

# SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF PRE- SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore pre-service English teachers' experience in facing challenges and their coping strategies in managing synchronous virtual classrooms during practicum. This study employed narrative inquiry as its research design with thematic analysis for analyzing the data collected through semi-structured interviews with three pre-service English teachers. The study found that the pre-service English teachers encountered several problems in managing synchronous virtual classrooms, such as 1) students' negative attitude; 2) insufficient instruction time; 3) lack of relationship or connection between teacher and students; 4) lack of proper feedback from mentor teacher and supervisor. Despite of several challenges mentioned above, the pre-service teachers had some strategies to deal with them, as follows 1) seeking emotional support from peers; 2) actively communicating with expert teachers; 3) solving problems through networking; 4) improving their strategies and skill. In summary, even though the pre-service English teachers faced several challenges, they could manage to overcome such challenges by identifying their needs and available access to improve their classroom situation.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Coping Strategies, Teaching Practicum, Virtual Classroom Management

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching practicum is an essential practice to gain experience in teaching for pre-service English teachers. It assists pre-service English teachers to be exposed with an authentic hands-on experience in teaching field. However, MacDonald (1973) claimed that teaching practicum considerably causes stress as pre-service language teachers confront a number of stressful circumstances during the practice. This stressful situation causes negative emotions, such as anxiety, annoyance, and dissatisfaction (Kyriacou, 2001). In language classroom, issues such as overcrowded classroom and students' different level of language proficiency also become hurdle for pre-service language teachers in actual classroom (Sarıçoban, 2010). Significantly, most of research regarding pre-service English teachers' challenges during teaching practicum identified management classroom as an utmost obstacle that pre-service teachers face.

Classroom management involves actions taken by teacher to create a conducive and effective learning environment. Thus, it is considered as a significant skill to become a proper teacher. According to Marzano (2003), a well-managed classroom consists of several integrating areas such as performing disciplinary actions, setting and establishing rules and procedures, maintaining effective relationship between teacher and student, and maintaining a good mental set in classroom management. However, managing classroom to such extent is becoming a serious challenge for pre-service English teachers (Quintero Corzo & Ramírez Contreras, 2011), especially in virtual classroom.

Virtual classroom, particularly synchronous classroom, is performed in real-time like traditional classroom as teachers and students attending class together while students can engage class materials at the same time. A technology-driven classroom has many advantages for teaching, learning, practicing, and assessing courses, particularly in EFL context in which benefits students whose limited opportunity to practice their language skills (Alsied & Pathan, 2013). Therefore, the teachers are demanded to acquire technology skills to effectively integrate them into classroom. Thus, with the crisis occurring, pre-service English teachers are expected to be able to adjust to the situation and skillfully combine the teaching instructional with technology during teaching practicum. In other words, new challenges regarding classroom management in teaching practicum for pre-service English teachers increase.

This issue has been growing attention in different focus for pre service English teachers, such as the study focusing on how a pre-service English teacher managed EFL classroom with the innovation of using technology (Capador and Nieto's, 2018), pre-service teachers' observation in the use of the EBA lessons which were distributed online in their practicum (Özkanal et al.'s, 2020), and the challenges and expectations of pre-service English teachers' teaching practicum during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gustine, 2021). Therefore, regarding the explanation above, this study aims to; (1) explore pre-service English teachers' experience in managing synchronous virtual classroom during teaching practicum; and (2) explore pre-service English teachers' coping strategies in managing synchronous virtual classroom problems that emerge during teaching practice.

### **Virtual Classroom: Synchronous Learning Strategy**

Synchronous learning allows teachers and students to connect in real-time, usually through video conferences (Plaisance, 2018). Not only it helps savings in term of time and costs, but Chen et al. (2005) also argues that in many situations synchronous learning can surpass both asynchronous learning and traditional face-to-face learning. There are five major functions provided by real-time online interaction, namely instruction, collaboration, support, socialization, and extended outreach (Finkelstein, 2006). Moreover, other important advantages are teachers can provide immediate feedback for students and increase their motivation to be present and engaged in class activities (Chen et al., 2005). In brief, it provides a better learning experience for students (It-analysis, 2001).

