective manner. A cross-sectional survey approach was selected to collect data at a single point in time, which allowed the researchers to capture a snapshot of the prevailing trends and patterns among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students within a specific institutional context. This approach was particularly effective in

identifying the immediate concerns and attitudes of students towards online learning, especially during a period of rapid educational transition. The use of a descriptive quantitative design was strategically chosen for its ability to provide a broad overview of students' collective experiences, offering valuable insights into the overall trends without delving deeply into individual cases. While a mixed-methods approach could have provided richer, more nuanced personal narratives, the chosen design ensured that the study was able to efficiently and effectively capture the broader issues faced by a diverse student body. The findings thus offer a comprehensive picture of the online learning landscape, which can serve as a basis for further research and potential improvements in educational practices.

Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 85 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Sulawesi Barat, Indonesia. A total population sampling technique was employed, involving all students who had actively participated in online learning during the relevant academic semester. The demographic composition of the sample included students from various academic years, with 65% identifying as female and 35% as male. In terms of digital literacy, approximately 32% of participants reported basic skills, 54% indicated intermediate proficiency, and 14% considered themselves advanced users. This diversity offered a broad range of perspectives on online learning experiences. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process: informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, in compliance with standard research ethics in educational settings.

Instruments and Data Collection

To collect data, the researchers developed an online questionnaire using Google Forms. The instrument was designed based on a review of relevant literature and similar studies on online learning in higher education contexts. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and multiple-choice items grouped into three main sections: (1) common obstacles in online learning, (2) perceived benefits of online learning, and (3) students' expectations and suggestions for improving the online learning experience. To ensure content validity and clarity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in educational research and subsequently piloted with a small group of 10 students who were not part of the main study. Feedback from the pilot was used to revise ambiguous items and confirm the questionnaire's reliability. The questionnaire was distributed in March 2023 through student WhatsApp groups. No incentives were provided, and participation was entirely voluntary. Students were informed that the study aimed to improve online learning and that their responses would be kept anonymous and used solely for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, a descriptive statistical approach was utilized to summarize and interpret the responses from the student survey. This approach allowed for a clear understanding of the patterns and trends in the data, which were crucial for drawing meaningful conclusions about student perceptions and experiences in online learning. The data were processed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, tools that are commonly used for their efficiency in handling large datasets and performing statistical calculations. The results were presented in the form of frequencies and percentages to highlight how prevalent certain responses or experiences were among the participants. In addition to basic frequency counts, summary statistics such as mean and standard deviation were also calculated where applicable, providing a more nuanced view of the data, particularly in terms of central tendency and variability. Despite the study not employing inferential statistical methods, the margin of error was estimated at $\pm 5\%$, which indicates a

reasonable level of precision in the findings. For future research, it would be beneficial to incorporate inferential techniques such as chi-square tests or correlation analysis. These methods could help identify potential relationships between student characteristics, such as demographic variables or prior experiences, and their perceptions of online learning, allowing for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing online education outcomes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Common Obstacles and Advantages Faced by Students in Online Learning

This section explores the common obstacles and advantages experienced by students in the realm of online learning. The survey responses shed light on the challenges students face and the benefits they perceive in the context of online education.

Table 1
Common Obstacles in Online Learning

Question	Obstacles	Number of Respondents	Percentage
What are the most common obstacles you experience in following online learning?	Technical problems such as poor internet connection	74	87.1%
	Lack of social interaction with teachers and classmates	57	67.1%
	Difficulty in understanding course material without direct assistance from teachers	45	52.9%
	Not very motivating to learn	31	36.5%
	Difficulty in being disciplined in managing study time	13	15.3%

The survey results indicate that students face a variety of obstacles when following online learning. The most commonly cited obstacle was technical problems, with 74 respondents (87.1%) reporting poor internet connection as a major issue. Technical issues can disrupt online classes and prevent students from fully participating and engaging with course materials, which can negatively impact learning outcomes. The second most commonly cited obstacle was the lack of social interaction with both teachers and classmates, with 57 respondents (67.1%) reporting this as a challenge. Online learning can often feel isolating, and students may miss the opportunity to ask questions or receive feedback in real-time from teachers and classmates. A lack of social interaction can further reduce students' motivation and make it harder for them to stay engaged in their studies.

