

Challenges and Strategies in Early Teaching Experience: Voice of Novice EFL Indonesian Lecturers

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Abstract

For novice EFL lecturers, the early years of teaching are quite challenging, as what they find 'ideal' in pre-service education is different from the realities of the classroom. The unfamiliar curriculum, limited supports from institutions, and socialization issues are general challenges for new lecturers. This study aimed to explore the voices of novice EFL Indonesian lecturers about the challenges faced and the strategies used in their early teaching experience. In this qualitative case study, the data were collected through interviews with four participants (novice EFL Indonesian lecturers). This study found that there were two major challenges that novice EFL lecturers faced in their early teaching experience, namely *student-related challenges* (students' low proficiency in English, students' negative learning attitude, students' low critical thinking) and *institution-related challenges* (unavailability of suitable syllabus and high demand of the university to the teachers). In responding to student-related challenges, novice EFL lecturers employed some strategies such as grouping students into mixed-ability groups, adjusting the materials to the student's level of proficiency, setting rules and consequences with students, and designing activities that promote critical thinking. In coping with institution-related challenges, these teachers collaborate with other English lecturers to develop a module and they consult with their coordinators to navigate the situation.

Keywords: Novice EFL lecturers, early years of teaching, challenges, strategies

INTRODUCTION

Lecturers are those who are teaching in higher education. In each institution, the age, gender, and length of teaching experience of lecturers vary from one person to another. However, no matter how old they are and what their genders are, if they are newly beginning their teaching career, they are categorized as novice lecturers. Kim and Roth (2011) define novice lecturers as lecturers with less than five years of teaching experience in higher

education. Lorenz et al. (2011) also defined novice lecturers as employees who just recently got their teacher qualification and have less than three years of teaching experience. In addition, Brent and Felder (2008) define novice lecturers as lecturers who are young and inexperienced.

To be a lecturer in an Indonesian higher education, ones should meet some requirements, including having the required academic qualifications, competencies, educator certificates, good physical and mental health, meeting other qualifications required by the higher education unit where they work, and having the ability to achieve the national education goals (Minister of Education and Culture, 2014). In Article 46 paragraph 2 of this minister regulation, it is mentioned that lecturers must hold at least a master's degree for diploma programs and undergraduate programs. Depending on the institutions, lecturer candidates, especially those who apply for an English lecturer position, are also required to have their English language proficiency proof such as a TOEFL score. Teaching English courses at Indonesian universities can be categorized into two kinds: English for language departments and English for non-language departments. In non-language departments, the English course is considered an MKDU (*Mata Kuliah Dasar Umum* – foundation course) for students of various disciplines, such as communication, Economics, Political and Social science, Psychology, and so on.

Problems arise when novice English lecturers who were trained as general English instructors are required to teach English courses for specific disciplines. These novice EFL lecturers were not familiar with students' disciplines, hence they could not easily connect English courses to the students' specific majors. Another issue with teaching English in non-language departments is the students' low proficiency in English (Masduki, 2011). Students' TOEFL scores of non-English major students were far below what was expected by the higher education institution whereas TOEFL was one of the requirements to complete the undergraduate degree (Noni et al., 2019). This indicates that teaching specific English for these specific discipline students would be challenging, as specific English (ESP) requires intermediate to high proficiency in English.

Starting a new career at university brought some challenges for new lecturers. Warford and Reeves (2003) confirmed that novice lecturers face many issues and challenges in their first years. In addition, Farrel (2003) mentioned in his research that the initial or early years of teaching have been marked with confusion, challenges, and tensions. Furthermore, Lacy and Guirguis (2017) stated that it is undeniable that in the early years of teaching, novice lecturers may feel stress, lack appropriate support, and may feel unprepared to handle behavioral and academic issues among their students. Additionally, it was even more frightening to the researchers of this study as it is commonly reported that in the early years of teaching, novice lecturers are faced with an unbearable workload. As Karprovich et al. (2020) highlighted that novice educators, no matter where they work, whether it is at school or university, are commonly reported to face problems with workload manageability and difficulties related to coping with stress and emotional burnout. Wanzare (2007) identified ten common challenges during first-year teaching, such as workload, professional support, reality shock, student discipline, personal vs professional demands, classroom management, isolation, students' and parents' demands, roles, expectations, and resources. Later, Farrell (2009) puts these challenges as a conception of 'self as teacher/lecturer' and institutional, personal, and professional identities as novice lecturers.

