

EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of their Experience in Using Short Stories in a Bichronous E-learning Environment

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Article History:

Received: 04/05/2023

Revised: 11/09/2024

Accepted: 20/11/2024

Available Online: 15/02/2025

Keywords:

Bichronous e-learning, EFL language skills, learning experience, short stories

ABSTRACT

Short stories and e-learning are two effective tools for EFL learning and teaching due to their potential to promote language, communication, cultural understanding, and thinking skills and to facilitate enjoyable, interesting, and encouraging learning. Yet, studies exploring students' experience in using literature and EFL e-learning environments are still meager. This study aimed at exploring the perceptions of eight EFL pre-service teachers at Universitas Kristen Indonesia, Jakarta of their experience in using short stories in an EFL e-learning environment. To elucidate their voices of their experiences, data collected employing FGDs and semi-structured interviews was analyzed using the content analysis technique. The results revealed that the majority of the participants had a positive perception of using short stories to learn English in a bichronous (combination of synchronous and asynchronous) e-learning environment. They viewed that short stories use through a bichronous e-learning platform in the course effectively developed their language skills, honed their research skills, made learning convenient and interesting, and broadened their knowledge and cultural understanding. Many of them were even encouraged to keep on reading online short stories for pleasure. Thus, short stories can be an effective tool for enhancing the performance of EFL learners studying through bichronous e-learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature use has long been one of the focus points in EFL learning and teaching. Its use in EFL classrooms can be very advantageous for several reasons. Current views indicate that literature use in EFL classrooms can make learning more enjoyable, interesting, and encouraging (Ghosn, 2002; Pardede, 2011), promotes communicative competence, develops cross-cultural understanding (Ghosn, 2002; Barker, 2003), and provides starting blocks for critical thinking (Parkinson & Thomas 2000; Ghosn, 2002) and aesthetic appreciation development (Bretz, 1990). Among all literary genres, short stories are considered the most suitable to use in EFL classrooms. Collie and Slater (2001) posited four advantages of using short stories. First, short stories could be dealt with in one or two class sessions due to their relative shortness. Second, most expressions in short stories are daily languages so it is relatively easy for students to work with on their own. Third, short stories cover so diverse topics, themes, and styles so that teachers have an ample opportunity to select works that meet student's interests and tastes. Fourth, short stories are suitable for students of all ages and all levels of language mastery. Moreover, short stories are entertaining (a necessary condition for reducing pervasive apprehension) and promote critical thinking (Young, 2007). Murdoch (2002, p. 9) accentuated: "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for students at intermediate levels of proficiency."

Despite its various benefits, short stories use in EFL classrooms can also generate problems. These problems are generally caused by three factors: inclusion of various literary expressions (e.g. archaic words, slang, allusions) and grammatical structures that are hard to comprehend by EFL learners in many stories; the presence of cultural issues that EFL learner find difficult to understand; and the varied length of short stories (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). these. If EFL students should deal with a too-long short story, they might be unable to handle it within the available course hours, or they might even be frightened to deal with the long work. To overcome these problems, teachers should carefully select the short stories to use by considering the aspect of students' needs, interests, language level, and historical, social, and cultural background knowledge, and the length of the short stories.

Another current trend in EFL teaching and learning is the integration of information and communication technology (ICT), i.e. technologies employed to access, gather, manipulate, and present or communicate information (Fortunasari, 2016). ICT integration is viewed as an important strategy to upsurge teaching and learning process efficacy as these technologies provide EFL classrooms a range of potential creative solutions for refining learning and teaching and offer various facilities that allow the learning reorientation from learning as a knowledge presentation process into a process of guiding individual in exploring knowledge and science.

ICT integration has been providing EFL classrooms with a range of potential creative solutions for refining learning and teaching inputs, learning processes, and learning outcomes (Pardede, 2012). One of the most significant trends in ICT integration is the adoption of e-learning to conduct courses fully web-based, in blended (the traditional plus web-based) format, or in the traditional courses supplemented with ICT tools. The fully web-

based courses were initially implemented in two modes: synchronous or asynchronous. Yet, they were later combined to build bichronous mode.