In regard to language teaching and learning, Mincu (2015) states that the use of synchronous learning strategy in language learning enhances several skills such as higher-level thinking, critical thinking, and problem-solving as students are expected to interact, collaborate, and participate in real-time in English classroom activities. Although a virtual classroom offers a number of benefits, it also has several limitations. The shift from physical classroom to virtual classroom generally can be challenging since teachers may encounter technical problems while integrating technology in the classroom, need much effort to design appropriate pedagogical and classroom activities, and gain students' support (Son, 2018).

### **Classroom Management within Online Environment**

There are four integrating areas in classroom management, such as setting and establishing rules and procedures, performing disciplinary actions, maintaining effective relationships between teacher-students, and maintaining good mental health set for management (Marzano, 2003). Mobit (2014) also mentions that there are three aspects of classroom management such as managing students' motivation, managing constraints that emerged in classroom, and managing

teacher roles. In online environment, it also requires establishing course rules and policies, yet expects not to be overemphasized because it might make students feel dehumanized and isolated (Stewart, 2008). As a preventive action towards those undesirable events, Stewart (2008) states that teachers should provide real-time feedback and maintain a sense of community in online environment. Nevertheless, online environment offers plentiful benefits over traditional learning, especially with its access and the use of technology (Martin, 2019). The foundation of productive classroom management is the student-teacher relationship, either in an online and offline classroom. An established relationship between students-teacher will build meaningful conversations that help teachers to meet students' needs and engage with them competently (Martin, 2019). Bondy et al. (2015) also declare that the online setting provides opportunities for meaningful social relationships, professional collaboration, and greater education among teachers. Thus, the use of technology allows teachers to encourage engagement, emphasize socialization and personalization, and build a critical learning community towards new knowledge (Dyer, Aroz, & Larson, 2017).

### **Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies are classified into several areas. Dewe (1985) categorized teachers' coping strategies into direct action strategies and palliative strategies. Direct action can also refer to active coping which is an initiative to eliminate stressors or to minimize the effects by increasing one's effort (Pogere et al. 2019). Direct action strategies can consist of accessing information, seeking help, improving skills, connecting with others, reflecting, and setting boundaries (Sharplin, O'Neill & Chapman, 2011). While direct action is a problem-focused coping, palliative strategies are emotion-focused coping in which helps to reduce internal or emotional response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Shah & Muncer, 2005; Pogere et al, 2019). The way of coping with burnout in palliative strategies includes maintaining health and well-being, maintaining relationships, setting goals, building psychological boundaries, and using humor (AL-Naimi, Romanowski, & Du, 2020). However, palliative strategies or emotion-focused coping also can include denial and self-distraction (Carver et al., 1989; Carver, 1997).

### **METHOD**

This study employed a narrative inquiry to gather information for the purpose of research through story telling. The study was conducted in the context undergraduate pre-service English teachers in education program at a public university in Karawang. Three pre-service English teachers participated in the interview which the form of interview is semi-structured interview. Moreover, the collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Results**

#### **1) The pre-service English teachers' experience in managing synchronous virtual classrooms**

Answering the first question of the research, the participants claimed that teaching practicum during the pandemic was challenging. However, they had to carry on with the available resources to teach in virtual classroom. Furthermore, the participants stated that there were advantages and disadvantages in teaching synchronous virtual classrooms. Thus, they have quite an impression on their teaching practicum experience, as stated below:

“That was my first experience teaching online, that’s why I thought my experience is quite interesting...” (PT1)

“Since we taught online, there were always some ups and downs. For the good thing of it was teaching become more efficient since we stayed at home...” (PT2)

Additionally, PT1 stated that she enjoyed teaching virtual classroom since she is pretty shy to teach directly in the classroom. Meanwhile, the other participant has a low perception towards teaching virtual classrooms, as PT3 claimed:

“I did not have technical problems like using technology in classroom, but I did realize that I was not quite good in managing classroom.” (PT3)

The PT3’s statement also represented the other participants’ feelings. Through the interview, the researcher found that all participants had been provided with adequate facilities and infrastructures to teach, so they did not face technical problems. However, in implementing synchronous virtual classrooms, the participants realized that there were many challenges they faced, even though they had already prepared the teaching materials and set rules in classroom. The participants claimed that the most challenging part in teaching synchronous classroom is classroom management, such as students’ attitude, limited instruction time, lack of student-teacher relationship, and inadequate feedback from mentor and supervisor.