Some previous studies were focusing on novice lecturers. First, a study conducted by Martinez et al. (2014) which involved 119 novice lecturers from the University of Alicante in Spain found that as new staff in higher education, novice lecturers faced some problems such as feeling anxious to prepare their classes properly, worry about the preparation of teaching resources to facilitate students' learning, and not sure that they can respond to their students' question. Another study by Karprovich et al. (2020) involving 40 novice lecturers suggests that 31% of novice lecturers had a low level of readiness. Some other challenges were: an overwhelming workload, bad life-work balance, high level of anxiety, lack of confidence, and a limited amount of time for self-development and self-improvement. Later, Faisal et al. (2020) carried out a study participated by 6 novice EFL Indonesian lecturers. The study found that novice EFL lecturers encountered challenges related to teaching qualities, professional development, research knowledge, community service, and support system.

There were also some other studies focusing on several strategies used by novice lecturers to deal with the challenges. First, a study by Ibrahim et al. (2013) in Malaysia found that novice EFL lecturers were referring to books, seeking information from the course or subject leaders, seeking advice from senior lecturers, seeking advice from peers, referring to teaching manuals and teacher's guides, and referring to sources from the internet. Besides, they also attend workshops or courses, attend seminars, seek advice from the head of the program, read journals, and seek advice from the dean or head of the center. Another study by Nababan (2015) involving novice lecturers 21-27 years old showed that the participants used several media for teaching ESP (English for Specific Purpose) speaking classes, namely: flashcards, pictures, course books, and media players.

These previous studies have covered common challenges of novice EFL lecturers in Indonesia and the strategies employed by the lecturers to deal with the challenges. Despite numerous studies on novice lecturers, little study has been conducted recently in the past ten years other than Faisal's study (2020). Therefore, it is worth doing to conduct a study in this area within the period in order to enrich the existing literature about novice EFL lecturers in the current time of pandemic and post-pandemic. The objectives of this study were to investigate the challenges that novice EFL lecturers faced in their early teaching experience in higher education and the novice EFL lecturers dealt with the challenges that they faced in their early teaching experience in higher education.

METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative case study design. A qualitative study is a study in which a researcher is able to explore a problem and develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the central phenomena were the challenges faced and strategies used by novice EFL Indonesian lecturers in their early teaching experience in higher education. Morrow (2007) adds that a qualitative study is useful when trying to deeply understand a participant's lived experiences, the significance of those experiences, and potentially a phenomenon that the experiences illustrate. While a case study is a qualitative approach in which the researchers explore a real-life, a case, or multiple bounded cases (case) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information such as observations, interviews, audiovisual materials, documents, and reports (Creswell, 2012). In addition, Cohen et al. (2018) assert that a case study is a study of a case in a context whose features

are rich in description and details. A case study was used in order to obtain a comprehensive description of the central phenomenon in this study.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this research was conducted digitally in which the interviewees were interviewed via Zoom meeting. Four novice EFL lecturers who had less than 5 years of experience in teaching non-English major students in higher education agreed to participate after the consent form was sent to them. These participants had similar criteria such as they taught general English courses to non-English major undergraduate students, worked in a private higher education institution that has been accredited by the National Accreditation Body for Higher Education (BAN-PT) as A (*Unggul*) in DKI Jakarta and had less than 5 years of teaching experience in higher education. The summary of the participants is presented below.

Table 1. Summary of participants

Name of participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Years of teaching
SS	F	4 years
IF	F	4 years
HW	M	3 years
LD	M	4 years

In this study, the data were collected through interviews which consisted of 13 questions related to the objectives of this study. Cohen et al. (2018) noted that the interview is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, seen, spoken, heard, and indeed with online interviews, written. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect the data of this study. According to Blandford (2013) semi-structured interview uses open-ended questions that have been prepared prior to the interview which allows the interviewees to elaborate and explain particular issues. By using this kind of interview, the researchers could explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about specific topics that were about the challenges faced and strategies used by novice EFL Indonesian lecturers in their early teaching experience in higher education.