Most e-learning courses employ the asynchronous mode (Parsad & Lewis, 2008) due to its flexibility, which allows students to study at their leisure. It is facilitated via online discussion boards, news feeds, and instant messaging tools. It offers students flexible time frames because they can access learning material, communicate, take and submit assignments, and take assessments at their own pace. To succeed in it, however, students must have high self-discipline to meet the deadline for completing every learning activity and a strong commitment to learn both individually and collaboratively. However, synchronous modes, which may take the form of live students' presentations, live lectures, or live group seminars hosted through video conferencing or chat, are very critical to bring teachers and students to interact in virtual spaces. Various studies (Barbour et al., 2012; Hen & Johnson, 2012) suggested that synchronous modes affect students' motivation, perception, engagement, and sense of contribution. Martin et al. (2020), therefore, recommended blending asynchronous and synchronous e-learning as they complement each other. They called the combination of the two modes bichronous e-learning. Duncan et al. (2012) found that the integration of high-quality chat rooms (synchronous) and discussion boards (asynchronous) improved students' performance. Bichronous e-learning was also found to increase students' engagement through their participation in synchronous and asynchronous class activities (Yamagata-lynn, 2014). Bichronous mode is supposed to be an essential part of future e-learning (Müller et al., 2021).

Another essential supporting factor for synchronous and asynchronous e-learning implementation, particularly in short story-based EFL classrooms, is the availability and easy access to digital short stories. Unlike the conventional printed short stories, which must be read on paper, digital short stories were created on a computer, published on the internet, and read on screens. They are also created in multimedia, i.e., in digital text, animated texts, text with direct link and reference to other texts, audios, videos, or the combination of two or more of these formats. Moreover, as they are published on the internet, they are easy to access. Various studies have shown that digital short stories also fit the interests of today's students. As tech-savvy, they are skillful in using ICT tools and in favor of getting information created and delivered via multimedia. Sun (2003) reported that students enjoyed online reading activities conducted on a reading website, and it improved their online reading skills. Similarly, Huang (2013) showed students' positive attitudes towards reading e-books downloaded from the website because it made reading easier and increased their reading ability. Having these features, digital short stories can provide a large opportunity to meet students' interests and needs.

What is more, digital short stories facilitate a production-centered experience among the students. They can be used to encourage students not just to be readers but also makers. After reading a digital short story, for instance, students could be assigned to create and upload audio or written reader responses. Students could also be assigned in groups to create a video of a drama based on the short story. Since they are encouraged to be makers, the students' creative and innovative skills are honed.

The discussion above indicates that short stories and a combined synchronous and asynchronous e-learning are two effective tools for EFL classrooms. Using their combination

can make learning more enjoyable, interesting, and encouraging. However, most studies on literature use in ESL/EFL classrooms mainly dealt with receptive skills (Siahaan, 2012), grammar (Rodríguez, 2017; Kahraman, 2020), vocabulary (Rodríguez, 2017), and writing or speaking (Parkinson & Thomas 2000). Some other studies were devoted to teaching methodology and activities (Sharma, 2019), while some others focused on the students' or teachers' perceptions (Pardede, 2011; Krishnan & Shah, 2020). Studies focusing on EFL students' perceptions of their experiences in using short stories in an e-learning environment are meager. Thus, there is a need to explore what students undergo when they learn English using short stories in a blended e-learning environment and how they perceive it. Accordingly, this study attempted to fill in the gap by seeking answers to the following question: "How do EFL freshmen perceive and describe their learning experiences in using short stories to learn English in a blended e-learning environment?"

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a case study design, defined by Yin (2008) as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). This design befits the study for it allows the participants to express their perceptions of the experiences they underwent while learning English using short stories in the blended e-learning environment.

Setting and Participants

Conducted in January 2022, this study involved eight freshmen of the English Language Education Department of Universitas Kristen Indonesia (ELE UKI), Jakarta. The participants were part of the students attending the Literature 1 course held in the odd semester of the 2021/2022 academic year, who consented to participate in the study. The course was designed to encourage reading for pleasure among the students and develop their language skills by using short stories.