### ***Students’ attitude problems***

Managing classroom has been concern for pre-service English teachers, especially in synchronous classroom. In regard to specific challenges in managing virtual classroom, the pre-service teachers encountered several challenges, while some of them were from external or nonacademic factors. The participants claimed that some students did not participate during the learning which held simultaneously through video conference such as Zoom or Google Meet. The students’ excuses could be varied from getting up late to family matters. PT1 made the following claim:

“It is hard to gather the students since some of them came late (join Zoom). There are many reasons they came late such as getting up late, family matters, bad connection, and etc.” (PT1)

Further evidence of students’ unwillingness to participate in the classroom was claimed by PT2:

“During the learning, I asked the students to turn the camera on, however some of the students did not listen and just turned the camera off.” (PT2)

The statement above also indicated that some students likely did not pay attention throughout the learning. Moreover, the students’ lack of motivation in synchronous classroom also become concern for PT1 and PT3, as they commented below:

“...out of 30 students, there were only 2-5 students who joined Zoom.” (PT3)

“Actually mute and unmute feature helped making the classroom become conducive, however it did not allow me to see students’ enthusiasm during the learning.” (PT1)

For the most part, the participants had difficulties in drawing the students’ attention to focus on the learning process. In virtual classroom, they could not make sure if the students’s focus are on them besides having them to turn the camera on. Furthermore, PT3 stated that the students’ lack of attention and motivation in EFL virtual classroom were caused by the repetitive method that the pre-service teacher used.

### ***Limited instruction time***

To achieve learning objectives, teachers may need more time to prepare teaching and learning needs in synchronous classrooms. In the field, however, the participants did not get enough time to deliver the materials. The lack of adequate time for instruction caused the pre-service teachers to be concerned about the input they gave, which might be not received well by the students.

“Due to online learning, instruction time becomes less, which made me feel rushed while delivering material.” (PT1)

“I only have 45 minutes to teach which made the material delivery less optimal. I was worried that with that little time, the students did not catch what I taught to them.” (PT2)

With such limited time, the pre-service teachers definitely had difficulty in managing virtual classroom, especially when the students' attitude towards the learning are low. This leads to them only focusing on delivering the material.

#### ***Lack of relationship between teacher and students***

Relationship between students and teacher is the key of successful learning. However, the participants were aware of the thin bond between them and their students, despite the fact that synchronous way of teaching and learning could provide the feeling of face-to-face traditional classroom.

“In my opinion, synchronous classroom gave an opportunity to build a good relationship between teachers and students. However, in reality it was difficult to build the bond with the students since only a few of them who were willing to participate in Zoom.” (PT3)

“Due to the limited time, I did not have a proper relationship with the students since the opportunity to meet them was just once a week with less than an hour of teaching time.” (PT1)

According to PT3, the fact that the students spent more time at home rather than in school due to the pandemic also become the factor of little chemistry between the students and teacher. These problems that the pre-service teachers faced lead to the feeling of social disconnection.

#### ***Lack of support and feedback from mentor and supervisor***

Mentor teacher's and supervisor's support are required in the journey of pre-service English teachers' teaching practicum. However, PT3 claimed that he did not get proper feedback from his mentor. Thus, he figured his problems out by himself.

“Honestly, my mentor did not help much in overcoming the problems I faced in the classroom.” (PT3)

That is because PT3's mentor teacher also faced difficulties in using technology. Thus, PT3 felt he had to deal with the problems himself. Even so, he still discussed the hindrances that he encountered with his mentor. Furthermore, he stated that his supervisor also did not help much since he just focused on administration stuffs which similar with PT2 situation.

