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Is online reading as effective and meaningful as offline reading?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine whether an online reading class is as effective and meaningful as an offline one. Participants were 46 first-year students taking an English for Psychology subject. Quantitative data collection and analyses were employed. The quantitative data were derived from the analysis of their pre-test and post-test results, as well as open-ended questionnaires. Online reading class provides students with extensive opportunities and a distraction from learning. It also requires computer access, an internet connection, and good electronic literacy. Offline reading class, in comparison, requires students to focus merely on the ongoing classroom activity and offer direct face-to-face interaction with peers and the teacher. The results of the pre-test and post-test indicate an increase score of 1.3 % for students joining the online reading class and 18.7 % for students joining the offline reading class. It means that both offline and online reading classes offer similar opportunities to succeed.

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1. Introduction

With the booming of the computer and internet technology, the world becomes the host of billions of people connection per second. All regions have unavoidably adopted this tech-sawy culture to catch up with the most recent world changes. The internet world statistics stunningly released the data of internet users in the world. According to its data for June 30, 2012 Asia is the region with the most internet users in the world (1076.7 million users). In Indonesia only, with the population number of 248,645,008 people, 2,000,000 are internet users in 2000. Twelve years afterwards, the number rose rapidly to 55,000,000 internet users and 51,096,860 became Facebook users (Internet World Statistics, 2012). It can be implied that people are more involved in a new kind of technology and thus it results in the emerging new literacy of computer and electronics gadgets.

The digital native generation-all born after 1980 at the time when things are made online (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, introduction)-began to get closely engaged with screen texts. Along with the more popular on line and screen culture, literacy skills become more knowledgeable and thus stand out necessary across ages. As more schools embed its learning with the advanced technology, research on online learning activities flourish. More attention is dedicated to investigate how the use of advanced technology and literacy issues bring significant impacts on learning. A great number of research is dedicated to this context-rich investigation such as on line extensive reading (Arnold, 2009), the advantages and disadvantages of learning English using ICT (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000; Warschauer, 1999a, in press), online learning in second language classroom (Warchauer, 2000; Leu et.al, in press), online reading strategies and learning styles (Hsieh and Dwyer, 2009), onhne reading habit (Abidin, 2011), and online reading strategies (Anderson, 2003). In particular education contexts; more extensive impacts of technology are indicated to lie on the shift of instructional design and new learning environment in classrooms (Leu et al, in Reinking, 1998, p. 204).

This research examines whether online reading and offline reading may be similarly effective and meaningful in a foreign language classroom. With high regard of its unique context-an ESP classroom attended by students registering in Psychology department-this study is deemed necessary to give insights on different reading activities in EFL classrooms. Online and offline reading issues have been on argument since they become parts of new learning activities along with the demand of using technology in classrooms. Kurniawan and Zaphiris (2001) investigated reading speed of on line texts and printed materials involving 42 participants of three age-groups. Results indicate that reading paper is slightly faster than reading on line texts while column formats almost have no impact on reading speed and preference. In addition, adjustment needs to be taken to help easy reading such as bigger fonts and display contrast. Similar issues on electronic versus printed materials are raised by Bintliff She proposes that both printed and electronic materials have their own advantages and disadvantages from which users are the ones to make necessary decision to use them for their own suited purposes. She affirms that "print materials offer complexity and context and electronics materials offer specificity and speed" (2005, p. 25, in press). It is, therefore, essential that the research on the use of on line and offiine reading be conducted to investigate how such activities could be properly implemented.

The discussion on on line class activities continues to the issue of feedback, social interaction in classroom, on line social network, characteristics of on line classes are "fiscally viable, technologically accessible, academically sound, educational alternative. The emergence of blended and online classes makes them more popular in use in English Language classroom. This kind of learning activities can be conducted either asynchronous, synchronous or a mixture of both (Cramer and Cramer (2008, p. 26-27). Comprehending online texts needs more skills compared to comprehending the traditional/paper-based texts (Coiro & Schmar-Oobler, 2005). In term of certain subject area using English language as the medium, there may be reluctance of some teachers to try new approaches due to their objectified teaching (IRA, 2002). Regarding the fact that teaching content area subjects may not be easy, many content teachers believe that their responsibility lies more on delivering the content rather than language skills such as reading (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).The sense of emergency is worth investigating in relation to more equal agenda for addressing the use of ICT, online

learning, reading comprehension, and content knowledge respectively (Leu et al, 2005, a report).

