Online English Grammar Instruction Using Polysynchronous Approach During Pandemic Times

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to report the best practices in online grammar learning through the polysynchronous learning model, as well as to explore students' perceptions of such learning model. This study is a descriptive case study covering the design of an online course carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic as the research object. The data processed were in the form of teacher reflections, documents of teaching materials and activities in the Learning Management System (LMS), and an open survey to explore students' perceptions. The findings from this study indicate that the online grammar learning carried out had sufficient relevance to the concept of polysynchronous learning, which is considered appropriate to be implemented during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. For students' perceptions, in general, they expressed appreciation for the learning process, especially in terms of the personal touch and the teaching style carried out by the teacher, the learning activities, and the teaching materials. Furthermore, some constructive suggestions were also given by students, for example, in the area of overcoming technical problems and learning management. The practices presented in this paper are expected to be useful for other foreign language teachers and lecturers as a form of collective sharing to face the challenges of the online grammar learning process during and after the pandemic.

1. Introduction

The pandemic caused by Covid-19 has globally changed the order of many aspects of life, including education. Schools and universities worldwide are forced to carry out online learning without any opportunity for teachers, lecturers, and students to better prepare for the changes in learning modes (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). The online learning model is considered suitable to be carried out during the pandemic because teachers, lecturers, and students can continue to work, teach and learn from home, thereby minimizing public interaction and helping to suppress the spread of Covid-19. However, the change in learning modes impacts all subjects, including the English lessons. New models of online English language teaching and learning need to be continuously explored to ensure effective instruction.

Language learning includes two main aspects: language skills and language components. Language skills include reading, writing, listening, and speaking, while the language components include linguistic aspects such as pronunciation, spelling, and grammar. At the higher education level, the teaching and learning of grammar are

organized as independent courses. This is because mastery of grammar is an important basis for students' English skills (Dutta & Mukherjee, 2018), which allows them to understand and be understood well in communicating using the language. Unfortunately, grammar is known as one of the most challenging subjects for most students (Wang, 2019). One of the reasons is because grammar is commonly considered more objective than other linguistic components, with many standards of linguistic rules and implementation patterns in sentences. This is one of the reasons why grammar instruction has been the subject of research by English language teachers and educators, especially focusing on the best practices and effective teaching and learning process.

Learning English grammar, which is already challenging even though it is done face-to-face, certainly becomes even more challenging if done online (Underwood, 2017). It is due to the unique characteristics of online learning, which are elaborated on in the next section.

1.1. Online Distance Learning in English Language Teaching

Online distance learning is not a new issue in foreign language learning such as English. However, the discussion of distance learning in online form has become a topic that is widely researched by academics and practitioners of foreign language learning, for example, in the area of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (Abdu, 2018; Chinnery, 2014; Wujiabudula, 2018), or Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (Abdu, 2018; Burston, 2014; Yükselir, 2017). To discover more detail about the nature of online learning, it is necessary to discuss the characteristics of distance learning.

One of the characteristics of distance learning that distinguishes it from traditional face-to-face learning is the physical absence of the lecturer among the students. This condition impacts various aspects of the learning process, including the interaction between students and lecturers, interactions between students and students, and interactions between students and learning materials (Arifani, Suryanti, Wicaksono & Inayati, 2020). In addition, in distance learning, most students carry out the learning process in isolation (Wong, et al., 2019). In other words, students carry out the learning process independently and physically separated from their classmates. This certainly challenges students, especially in forming, maintaining, and increasing their learning motivation. The theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) clearly states that subjective norms greatly influence someone to do something. This theory can explain why when students see their friends learning something or their friends can master a certain learning topic, it inspires and encourages other students to do the same. That is where external motivation is formed and indirectly helps the learning process. However, in the online learning mode, the external motivation is greatly reduced due to physical distance limitations and technical constraints.

1.2. Polysynchronous Instruction Model for Online Learning

The two major constraints of online distance learning elaborated in the previous section—the physical absence of lecturers and students studying in isolation— have, in general, become the main focus in various efforts to find the best practices of online learning by teachers and lecturers. For instance, the forms of virtual teacher presence were discussed by Rehn, Maor & McConney (2016) and Savvidou (2013), while various efforts to encourage the emergence of collaborative learning between students in

online learning became the focus of researchers and education practitioners, among them, Reychav & McHaney (2017), Strauß & Rummel (2020), and Sun, Liu, Luo, Wu & Shi (2017). In this case, the university where the author teaches encourages its academics to use the polysynchronous instruction model in conducting the teaching and learning process during and after the pandemic (Fauzan, 2021).