Since in-class face-to-face learning was still prohibited due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time the course was conducted, the course was shifted to an e-learning platform that blended asynchronous sessions via Edmodo and synchronous sessions conducted via Zoom or Google Meet. Through Edmodo, the students access learning materials (by clicking each link), discuss with the lecturer and other students, and take and submit assignments and assessments at their own pace. The main materials of the course were 12 classics and modern short stories and 8 modules of short story elements. Besides their texts, some of the stories were also provided with audio/video versions to allow the students to use them to enhance their listening and pronunciation skills. The modules were written and uploaded to the lecturer's blog. The learning activities held in the asynchronous sessions included reading the short stories and listening/watching their audios/videos, posting questions and answers concerning the learning materials, writing and providing written feedback, and doing group projects. The synchronous sessions, facilitate live students' presentations of individual reading responses or group analysis of a short story and class discussions to clarify concepts the students had studied in the previous asynchronous sessions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted via a live meeting platform. The FGDs were held twice, each involved four participants, and lasted around 45 minutes. The interviews, conducted to get more insights for clarifying, elaborating, and triangulating the data obtained through the FGDs, were held with four informants randomly selected from the participants of the FGDs. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. After granting the participants' permission, each FGD and interview was recorded and transcribed. During the transcription process, some of the participants' expressions were edited without changing the messages for enhancing their readability. Next, the documents were verified and coordinated with the subsequent FGDs and interviews.

The data obtained were analyzed employing the content analysis technique proposed by Miles et al. (2014) conducted in three simultaneous flows of activity: (1) data condensation, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing. In this study, data condensation was conducted by accumulating, simplifying, and extracting the information gained from the transcriptions of the FGDs and the interviews. The data display phase was carried out by systematically rendering the information gained in the previous step. Conclusion drawing was carried out by making conclusions based on the problems identified and the result of the discussions.

RESULTS

Based on the data condensation and display processes, the findings in this study were classified into five categories/themes as listed in Table 1. Various sub-categories/ subthemes in this list are substantively overlapping. This themes/categories list was arranged for convenience's sake.

Short Stories Use Constraints

The first category of the research findings shows that the participants viewed the use of short stories as a learning material in the classroom arose some difficulties. The difficulties were caused by four factors: difficult/unfamiliar words and literary expressions, complex and deviated grammatical structures, improper cultural understanding, and inappropriate short story reading experience.

Some of the participants found that reading short stories was challenging when the works include unfamiliar literary expressions. P3 (henceforth, participants are identified as, P1, P2, and so on), for instance, stated: "At the beginning, it's hard to understand the war context in Hemingway's *Old man at the Bridge*. So I searched the Internet, and after reading Hemingway's experience as a war correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, the story became more meaningful". P4 added: "*Old man at the Bridge* became more interesting to me after knowing that the bridge in the story is a metaphor for the border of safe and dangerous places."

The participants also found reading short stories challenging when they encounter complex and deviated grammatical structures. P6 said: "..., some stories use some complicated and long sentences. They are difficult to understand."

The third cause concerns with culture. Their improper understanding of certain cultural elements caused the participants unable to thoroughly grasp what an author intended to

say. P8 stated: "It's hard for me to understand why Louise in Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* thinks her marriage has imprisoned her. She loves her husband, but she is excited to imagine that her husband's death will free her. But after the lecturer suggested me see it through a feminist perspective, her attitude made sense."

Table 1.
Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes Based on the Analysis of the Informants' Responses

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Short Stories Use Constraints	a. difficult words and unfamiliar literary expressions b. complex and deviated grammatical structures c. improver cultural understanding d. inappropriate short story reading experience
2. Short Stories Use Effectiveness and Usefulness	a. language skills improvement b. vocabulary and grammar knowledge improvement c. cross-cultural understanding development d. people character judging ability development e. enjoyable and encouraging learning f. reading for pleasure cultivation.
3. Importance of Literary Theories	a. the nature and essence of short stories b. knowledge on short story elements
4. E-learning Constrains	a. reduced social interaction b. Unavailability of laptop/desktop c. lack of internet quota d. slow internet signal
5. E-learning Advantages	a. flexibility and convenience b. online resources and free learning tools availability c. synchronous and asynchronous modes combination

The fourth cause of the difficulties was their inappropriate experience in reading short stories. The FGDs revealed that before attending the class, only 44,4% of the participants ever read some English short stories while the other 55,6% ever read only two or three English short stories assigned in their secondary school English classes.