In analyzing the data obtained from the interview, the researchers used thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are six steps to analyze qualitative data; (1) familiarize yourself with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) produce the report/manuscript. Additionally, to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings from data collection, the researchers used member checking as the technique of establishing trustworthiness. Creswell (2013) asserts that validating findings means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies, such as member checking. Yin (2014) defines member checking as reviewing the draft of a case study by returning the draft to participants which can help to corroborate the findings and evidence as well as produce new evidence that the participant may not have given during the initial data collection. Member checking was used in this study in order to get confirmation from the participants whether or not the result was clear and true to what they have answered. When they agreed with the findings, it was considered accurate and credible findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented in two parts; challenges faced and strategies used by the four novices EFL Indonesian lecturers in their early teaching experience in higher education.

Challenges Faced by Novice EFL Indonesian Lecturers in their Early Teaching Experience in Higher Education

Farrel (2003) mentions that the initial or early years of teaching have been marked with challenges, confusion, and tensions. This claim was proven by the findings of this study. Data analysis suggests that the participants faced some challenges in their early teaching experience. The challenges found in this study are divided into two categories, namely: student-related challenges and institution-related challenges.

Student-related Challenges

What is meant by student-related challenges here is the challenges faced by novice EFL Indonesian lecturers that were mainly about the students. Four major challenges related to students are students' mixed ability, students' low English ability, students' negative attitudes, and students' low critical thinking.

The students' mixed ability was the first challenge encountered by the participants in this study. According to Chapman and King (2003), a mixed-ability classroom consists of a group of students with differing levels of learning abilities, interests, and skills. Ansari (2013) adds that a mixed-ability class comprises not only learners with various capacities but also those that have a broad range of preferences and learning styles. The four participants in this study stated that they all faced this kind of challenge.

"It's pretty difficult in terms of their English mixed ability, some of them are good, and some of them are really beginners. They're not prepared to join the class, and some of them even have zero knowledge of English so I need to really adapt how to still engage the zero English students, but at the same time, I also need to think about the intermediate students." (SS)

"It's really hard to teach them because only a few students can speak English while others can't." (HW)

"Actually, I have a couple of challenges, but having the students who have mixed abilities in a class is the hardest because I really need to think about the materials which are appropriate for the students who have high ability and also easy for the students who have the low ability." (LD)

This finding is in line with Al-Subaiei's (2017) findings in her study, that mixed-ability classes have been found to be one of the greatest challenges in teaching at English language institutions (ELIs) in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Hedge (2000) mentioned that teaching a classroom of mixed-ability students is a vital issue that instructors experienced daily. In addition, one participant in this study mentioned that it was even more challenging when using the same material provided by the higher education institution.

"The university gave us only one-course book, it is really hard to use the same material for the students who have a different level of ability in English, we have to cover the ones who are very good, but at the same time, we have to cover the one who are very bad." (HW)

It can be concluded that non-English major students' mixed language ability is hard to handle by novice EFL teachers, as they had to design or select materials that could cater to these mixed-ability students.

The students' low English ability was the second challenge found in this study. Three participants in this study mentioned that teaching English to non-English majors' students was difficult because they commonly had low English ability.

"Most of the non-English major students don't speak English, right? So, every time I speak English in the classroom, it's pretty hard for them to grab what I mean when I explain things." (IF)

"Most of the time, I find out that they have poor English so I need extra and several times to explain the materials." (LD)

One participant admitted that he was disappointed because he never found that non-English major students' reading skill was awful. At first, he thought that teaching English to non-English major students in higher education would be enjoyable, but it turned out to be challenging. Similar to this finding, Masduki (2011) also found that most of the non-English major students in higher education had a low capability in English. Also, Jamilah (2016) found that the English proficiency of non-English major students was still very low in all aspects: grammar, speaking, reading, writing, and listening.

"I feel a bit surprised, why? at first, I thought that teaching non-English major students is going to be fun, but in fact, it turns out to be challenging. Their English is not good, for example, when I ask them to read, oh my God. The spelling, the way they read is really bad." (LD)

The students' negative attitude was the third challenge found in this study. Only one participant in this study faced this kind of challenge. She reported that this was her main challenge during her early teaching experience in higher education.