“...My supervisor did not really give much input about teaching because teaching matters is my mentor's responsibility. My supervisor was more concerned with teaching reports.” (PT3)

## **2) The pre-service English teachers' coping strategies in managing virtual classroom challenges**

The participants revealed that there are several strategies they used to overcome the synchronous virtual classroom management challenges during teaching practicum amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as follow:

### ***Emotional support***

Seeking social support during a difficult time can reduce the distress that pre-service teachers experience during teaching practicum. As PT3 claimed, he felt stress during the practicum since he had little experience in teaching. Thus, talking and sharing with friends about his practicum experience helped him to ease the burden.

“I happened to be part of a small group that often hold a discussion once a week. My friends and I always share teaching experiences during teaching practicum there.” (PT3)

PT3 stated that sharing his experience and the challenges he faced during teaching practicum with his friends helped reduce his stress. He also revealed that he would go hang out with his friends on the weekends as a way to distract him from the stress.

### ***Active communication***

Good communication between pre-service teachers and mentor, and supervisor is needed to overcome problems faced by pre-service teachers in the classroom. Some participants claimed that their mentors were of enormous help for them, as PT1 and PT2 mentioned below:

“I usually discussed with the mentor teacher when I have problems in the classroom. He is very caring and always provided solutions to the problems I faced.” (PT1)

“...If there was a problem or I needed help, I always went to my mentor to discuss it.” (PT2)

The statements above indicate that a professional such as mentor teacher or supervisor is expected to guide pre-service teachers during teaching practicum, considering most pre-service teachers have little experience in teaching.

### ***Solving problems through networking***

Sharing with friends or peer discussion is beneficial to encourage pre-service teachers in reflecting their teaching performance. One of the participants used this strategy to overcome the challenges he faced during practicum, as followed:

“Through discussion that I had with my friends, I got some ideas to solve the problems I faced in the classroom.” (PT3)

Besides classroom problems, PT3 also claimed that he often asked his friends’ opinions regarding his teaching style and classroom management, which helped him be more confident and prepared.

### **Professional development**

For inexperienced teachers, improving their teaching skills is necessary. PT3 reported that he deliberately took a course on open online learning, specially for teaching vocational students. Instead of teaching them basic English, he thought he wanted to provide them with some useful skills to prepare them for their future job, such as writing letter application.

“I want to teach that is necessary for them, so I taught them English according to what they need in the future.” (PT3)

Due to the students’ low participation, PT3 initiatively instructed them to practice sending their letter application through email, then gave the students proper feedback. Through this practice, he could see the students’ enthusiasm in learning English. Additionally, PT1 also attempted to improve her teaching instructional to engage the students in the learning.

“My students were very passive and many of them turned off the camera, so I often did little quizzes at the end of the learning session.” (PT1)

PT1 stated that this activity triggered the students to be active and engaged them in the learning. As shown above, PT1 and PT3 were aware of their own lacking areas, thus they worked on it as a way to improve the classroom situation.

## **Discussion**

### **1) The pre-service English teachers’ experience in managing synchronous virtual classrooms**

The benefit of synchronous classroom is the learning that takes place in real-time, allowing students and teachers to interact simultaneously. However, the idea of being present at the same time does not always go smoothly for pre-service teachers. Based on the findings, the participants faced several classroom management problems that hindered them during teaching practicum. One of the challenges was the students’ negative attitude and little motivation towards the learning in EFL synchronous classroom. This is in line with Macias’ and Sanchez’s (2015) findings that students’ lack of interest and motivation in EFL classroom was because of the boredom and frustration that led to students’ disruptive behaviour that caused classroom management issues. Moreover, the repetitive activity also may become the reason students’ boredom as Martin (2019) stated that virtual classrooms tend to be repetitive and can cause students to feel isolated and disinterested in the lesson.

Furthermore, some participants agreed that instruction time given was limited. Problems such as students’ tardiness, technical difficulty for students, and lack of resources waste their learning time which delayed the process. It is opposite with Fu (2013) that claimed a successful online instruction mostly lies on students’ active learning. Moreover, Lancker and Parolin (2020) mentioned that several students could struggle to optimally perform in online environment since it requires a reliable internet connection and is quite pricey for students who

come from low income or precarious family, especially due to pandemic. This also contributed to minimal interaction the pre-service teachers have with their students which resulted in the lack of relationship between them. Although this may be true, the participants always provided feedback for students' works as a way to build their relationship. Stewart (2008) supports the premise as she stated that real-time feedback can prevent students to feel dehumanized and isolated.