To overcome these difficulties, the participants tried to consult e-dictionaries and relevant references, utilizing a translation machine. P3 said, "When I could not get the meaning of a word, I checked an e-dictionary or simply copied the word and pasted it on Google to search the meaning". Additionally, all participants also read the stories several times. The finding through the FGD revealed that 33% of the participants read a story 3 to 4 times; 45% read a story 5-6 times, and the other 23% read more 7 or more times.

Short Stories Use Efficacy and Usefulness

The second category of the findings is the usefulness and efficacy stories use to learn English. This category comes up of six sub-categories: language skills development,

vocabulary and grammar knowledge improvement, cross-cultural understanding development, improvement in people's character judging ability, and enjoyable and encouraging learning.

The first subcategory reveals that one of the reasons why short stories use effective and useful is the participants' belief that the class improved their language skills. P1 stated: "Reading the short stories and my friends' responses developed my reading skills." P4 added: "I liked listening to the audio while looking at the text of a story to improve my pronunciation and speaking skills."

The second subcategory concerns with vocabulary and grammar knowledge improvement. Although some difficult words and complex sentences often impeded their understanding in the first reading, participants managed to use them as an opportunity for enriching vocabulary and improving grammar skills. P8 illustrated: "When I found a complicated sentence, I analyzed it by searching relevant concepts or tips on Google. This strategy assisted me to get the meaning." Concerning vocabulary enrichment, P3 said, "When I could not get the meaning of a word, I checked an e-dictionary or copied the word and searched its meaning on Google. This technique was very helpful."

The third subcategory concerns cross-cultural awareness. As described above, the participants' improper understanding of certain cultural elements hindered them to grasp a deep understanding of some stories. But when they had got appropriate knowledge of the cultural items from self-research or discussions, they became appreciative of the cultural differences. P8 asserted: "At the beginning, I thought Mr. Behrman's action to risk his life for Johnsy in Henry's *The Last Leaf*, seems foolish. But after learning the selfless sacrifice principle many people hold, I finally appreciate the action." The next subcategory is the participants' character judging ability improvement. They found reading short stories in general and characterization and character analysis activities, in particular, promoted their ability to understand other people's character. P8 stated: "Reading a short story helps me know more about people's characters because interactions in stories always show the characters' personalities and beliefs." P6 added: "I found characterization techniques used in short story analysis help me judge people's characters in real life."

The fifth subcategory is the potential of short story to provide enjoyable and encouraging learning. The participants found that reading a short story boosted their curiosity to find out what would happen next and what a character would do or say. Immersed in the pleasure of reading, they were not aware that at the same time they were learning English. P8 affirmed: "While reading the third short story in the class, I began to get involved in the story. I shared what the major character feels. To understand the stories better, I tried to learn the meaning of difficult words or complicated grammatical constructions."

The last factor/subcategory indicating short story use efficacy and usefulness is reading for pleasure cultivation. The data from the FGDs showed that 33.3% of the participants kept on reading short stories online for pleasure, the other 22.2% sometimes did it though not continuously, and the rest never read any story at all.

Importance of Understanding Elements of Literature

The third category of the findings in this study is related to the importance of understanding the concepts of literature, especially short story elements. Concerning this, the participants found the learning modules (mainly related to short story basic nature, elements, and how to use them to analyze a short story) helpful. P3 said: "I found the modules very important

to study. When I mastered the concepts of plot, character, setting, etc., I found it easier to understand any short stories." In the same vein, P6 claimed: "I liked studying the modules. ... They were not very difficult to understand because some examples from the short stories assigned in the class are used to explain the concepts."

E-learning Constraints

The fourth category of the findings is related to some difficulties emerging from the blended e-learning environment. Four subcategories contributed to this category: reduced social interaction, unavailability of laptop/desktop, lack of internet quota, and slow internet signal.