Forty-five respondents (52.9%) reported difficulty in understanding course material without direct assistance from teachers, indicating the importance of individualized attention and support in the learning activity. This obstacle reflects the fact that online learning may not suit every type of student, especially those who rely on more direct and personalized instruction. Thirty-one respondents (36.5%) reported that online learning is not very motivating, suggesting that some students may struggle with self-motivation and may need more support and encouragement to stay engaged with the coursework. Finally, 13 respondents (15.3%) reported difficulty in being disciplined in managing study time, which reflects the need for students to be self-directed and responsible in their online learning experience.

The findings above indicate that students face a range of challenges when participating in online learning, including technical issues, lack of social interaction, difficulty in understanding course materials, lack of motivation, and challenges in managing time. Institutions should work to address these challenges by providing adequate support and

resources to students, such as technical assistance, virtual office hours, and opportunities for virtual collaboration and discussion. By doing so, institutions can help ensure that students have the best possible online learning experience and can achieve their academic goals.

Table 2
Advantages of Online Learning

Question	Advantages	Number of Respondents	Percentage
In your opinion, what are the advantages of online learning compared to face-to-face learning?	More cost-effective as there is no need for transportation or accommodation	53	62.4%
	Access to course materials anytime and anywhere	42	49.4%
	Less burdened by social demands such as dressing up nicely or arriving on time	36	42.4%
	Flexibility in managing study time	15	17.6%

The survey results demonstrate that students perceive several advantages to online learning compared to face-to-face learning. The major advantage of online learning, according to survey respondents, is that it is more cost-effective than face-to-face learning. Fifty-three respondents (62.4%) reported that online learning is more cost-effective because there is no need for transportation or accommodation expenses. This advantage is particularly relevant for students who live far away from campus or who have other responsibilities that make attending traditional classes more difficult or expensive. The next commonly cited advantage was access to course materials anytime and anywhere, with 42 respondents (49.4%) reporting this benefit. This advantage reflects the fact that online learning gives students more flexibility and convenience, as they can access course content and complete tasks whenever and wherever they have an internet connection.

Thirty-six respondents (42.4%) reported that online learning is less burdensome in terms of social demands such as dressing up nicely or arriving on time. This advantage may be particularly relevant for students who feel uncomfortable or self-conscious in traditional classroom settings, or who have other reasons for preferring the more low-key and flexible environment of online learning. Finally, 15 respondents (17.6%) reported that the flexibility of online learning in managing study time was an advantage compared to face-to-face learning. This emphasizes that online learning gives students the flexibility to balance their studies with other important commitments, such as work or family life.

Taken together, the data conveys that students perceive several advantages to online learning, particularly in terms of flexibility, convenience, and cost-effectiveness. These advantages may make online learning a more attractive option for some students, particularly those who have other responsibilities or constraints that make attending traditional classes more difficult. However, it is important to note that online learning has its unique challenges and limitations, such as the need for self-motivation and the potential for technical issues. Institutions should work to balance the benefits and drawbacks of online learning to ensure they deliver the most effective educational experience for every student.

Students' Expectations and Suggestions toward Online Learning

This section delves into students' expectations and suggestions concerning online learning. The findings deliver key insights into the preferences and recommendations of students aimed at enhancing the quality of online learning.