"Manner, this is the main challenge, I think it's because the age gap between me and my students is not too far... they're smart but because most of them are rich people so they are a bit irritating. They like to come late and even some of them never show up" (IF)

It can be inferred from the participant's account above that the participant felt disrespected because the students didn't come on time and often skipped her class. This finding is similar to Zirmansyah (2013) who found in his study that non-English major undergraduate students in higher education had negative attitudes and tended to skip the general/Foundation English course. Similarly, Rokhyati (2013) also pointed out in her study that non-English major undergraduate students showed negative attitudes because, in their view, the General English course was just like a formality that was not really useful for them as it only has two credit hours. The participant also mentioned that the reason why the students behaved that way was due to the age gap between her and her students.

The students' low critical thinking was the last students-related challenge found in this study. A participant in this study reported that critical thinking is another issue for students. During his early teaching experience in higher education, at first, he thought that the students spoke up actively in class, but in fact, they did not.

"Their critical thinking, the way they think, it's not shaped yet, at first, I thought that university students have the courage to speak up" (HW)

All of the participants mentioned that the status of the English course as a general English or MKDU implies that this course is taught in semester 1. During this time, students are still adapting to university life and culture, transitioning from high school to university, and gathering their confidence in participating in class. That might be the reason why the students didn't have the courage to speak up. As the result, lecturers often had to spoon-feed students with language input the time. In other words, it took a big effort in order to stimulate the students to be active, as revealed in the quote below.

"Since this course is in the first year of their study so they are freshman from senior high school, they are not brave enough to speak up, we tend to spoon feed them." (HW)

Institution-related Challenges

Institution-related challenges were the challenges that are sourced regarding the higher education institution where the participants worked. There were two institution-related challenges found in this study; *the inappropriate syllabus provision* and *the high demand from the higher education institution*.

The inappropriate syllabus provision was the first institution-related challenge found in this study. One participant in this study mentioned that the higher education institution provided the syllabus, but it was unclear, as revealed below.

"They did a have syllabus, but it's not clear. The syllabus was really packed in a way that we couldn't follow it in only 100 minutes in class per session." (SS)

The above quote revealed that the participant had difficulty in applying the syllabus to her class since the time allocation for teaching general English courses to non-English major students was only 100 minutes per session. Similarly, Martinez et al. (2014) also found that novice lecturers felt anxious about preparing the class properly since the syllabus provided was not clear.

The high demand from the higher education institution was the second institution-related challenge found in this study. One participant mentioned that the higher education institution where she worked demanded her to make the students be able to do the TOEFL test by the end of the semester. However, the reality was that most of the students had zero knowledge of English, as reported below.

"I have to bridge the faculty demand and also the fact in the class. The students are not ready to get quite complex material but at the same time university has a demand which is the students need to be able to do TOEFL by the end of the semester." (SS)

It can be seen from these findings that it was indeed a struggle to fulfill the demand from the higher education institution because the reality in the classroom was below the expectation of the institution. The finding supports Noni et al. (2019) that higher education institutions had high expectations that non-English major students were able to pass the TOEFL test, but in fact, their English abilities were very low. It also justified study the by Ibrahim et al (2013) that novice lecturers mostly face many challenges in their early years of teaching especially in the area related to the students and institution where they work.

Strategies Used by the Novice EFL Indonesian Lecturers to Deal with the Challenges

Based on the interview findings, there were some ways that the participants did to deal with the challenges. Similar to this, Ibrahim et al. (2013) also revealed in their study

that novice lecturers have taken the appropriate strategies to cope with the challenges faced at their initial years of teaching.

Student-related Strategies

There are some ways the novice EFL lecturers employed to deal with student-related challenges, namely: mixing students into heterogenous groups, adjusting the materials to students' ability, collaborating with other lecturers, and consulting with the course coordinator.

The first strategy that participants employ regarding students' mixed ability is by putting the students into groups of discussion consisting of the low and high-ability students in it. This way, students can help one another, learn from each other and work together. In line with this, Pedersen and Kronborg (2014) recommended the strategy for the mixed-ability class which is putting the students into groups and applying student-centered methods which include; game competition, in-class activities, and dramatization. Unfortunately, as Borko (2004) found, most of the novice lecturers did not know how to handle the diversity among the student, moreover, they did not know what methods to apply. The quotes below show how the participants deal with the mixed-ability students.