Despite their agreement to blended e-learning effectiveness, most of the participants thought the e-learning environment is not an ideal substitute for traditional face-to-face learning because the latter provides them with proper social interactions. P3 said: "Although the combined synchronous and asynchronous modes facilitated me to learn quite effectively, to be honest, I missed the teacher and friends' direct support, affirmation, and physical interaction I used to have in-class face-to-face courses." Though they have got quite extensive interactions while doing their group projects, they still felt missing the social aspects of interactions. P6 said: "Yes, I had made many interactions through the LMS and virtual conferencing. But I still feel they were not as effective as the direct face-to-face interactions. P9 accentuated: "I hope Coronavirus-19 pandemics would end soon so that I can have in-class learning again."

The next factor causing the blended e-learning constraints is the unavailability of a laptop/desktop. To facilitate their e-learning, 44.4% of the participants utilized smartphones, while the other 55.6% alternately used laptops/desktops (when they were at home) or smartphones (while they were not at home). Those who utilized a smartphone found it hard to keep on studying via the tool for more than two hours and to type and edit texts satisfactorily. Additionally, their learning activities were sometimes interrupted by phone calls or message notifications.

The third factor causing the blended e-learning constraints concerns with internet quota. The participants felt frustrated when they ran out of data plan. P3 said, "After joining e-learning classes due to Coronavirus-19 pandemics, I needed up to 40 GB of internet quota per month. Before the pandemic, I needed only about 15 GB. The e-learning was financially burdensome for me."

The last factor is bad Internet connection which, according to the participants, could make them stressed because it interrupted their reading or live discussion. P9 said: "I sometimes went through a slow internet connection. It did not only stuck me to read the short stories and search for information on the Internet but also ruined my interaction with my friends and lecturer."

E-learning Advantages

The fifth category is related to the benefits of using e-learning. This category comes up from three sub-categories: flexibility and convenience, availability of online learning sources and tools, and the effectiveness of blended e-learning (synchronous and asynchronous learning modes combination).

The first sub-category, flexibility, and convenience, indicates that the participants viewed the e-learning environment as beneficial because it enabled them to interact with the lecturer and other students in their own time and to study the learning materials at their own pace and learning styles. Such flexibility allowed them to plan their study time around their other commitments and to learn at their best time and ways. P4 claimed: "I like to study online which allows me to learn in the evening so that I could teach my elementary school pupils in the morning. P8 said: "Watching the video version of a short story helped me understand the text version. I could also keep learning asynchronously as I needed." P3 said: "I loved learning in the silence of the night. I could do it because of the e-learning flexibility."

The next sub-category shows that the e-learning environment was beneficial to the participants due to online learning sources and tools availability. All participants, unanimously agreed that the online modules, articles, etc., helped them increase their research skills. P2 said: "Whenever I need relevant information about the author and other background information, I can directly search them on the Internet." They also viewed learning tools available on the Internet as a factor causing the e-learning advantages is. P6 said: "In the beginning, it was very difficult for me to write a summary or a reader response. But after I practiced using Google Translation and Grammarly, I could write more conveniently."

However, concerning the use of online short stories, in particular, the participants' views split up. Two-third (66.7%) of them preferred to read online than printed short stories due to their availability in multimedia format and practicality. P4 claimed: "I prefer digital short stories because I can have them in textual, audio, and audio formats." P6 added: "Digital short stories are cheaper than the printed ones. They are also practical. I can bring and read them wherever I go." The other participants (33.3%) preferred printed short stories because they facilitate underlining and note-taking, and reading on screen can cause eye strain. P1 said: "To be honest, I like a printed version because I could analyze it word by word, highlight some words, and put notes on the empty spaces." P9 added: "Since I have a minus in my eye, I always printed out a story before I read it".

The third sub-category concerns with the effectiveness of blended e-learning. The participants viewed the synchronous and asynchronous modes have their strengths and weakness, but they complement each other in blended e-learning. For them, the synchronous learning mode was effective to receive feedback and practice speaking skills by holding an oral presentation, class discussion, and virtual lecture. On the other hand, the asynchronous mode was effective to facilitate studying new materials and for reflection. P1 said: "To get new knowledge and to begin reading a story, I found the asynchronous sessions more effective. The synchronous sessions are better for clarifying ideas." Some participants also viewed blended e-learning required their high self-discipline and commitment to learn both independently and collaboratively. P4 said: "E-learning, I guess, requires more time and energy. I could not wait for my lecturer or friends to explain everything. I should be active to search and read references or discuss it with my friends. P8 claimed: "E-learning made me more independent. Yes, it's sometimes hard to do, but it's encouraging. I could learn new things by myself!"