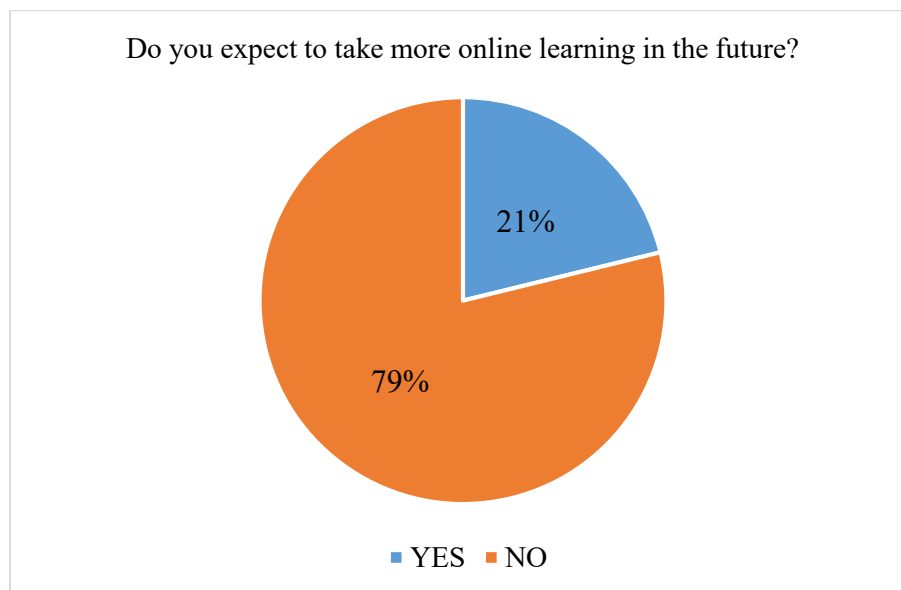


Figure 1 Students' Expectations

Based on the survey results, the majority of respondents (67, or 79%), do not expect to take more online learning in the future. This may suggest that there are still significant challenges and limitations to online learning that have not been fully addressed, despite the benefits that it offers. On the other hand, 18 (21%) of respondents said they expect to take more online learning in the future. This may imply that they have experienced online learning positively and view it as an efficient way to learn. In brief, the data implies that while online learning has become more prevalent in recent years, it may not be suitable for everyone and may still have room for improvement to address the challenges that students face.

Table 3
Students' Suggestions in Improving Online Learning

Suggestions to Improve Online Learning	Number of Responses	Percentage
Improving the quality of technology and online learning platforms	48	56%
Increasing support to address technical issues	40	47%
Providing more assistance in understanding course material	39	46%
Providing more opportunities to interact with teachers and classmates	34	40%

The survey results present that the respondents have several suggestions to enhance the quality of online learning in the future. The majority of the respondents, which is 48 out of 85 (56%), suggested improving the quality of technology and online learning platforms. This implies that the respondents have experienced technical problems that affect their online learning experience. Moreover, 40 respondents (47%) suggested increasing support to address technical issues. This indicates that technical problems are prevalent and could impact the quality of online learning. Additionally, 39 respondents (46%) suggested providing more assistance in understanding course material. This indicates that the respondents need more guidance and support in comprehending the course material during their online learning. Finally, 34 respondents (40%) suggested providing more opportunities to interact with teachers and classmates. This shows that the respondents feel a lack of social interaction and support during their online learning, which could potentially affect their motivation to learn. To sum up, the results suggest that enhancing the quality of technology and online learning

platforms and providing more assistance and interaction with teachers and classmates are crucial in improving the quality of online learning. Additionally, addressing technical problems is also necessary to ensure a smooth online learning experience.

Discussion

This study's findings on common obstacles and advantages in online learning align with previous research while providing a comprehensive view of students' experiences and expectations in the context of digital education and online learning. In response to the first research question, the study identified technical difficulties, particularly poor internet access, as the most significant challenge students faced. This finding corroborates existing literature that highlights the significance of technical problems in online education (Gombkötő et al., 2024; Okyar, 2023). The prevalence of this issue underscores the imperative for educational institutions to invest in robust technological infrastructure and support mechanisms to mitigate disruptions caused by technical glitches. The second most frequently reported obstacle, the lack of social interaction, echoes earlier studies emphasizing the importance of building a sense of community in online learning (Lin & Wang, 2024; Pei et al., 2024). The need for social engagement, as identified by students, aligns with prior research that suggests incorporating collaborative activities and peer-to-peer interaction can enhance the online learning experience (Ala et al., 2023; Hsieh, 2020).

Difficulties in understanding course materials without direct assistance, a challenge faced by a considerable portion of respondents, also align with previous research on the role of instructor presence and instructional design in improving online course materials (Polat, 2023; Roque-Hernández et al., 2023). These findings underscore the significance of proper faculty development and course structure in building effective online education settings. Furthermore, the observation that online learning may not always be motivating to students is consistent with earlier studies on student motivation in online courses (Ferrer et al., 2022; Huang & Wang, 2023; Xiao & Hew, 2024). To address this issue, educators must consider implementing strategies that boost student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. Finally, the challenge of time management is a common concern in both online and traditional learning environments. Effective time management skills are crucial for student success, underscoring the importance of providing support and resources to help students build these skills.

Addressing the second research question, the advantages of online learning, such as flexibility, accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and reduced social demands, are well-documented in the literature (Castro & Tumibay, 2021; Hussein et al., 2020; Isma, Basri, Abduh, et al., 2024; Isma, Sudewi, & Amrang, 2024; Stoian et al., 2022). These benefits, as highlighted by the respondents, underscore the appeal of online education to students who value these aspects. The perception of online learning as more cost-effective is consistent with previous research (Lim & Lee, 2022; Masalimova et al., 2024). The reduction in transportation and accommodation expenses makes it an attractive option for budget-conscious students, especially as the cost of higher education continues to rise. The potential for cost savings can be a significant factor in students' decisions to pursue online education. Moreover, access to course materials anytime and anywhere is a well-documented advantage of online learning (Chathuranga et al., 2024; Du et al., 2022). The capacity to access educational resources from the convenience of one's home or any place with internet connectivity is a fundamental aspect of online learning. It encourages students to learn at their own pace and take control of their academic experience.