The emergence and flourishing of ICT use and online learning necessitate the skills of electronic literacies. Warschauer proposes electronic literacies that include computer literacy, information literacy, multimedia literacy, computer-mediated communication literacy or online interaction. Therefore, involvement of students should be promoted in learning activities (2000). He further suggests that all academicians and stakeholders are in high demand for integrating ICT as the tool of learning into language teaching practices (Warschauer, 2002, pp.456). Therefore, the notion of online reading class may give great opportunities for students to be familiar with the technology embedded learning which in turn will empower students with electronic literacies and new learning experiences.

2. Research Methodology

The participants were 46 students majoring in Psychology and they were taking a 2-credit English subject that meets once a week for 100 minutes. There were 46 students taking the English subject in the class and 14 meetings were required to complete the learning process for the semester. According to the faculty regulations, students had to attend minimum 75% of the whole sessions. Eighteen students volunteered joining the online reading class for five weeks while the rest preferred to attend offline reading class. Those who volunteered the online reading class were the ones with internet access at their homes. The learning process containing 14 sessions was divided into 4 parts. The first meeting was used to introduce the overall classroom activit1es, requirements, assignments, and assessment. The second week, in addition, was used to administer the pre-test. The next 5 week-learning activities were carried out with 10 students joining the online class (the other 8 students finally resigned due to technical and personal problems) and 36 students joining the offline one. After the session was over, a post-test was administered to 10 students taking the online reading class and 10 students taking the offline class that were randomly selected. The other 7-week meetings were used to deal with the rest of the reading activities involving both online and offline reading activities. Finally, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to all students to obtain their information on both online and offline reading class. Analyseson the procedures, effectiveness, and meanings of the learning activities were carried out and described to obtain the picture of online and offline reading activities as to how much one may be different, more effective, and more meaningful than the other.

3. Findings

The class was divided into two groups. Group A joined the offline reading class while Group B the on line reading class. In the first 2 meetings, students were introduced to the syllabus and the entire researchplan including their participations, requirements, consequences, and willingness. Of 18 students volunteering the online reading class, only 10 completely joined the online reading class through thee-learning medium called klasiber (a learning management system developed by the university for internal use). This learning management system is available and accessible to all students 24 hours a day and 7 days per week. All student data are included in the system, therefore no other entry data regarding

the number of students and names need to be provided. A few days before the online reading started, 4 student volunteers for the online reading class resigned due to internet trouble. It correspondingly affected the number of data used for comparing the pre-test and post-test As a result, there were merely 14 students joining the online reading class but only 10 students completed the data collection. In other words, the data available for investigating online reading classes were reduced. To fairly compare the existing data ,therefore, ten random data were taken from the offline reading group. The research participants who volunteered joining the on line reading classes averagely took six subjects requiring the use of computer and internet with approximately 3.9 hour internet usage per day. They also believed that their computer literacy was good. The result of the pre-test and post-test shows that the students joining the on line reading class succeeded in increasing their score by 1.3 % from 55.1 to 55.8 respectively. In comparison, the score of the pre-test and post-test of the students joining the offiine reading class significantly rose from 50.7 to 60.2 (18.7 %).

From the open-ended questionnaires, it can be illustrated that 70% students believed that online reading class has similar benefits to offiine reading class. There were 63% students affirmed that online reading is more difficult than the offiine reading. It is also interesting to note that 87 % students thought that having experiences in joining on line reading class was very important for them while only 13 % students felt the reverse. Students indicated that online reading required strong motivation and self-confidence. Similarly, nearly all of the students agreed that on line reading class would be successful when they had the autonomous learning manner. Similar finding suggested the necessity for computer and internet literacy and greater chance to explore the internet world and to search unknown information.

Quite many constraints were listed by the student participants. Disconnected internet, run-out credit, unsupportive programs, slow connection, bad signal from providers, software installment failure, and black-out were to mention some. Furthermore, more personal constraints that were disclosed include laziness, unserious conversation, and unhealthy body condition. Some benefits of joining on line reading class were flexible time and place, more knowledge on on line reading class, no need to go to campus, more relaxed, easy to find information, and not getting tired.