DISCUSSION

As described above, findings in this study revealed that viewing from the participants' perspective, short stories use in EFL blended e-learning posed various advantages and challenges. The findings' major themes cover short story use constraints, short stories' effectiveness and usefulness, the importance of literary theories, e-learning constraints, and e-learning advantages.

Short Stories Use Constraints

The participants encountered difficulties in reading short stories because of four factors: inclusion of difficult/unfamiliar words and literary expressions (slangs, archaic words, idioms, metaphors, allusions, etc.), complex and deviated grammatical structures, improper cultural understanding, and inappropriate short story reading experience. Encountering unfamiliar words/literary expressions and deviated grammatical structures in English short stories are essentially natural for the participants. First, the short stories are written for English native speakers, to whom unfamiliar expressions and deviated grammatical structures are common. Second, as they had just graduated from secondary schools in a non-English speaking country, their English vocabulary and grammar knowledge were still limited. Syntax and literary vocabulary are two common sources of difficulties in short stories use in EFL classrooms (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014).

The participants also thought that their limited cross-cultural understanding also caused the short stories difficult to read. Barker (2003) defined culture as "the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages, and customs of any specific society" (p. 7). Thus, culture seeks to represent the world and its construction. To represent and communicate culture, language is used as the main tool. Since short stories are an art using languages as their media, they contain various cultural features. To understand them, cultural context plays a vital role. As they still had limited intercultural understanding, the students in this study encountered difficulties to understand the short stories. This supports McKay's (2001) view that literature can disappoint new readers for it is full of cultural content that might annoy the new reader.

The third factor contributing to short story use constraints was the participants' inappropriate experience in reading short stories. Before attending the class, most of the participants had ever read only two or three English short stories. Having such a poor reading experience, no wonder if the participants encountered some problems. Duke and Pearson's (2005) literature review showed that to be an effective reader, one should master various strategies, skills, and techniques and practice them by reading numerous different texts.

The findings in this study show that the participants overcame short story use constraints by utilizing relevant internet tools and resources (e-dictionary, e-thesaurus, online articles), and translating texts using Google Translation. Additionally, they also read the stories several times.

Short Stories Use Efficacy and Usefulness

The second theme of the findings reveals that the participant viewed short story use in the blended e-learning they attended as effective and useful because it developed their

language skills, improved vocabulary and grammar, enriched cross-cultural understanding, promoted character judging ability, and created enjoyable and encouraging learning. These findings confirmed previous studies' results revealing that reading and listening to short stories developed EFL students' language skills and enriched their vocabulary (Rodríguez, 2017); short stories are interesting to use as materials for language skills learning and personal enjoyment (Pardede, 2011); and short stories are effective to inculcate intercultural awareness (Savviduo, 2004). These advantages, however, were not resulted from reading the short stories alone, but through its combination with other activities, including peer and class discussions, writing reader responses, researching relevant online learning resources, and short story analysis.

Importance of Literary Theory

The third theme of the findings indicates that literary theory, particularly concepts related to the nature and essence of short stories, elements of short stories, and how to analyze a short story helped them get a deeper understanding of the works they read. This finding justifies Vary's (2022) argument that a reader's ability to identify the elements of literature will enable him to appreciate a story at a higher level and leads him to a deeper examination of the work. It also confirms Chun's (2015) view that literature theory inclusion not only expands students' horizon but also deepen their understanding and interpretation of literary works. However, the inclusion of theory should not aim to study theory for theory's sake but to increase students' ability and awareness in understanding and appreciating short stories.