Additionally, one of the participants revealed that he got little guidance and feedback due to the mentor's lack of digital literacy, considering most of the time the teaching and learning should be carried out online. This finding is similar to Al Abiky's (2020) study in that one of his participants also encountered the same experience in which the mentor did not give proper feedback and little support because of his mentor's own difficulties. Al Albiky (2020) stated this issue was caused by the pressure of time and new situation which made schools, teachers, and educational staffs busy dealing with the situation. On the contrary, the other participants have better relationships with their mentors since the mentors always provided feedback and assisted them when they faced difficulty. Support and constructive feedback are definitely essential for pre-service teachers (Al-Abiky, 2020), especially during teaching practicum that was held online. However, despite the challenges that the participants faced, the support they gained from their mentors encouraged them to maintain their spirit in teaching practicum within online environment.

## **2) The pre-service English teachers' coping strategies in managing virtual classroom challenges**

Regarding coping strategies, this study identified several strategies that the participants utilized to deal with the multiple problems they faced in managing synchronous virtual classrooms. The study found that strategies that included active communication and professional development were the most used in coping by the participants. Most participants thought it was necessary to seek help from experienced teachers to solve their classroom management problems which align with Pasaribu's and Harendita's (2018) disclosure that institutional level, such as mentor teacher and supervisor certainly play an important role to reduce pre-service teachers' stress. While the other participant claimed that learn new methods and improve one's skills is also important. He deliberately accessed information on the internet and took course to enhance his teaching quality, so that he could improve his students' attitude towards the learning. These coping are included in professional coping strategies which Murray-Harvey (1992) mentioned as knowledge, skills, and the quality of teaching development.

As a matter of fact, the pre-service English teachers were considered to have a good knowledge and understanding of technology. Thus, they had no issues in dealing with the tools in synchronous virtual classrooms. They know how to navigate through the internet to get information and make improvements for their professional teaching. Correspondingly, one of the participants relied more on the internet rather than asking for help from his mentor or school in addressing his problems. The finding aligns with Al-Naimi et al.'s (2020) findings that male teachers tended to use YouTube or the internet and outside professional training to improve teaching quality more willingly than waiting for school assistance. It is supported by Beers' (2012) and Sharplin et al.'s (2011) statement that beginning teachers could immediately identify and solve their problems by using some strategies such as using internet to get information and accessing professional development without institutional assistance.

Moreover, coping strategies that the participants also used was seeking solutions through networking. In other words, the participants tended to directly focus on solving the classroom problems. Scholars address this coping as a direct coping strategy or active coping since the purpose is to eliminate the problems and or minimize the effects by increasing one's efforts (Pogere et al. 2019). Furthermore, emotional support is also equally important to reduce the participants' burden. This strategy helped the participant in releasing the stress. This emotional support is addressed as palliative coping or emotion focus coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Shah & Muncer, 2005; Pogere et al, 2019), which helps the participants reducing their internal or emotional response. This finding is similar with the previous study by (AL-Naimi, Romanowski, & Du, 2020) that included maintaining health and well-being, setting goals, maintaining relationship, and using humor.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the finding and discussion of this study, the researcher concluded that the pre-service English teachers experienced and encountered several problems in managing synchronous virtual classroom, such as 1) students' negative attitude in synchronous classroom; 2) inadequate instruction time; 3) lack of emotional bond or connection; 4) lack of proper feedback from mentor teacher and supervisor. Despite several problems mentioned above, the pre-service teachers had some strategies to cope with them, as follows 1) seeking emotional support from peers; 2) actively communicating with experienced teachers; 3) finding solution through networking; 4) Improving one's strategy and skill. Thus, this study showed that classroom management problems in synchronous virtual classrooms did not severely affect the pre-service English teachers in handling their classrooms. By identifying their needs and available access, they could manage to find solutions to their problems in changing their classroom situation.

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