Polysynchronous instruction design was a term initially proposed by Oztok et al. (2014), which is literally defined as "a form of dialogue that takes place via technical functionality that flows flexibly and simultaneously between asynchronous and synchronous potential, and according to individual end-user workflows." (p. 158). Following the definition, the polysynchronous learning model where the study took place combined student-centered learning, and personalized learning by using an interaction pattern that combines face-to-face mode (if possible), synchronous, and asynchronous mode (UMM, 2020). In other words, such instruction design may connect formal and informal, academic and non-academic learning in both real and virtual settings without being tied to fixed class timetables or physical classrooms (Kolour, Khaksaran, & Ali, 2018), thus "breaking away from the text, time and place" (Hedberg & Stevenson, 2014: p. 17). To put the idea into practice, Suparto (2020) argues that the polysynchronous learning model in online education is generally based on two main frameworks: the knowledge continuum and the application model. First, the knowledge continuum is based on Bloom's Taxonomy which is divided into the low order thinking skills consisting of knowledge, comprehension, and application, and the higher-order thinking skills comprising of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Next, the application model also covers five hierarchies, the lowest to the highest order being knowledge in one discipline, application in one discipline, interdisciplinary application, real world predictable situation, and finally, the unpredictable real-world situation.

The online learning with this polysynchronous approach in this study was facilitated by using a Canvas-based Learning Management System (LMS) integrated with the university's website. The grammar online discussion highlighted in this paper, was carried out by following the polysynchronous learning model in the fully online mode because the situation did not allow the face-to-face interaction to take place due to the seriousness of pandemic situation at the end of 2020. The discussion about grammar teaching and learning in an online setting is further elaborated in the following section.

1.3.   Online Grammar Teaching and Learning

As previously mentioned, grammar subjects in learning English as a foreign language are generally considered challenging materials for students (Wang, 2019). Apart from the objectivity of the grammar content being studied, Underwood (2017) argues that this is also influenced by the fact that language is closely related to the culture of the original speaker. In his research involving students from Japan, Underwood found that various attitudes, and social and contextual factors can affect grammar learning, both positively and negatively. Therefore, lecturers have an important role in providing a creative and innovative grammar learning experience. When taken to the context of Indonesian culture and language, for example, the concept of time does not have to be reflected in the verb in a sentence in the Indonesian language. While in English, the concept of time must be reflected in the verb of each

sentence, a grammar concept that is commonly known as tenses. These topics are basic material in English grammar subjects, but not a few students find it difficult to understand and implement them in sentence structure. This is because, culturally, there is no similar analogy in the Indonesian language, so the concept of tenses becomes a foreign concept for Indonesian students in learning English.

Limited online grammar learning research is available in the literature, especially concerning the Covid-19 pandemic situation. However, most research on learning English during the pandemic is still general, for example, regarding the integration of certain technologies in learning English as a foreign language (Inayati & Waloyo, 2022; Ghounane, 2020) or in learning English for special purposes—English for Specific Purposes (ESP) — (Sutrisna, Lagatama & Dane, 2020); and about challenges and lessons learned in learning English during the pandemic (Muslimin & Harintama, 2020; Karuppannan & Mohammed, 2020; Shahnama, Yazdanmehr & Shirvan, 2021). Of the few studies that specifically address the topic of online grammar learning during the pandemic, one of which was conducted by Ghobrini (2020) in the context of secondary education in Africa. Set at the beginning of the pandemic, Ghobrini tries to combine online grammar learning using the social media platforms of Facebook and YouTube. He created an online and open grammar learning community of practice for lecturers and high school students in Algeria by creating grammar learning content on both platforms to facilitate online grammar learning in schools. He concluded that the learning model could facilitate online learning of grammar more effectively even though it was still characterized by various technical challenges due to the limited access to technology faced by lecturers and students in Algeria.