E-learning Constraints

The findings show that the participants encountered some difficulties while attending the e-learning-based course, i.e.: reduced social interaction, laptop/desktop unavailability, lack of internet quota, and slow internet signal. They admitted that the e-learning platform, particularly the asynchronous mode, allowed them to effectively learn and intensively interact with their friends and lecturer. However, they missed the social elements, including verbal and non-verbal affirmations, approvals, and support in these interactions. This confirmed some previous studies revealing that e-learning is complained of its lack of social presence (Rovai, 2002), particularly the asynchronous mode predominated (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The disappearance of the social elements of interaction drove most participants to conclude that a blended e-learning platform is not an ideal substitute for traditional face-to-face learning. P9 accentuated: "I hope Coronavirus-19 pandemics would end soon so that I can have in-class learning again."

Other factors contributing to e-learning constraints are associated with external factors, i.e.: Laptop/desktop unavailability, limited internet quota, and bad Internet connection. Almost half of the participants did not have a laptop/desktop so that they just used a smartphone to facilitate their learning. This tool made them unable to study for a long time, to properly type and edit texts, or to satisfactorily search for resources on the Internet. Sometimes, their learning activities were also interrupted by phone calls or message notifications. Their limited internet quota also contributed to e-learning problems. Running

out of data plan could make them frustrated. The last factor was bad Internet connection which, could make them stressed, especially if it interrupted their reading or live discussion.

4. E-learning Advantages

Despite the problems they encountered, the participants viewed e-learning as advantageous and encouraging because of its flexibility and convenience, the availability of online learning sources and tools, and the effective combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning modes.

To the participants, e-learning, particularly its asynchronous mode, is flexible and convenient because it enabled them to interact with the lecturer and other students in their own time and to study the learning materials at their own pace and learning styles. These features allowed them to self-regulate their learning so that they could learn using their preferred strategies, styles, time, and place well-suited with their learning needs. The e-learning course was also convenient to them because they found the learning platforms user-friendly. This confirmed the results of previous studies revealing that e-learning convenience correlates with students' capability to access, navigate, and engage with the e-learning platform (Anderson, 2002; Wang, 2009).

The participants also viewed the e-learning course as beneficial because of the availability of online learning sources and tools. They unanimously agreed that the online modules, articles, short stories, and learning (tools e-dictionary, Google Translation, Grammarly, etc.) helped them access information and increase their research skills. Yet, their views of online short stories use were split up. Two-third of them preferred to read the online short stories due to their availability in multimedia format and practicality. The other one-third favored printed texts because they facilitate underlining and note-taking, and reading on screen can cause eye strain. This confirmed Kolikant's (2010) study showing that 76% of the students involved in the study favored online texts because they are interesting, practical, and fun.

The last factor contributing to the e-learning environment's advantage the synchronous and asynchronous modes combination efficacy. To the participants, synchronous and asynchronous modes have their strengths and weaknesses. They viewed the synchronous mode as effective to receive feedback and to practice speaking skills by holding an oral presentation, class discussion, and virtual lecture; and the asynchronous mode was effective to facilitate studying new materials and for reflection. Therefore, combining the best feature of the two modes could build an advantageous blended e-learning platform.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this study was to explore what eight freshmen of ELE UKI perceive of their experience in attending an EFL course using short stories in an e-learning environment. The findings revealed that the majority of the participants had a positive perception of the course. In the beginning, they did encounter some constraints in the use of short stories and a blended e-learning platform. However, after some sessions, as their online learning and researching skills developed, and they could adapt more to the course, they found that the bichronous e-learning provided them with learning experiences that developed their language skills, increased their vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and honed their

research skills. It also promoted their cross-cultural understanding and character-judging abilities. These experiences even encouraged many of them to keep on reading online short stories for pleasure, although the course had ended. To conclude, short stories can be an effective tool for enhancing the performance of EFL learners studying through the combination of synchronous and asynchronous e-learning.

Since this study involved only 8 freshmen majoring in English at an institution (ELE UKI) and the data were collected only through FGDs and interviews, the findings are exclusive to the contextual setting of the study and the participants involved. Thus, it merely contributes partially to understanding freshmen's perception of their experience in using short stories in EFL classrooms in an e-learning context. To obtain more comprehensive insights, future studies are recommended to include a larger number of participants of various majors and from different educational levels and to employ various data collection techniques.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We express our gratitude to Fakultas Sastra dan Bahasa Universitas Kristen Indonesia (FSB UKI), Jakarta for funding this study, and to the students of the English Language Education of FSB UKI who participated in this study.

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