Meanwhile, the drawback of joining online classes was lack of concentration, indirect meeting with the teacher, confusion and inability to ask for teachers' clarification, inappropriate time, and loss of relaxing time. On the other hand, students also posed several advantages of learning offiine reading, such as more meaningful conversation, concentration, understanding after the teacher's explanation, and opportunities to ask for the teacher's clarification. Few personal reasons were also revealed such as early getting up and more disciplined schedule. Surprisingly, offiine reading class was attributed to numerous disadvantages, namely sleepiness, no breakfast time, inflexible, lateness, inconducive atmosphere, easily distracted concentration, distance from home to campus, tiredness, and inability to use social media such as twitter.

4. Discussion

This research is trying to compare how online reading class can be as effective and meaningful as offiine reading class. This study finds that the students joining the online reading class succeeded in increasing their score by 1.3 % from 55.1 to 55.8 respectively. Comparatively, the score of students joining the offiine reading class significantly rose from 50.7 to 60.2 (18.7 %). The results indicate that the increasing score of the students joining the offiine reading activities are considerably higher than that of the students joining the online reading activities. Relating to the findings, further investigations on how the score can be dissimilar are continued.

Numerous research findings such as the ones conducted by Kurniawan and Zaphiris (2001), Bintliff (2005), and Coiro & Schrnar-Dobler (2005) address similar issues regarding the difficulties, advantages and disadvantages of reading paper and reading on line. Kurniawan and Zaphiris reveal that offiine reading or reading paper lssomewhat faster than reading on line meanwhile Bintliff points out that both print materials and electronic materials have their own characteristics which need to be dealt with using different strategies. Complexity and context are tangible to printed materials while specificity and speed belong to electronics materials. Coiro & Schmar-Dobler (2005) pose more skills needed to comprehend on line reading materials. The research participants of this study (63 %) support the argument that difficulties to cope with online reading materials are more salient than those of the paper materials. It is therefore indicated that reading electronic materials may need more skills than simply reading paper. Hence, students have to understand ways to make on line reading easier and helpful. As indicated by Bintliff, the issue of contrast and bigger font on the computer screen may significantly influence the online reading activities. Leu et al in Reinking (1998) address the lack of software as one of the sources of problem that students and teachers face. Similarly, students involved in this research complain of several technical problems and available facilities such as disconnected internet, unsupportive programs, and software installment failure. Due to the related technical problems, some solutions are therefore needed to support the online reading class implementation. Though klasiber has been set and designed for the ease of learning, computer capacity, internet speed and stability, as well as secure electricity supply should be appropriately provided. Data collected from the open-ended questionnaires show that 63% students confirm that online reading is more difficult than the offline reading. It can then be implied that the score differences between students joining the online and offline reading class may result from the available technical factors and facilities.

In term of meaningfulness of both offline and online reading activities, it is important to remark that 87 % students indicate the importance of having online reading class experiences while only 13 % students feel the reverse. Another finding of this study suggests that students believe in the similar benefits of both offline and online reading class. It also means that both activities may provide students with various learning experiences that require different strategies to excel. To well tackle this circumstance, Warschauer has greatly proposes kinds of electronic literacies that need to be mastered by the students. The electronic literacies cover computer literacy, information literacy, multimedia literacy, computer-mediated communication literacy or online interaction (2000). It can be inferred that successful online reading class requires sufficient electronic literacies in order that students are fully ready for coping with any problems of online reading activities. Insufficient preparation, thus, is highly likely problematic and may trigger unsuccessful and inconvenient learning. Since this

research was commenced, students were offered choices whether they would prefer online or offline reading class. Those who chose to join the online reading class believed that they could deal with the online learning regardless the fact that technical problems- the uncontrollable factor they face-seem to impede their maximum performance.

5. Conclusion

In the light of all the finding and discussion, it can be highlighted that online and offiine reading classes may have their advantages and disadvantages. While offli ne reading activities have been common and extensively practiced in schools,on line reading class offers students with new experiences,challenges, and mastery on electronic literacies. Although the findings in this study indicate that score of students joining online reading class is lower than that of students joining offiine reading class, numerous influencing factors can correspondingly be listed such as insufficient computer and internet literacies, unstable internet connection, and software installment failure. In addition, experiencing online reading class may be challenging for some students, yet potential technical problems require precaution.

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