"I combine the strong and weak students in a group so they can help each other." (SS)

"I put them in groups, I always mix the students in a group (low and high ability in English) so they usually help and work with each other." (IF)

"When I give the material, I always make sure that it allows the students to work in a group. I combine the high-ability students and low-ability students in each group, so they can help one another." (LD)

Another way of dealing with the challenge of students' English ability is adjusting learning materials that are suitable for his student's level of English ability. Apparently, learning materials provided by higher education institutions are too difficult for students.

"The university gave me the materials to teach my students but it seems to me that my students are not ready to learn that, so I give them another source of material to make them active and comfortable in learning." (HW)

In addressing the students' manner, participants attempted to set the rules and consequences in the first meeting of the course. Goodwill (2012) also discovered that new educators with less than five years of experience were more likely to declare that student behavior was a problem in their classes than those with more experience. To deal with this, the participant in this study stated that she told the rules to the students in the first meeting and made the deal with the students about the consequences whenever they disobey the rules. Similarly, Baihaqi (2021) revealed that his participants, novice lecturers of English, gave briefings to their students at the first meeting in order to make them disciplined and obey the rules in class.

The participant in this study also mentioned that the reason why the students showed a negative attitude was that the age gap between her and her students was not too far, but she eventually knew how to deal with this kind of challenge. Oppositely, Sumarsono (2016) found that novice EFL got difficulty and are still confused in managing classrooms, especially handling students who are relatively similar ages as the lecturers.

"I always tell the rule in our first meeting and discuss what punishments they will get if they don't follow the rules." (IF)

Addressing the students' low critical thinking, the teacher gave and prepare activities that could stimulate the students to think critically and be active in speaking.

"I tend to make a group discussion in every meeting, I always try to give the activities that can make the students be active in speaking." (HW)

Although the participant did not specifically mention the kinds of activities that could stimulate the students to think critically and be active in speaking, he stated that the activities mostly allowed the students to work in a group discussion. As Arpilleda (2021) found that novice English language instructors in universities used some activities such as role-playing, discussions and conversations, oral presentations, games, group reporting, writing essays, research papers, reflection papers, film reviews, literary critiques, and individual reporting.

Institution-related Strategies

In coping with the institutional-related challenges, participants tried to work together/collaborate with the other lecturers including the coordinator to create a module in which they compiled some materials that were suitable for non-English major students. This was done because she stated that the syllabus provided was not clear.

"I worked together with the 4 lecturers (coordinator and colleagues) we made a module; we compiled some materials that we thought would be possible to teach non-English major students." (SS)

Another way to deal with the demand from the higher education institution is by speaking with the coordinator to figure out and discuss how to produce a good learning outcome as expected by the higher education institution. Similarly, to this, Boakye and Ampiah (2017) also revealed in their study that one of the solutions that novice lecturers generally used in solving some of their challenges was by contacting the people they felt could help them, such as their coordinators.

From the meeting, the participant in this study admitted that she gained a way how to deal with this kind of challenge, as reported below.

"The higher education institution where I work has a habit of having a meeting at the beginning and the end of the semester, during the meeting, I spoke with the coordinator, we figured out together, and we came up with something from the meeting, that's what usually happened in every semester." (SS)

CONCLUSION

Early years of teaching experience have presented great challenges for the participants of this study. Institutional and student-related challenges were there, and these novice EFL teachers had to deal with these challenges with very limited available support from the institution. In responding to student-related challenges, novice EFL lecturers employed some strategies such as grouping students into mixed-ability groups, adjusting the materials to the student's level of proficiency, setting rules and consequences with students, and designing activities that promote critical thinking. In coping with institution-related

challenges, these teachers collaborate with other English lecturers to develop a module and they consult with their coordinators to navigate the situation.

There are some limitations that this study has. First, the participants of this study were limited only to novice EFL Indonesian lecturers who taught in a private higher education institution in DKI Jakarta, Indonesia. Second, the way to collect the data was only from the interview. Future studies could expand the geographical and socio-economic backgrounds of the participants and universities, and employ a variety of data instruments such as observation and documentation in order to obtain more detailed data.

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