Furthermore, the feeling of being less burdened by social demands, such as dressing up or arriving on time, resonates with the concept of reduced social pressures in online learning (Richardson & Swan, 2019; Tan et al., 2023). It offers a more relaxed and comfortable

learning environment, particularly for students who may feel self-conscious or stressed in traditional classroom settings. In addition, the flexibility that online learning provides in managing study time aligns with existing literature (Isma, Basri, Abduh, et al., 2024; Tarrayo et al., 2023). This flexibility accommodates the varied schedules and commitments of students, enabling them to access course materials and complete assignments at their convenience. It provides a degree of convenience that might be difficult to attain in traditional classroom settings, especially for non-traditional and working students (Zeng & Bridges, 2023).

The third research question, which explored student expectations and suggestions, revealed a concerning insight: nearly four out of five students did not expect to pursue further online learning. This reluctance strongly suggests that, despite clear advantages, current online learning practices are falling short in delivering a fulfilling educational experience. The students' expectations regarding the future of online learning are aligned with the literature on student preferences and expectations (Chodak et al., 2023). This suggests that while online learning has its advantages, addressing the identified obstacles is essential to enhance its appeal. The students' suggestions for improving online learning also resonate with prior research. Enhancing the quality of technology and online learning platforms is consistent with the notion that technology plays a pivotal role in online education (Anderson & Rivera-Vargas, 2020; Isma, 2023b; Isma, Lestari, Halim, et al., 2024). Similarly, the call for more opportunities for interaction is in line with recommendations to promote collaborative learning and instructor-student engagement in digital education (Isma, Lestari, Rohimajaya, et al., 2024; Roque-Hernández et al., 2023). These suggestions emphasize that technology alone is not enough; effective online learning requires human-centered design that incorporates interaction, support, and responsiveness. Tools like virtual office hours, peer discussion forums, feedback-rich assignments, and modular video content could help bridge the gap between isolation and engagement.

This study contributes to the literature by presenting a context-specific perspective from EFL students in a developing region, an area underrepresented in existing research. By focusing on the Indonesian higher education context, the study provides insights that are both locally grounded and globally relevant, especially for institutions aiming to offer equitable online learning in low-resource environments. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that higher education institutions must move beyond simply adopting online platforms; they must invest in digital infrastructure, train instructors in digital pedagogy, and actively solicit student feedback. For policymakers, the results underscore the importance of inclusivity in technology planning, ensuring that online education does not amplify existing educational inequalities. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The data are based on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by individual biases or recent experiences. Additionally, the research focused on a single institution, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, compare cross-institutional data, or investigate the long-term impact of online learning on academic outcomes and student well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the experiences of EFL university students with online learning, focusing on the challenges they encountered, the advantages they recognized, and their expectations for future improvements. The findings revealed that while students acknowledged the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of online education, they also faced considerable obstacles, particularly technical problems, limited interaction, and difficulty understanding course material. These challenges contributed to a general reluctance among students to engage in further online learning, despite the practical benefits it offers. The study's results have important implications for institutions seeking to deliver effective online

education in EFL contexts. There is a clear need for improved technological infrastructure, responsive technical support, and more interactive and personalized instructional approaches. Educational institutions must move beyond viewing online learning merely as a delivery mechanism and instead approach it as a pedagogical environment that requires thoughtful design, regular evaluation, and learner-centered support systems. Furthermore, the students' feedback highlights the importance of fostering engagement through social interaction, instructor presence, and timely academic assistance. These elements are essential not only for enhancing learning outcomes but also for maintaining student motivation and satisfaction in digital environments. Institutions are encouraged to involve students in the ongoing development and refinement of online learning systems to ensure their needs and voices are reflected in policy and practice. Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. It relied on self-reported survey data from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider adopting mixed-methods approaches, expanding to multiple institutions, and exploring the long-term impacts of online learning on language proficiency, academic achievement, and career readiness. In summary, online learning presents both significant opportunities and notable challenges. To ensure that it becomes a viable and sustainable mode of instruction in EFL higher education, institutions must prioritize accessibility, interaction, and instructional quality. By addressing these areas, educators and policymakers can help build more inclusive, effective, and learner-centered digital learning environments.

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