Considering the challenges in the teaching and learning of grammar in online instructional contexts and the limited literature on online grammar learning during the pandemic time, this research report is expected to fill the literature gap. More specifically, this paper has two aims; first, to describe one of the best practices of an online English grammar learning model following the polysynchronous approach in one of the Indonesian higher education settings; and second, to investigate students' perceptions of the online polysynchronous grammar learning model that had been carried out. By sharing the best practices of online grammar learning following the polysynchronous approach, it is expected that other foreign language learning practitioners can find inspiration and reap benefits from it and can eventually implement it in their teaching and learning contexts.

2. Method

This research employed a case study design. The purpose of a qualitative descriptive case study involving technology is to explore "an in-depth description of the educators' values, beliefs, and confidence at the onset of their experiences changing from a traditional learning environment to a learning environment integrating technology" (Hartman, Townsend & Jackson, 2019; p. 239). As such, this design was considered appropriate for the current study due to its suitability for the research. The study was set in an English Language Education Department of a renowned private university in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. The objects of this study were the teaching and learning documents, the lecturers' reflection notes, and the first-year students of the English Education Department who were involved in the Basic English grammar course at the end of the 2020 academic year. They were chosen due to their close

relevance to the study's aims, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the data obtained. The online platform used in this study was the Learning Management System (LMS) called Canvas, which housed all the syllabus, materials, activities, and assessment of the grammar course. The course, officially entitled Basic English Grammar, was delivered in polysynchronous mode in that it was managed asynchronously (i.e., via Canvas) and synchronously (i.e., via video conference) and sometimes even supported by other online tools such as an instant messaging platform.

Next, to answer the first research question regarding best practices in online grammar learning during the pandemic, the researcher used a narrative approach to present the learning process. The data used were reflection notes by the lecturers supported by analysis of the learning documents used during the process, such as the online discussion forums, teaching materials, and quizzes available in Canvas LMS. Then, to answer the second research question regarding students' perceptions of online grammar learning that had been carried out, an open survey was used, which was given to all students participating in the course. The questionnaire contained three open-ended questions that asked students to evaluate the online grammar instruction that had been done. The open questionnaire was chosen to avoid any forms of influence on the answers so that a sincere response was obtained, showing the students' impression of the online grammar learning that had been done. The three questions in the questionnaire include advantages, disadvantages, and suggestions for improvement. The questions were given in English, but students were free to answer using the Indonesian language or English. The participants were invited to complete the survey at the end of the semester as part of the course evaluation. They were well informed that it was for the current study and that completing the survey indicated consents to take part. The online survey was distributed to all 148 students and at the end of the data collection process, 73 responses were obtained.

The data obtained were then analyzed qualitatively using the thematic analysis process. The themes observed during the data analysis were those related to the main objectives of the research that had been formulated previously, namely to describe best practices in online grammar learning and to explain students' perceptions of the online grammar instruction process. The data analysis procedure followed the classic qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Therefore, the data obtained from document analysis and open-ended surveys were reduced and coded to arrive at a conclusion about the answers to the research objectives. The results of the data analysis process are presented in the following section

3. Findings

This section presents the answer to the research aims, the best practices of an online English grammar learning model using the polysynchronous design, and the students' perception of the instructional model. As suggested early on, such a description is an alternative idea that other English language teachers and lecturers may find inspirative and valuable in their teaching contexts.

### 3.1. Online Grammar Instruction with Polysynchronous Model

This section presents the forms of online grammar learning during the Covid-19 pandemic using a polysynchronous model. The information presented here is the result of the lecturer's reflection on teaching. It is supported by a document analysis

of teaching materials and communication through the learning management system (LMS -Canvas) used in the learning process. The results of the data analysis are presented in chronological order to make it easier to follow and understand.

To start, the lecturer prepared a 'Welcome Note' to welcome students to the online grammar class. This welcome note contained a virtual welcome message to students, followed by a brief video introduction. Besides, there is also a short description of what students must do to start the steps in following the online grammar course and it ended with the hope of good and constructive cooperation between lecturers and students for the whole semester. This welcome note was positioned in the 'Home' section, with an expectation that the students could read it first once they open the course LMS page. This welcome note was also a warm initial greeting so that students would feel welcome and did not hesitate to ask for help if they experience problems and difficulties in the future.

Next, students are directed to open the 'Syllabus' menu which contains a course description, complete with a schedule of topics and activities per meeting for one semester. The syllabus was then discussed in the first video conference using the Google Meet platform. The first video conference included personal introductions by lecturers and students, as well as introductions to the course outline detailing the expected learning outcomes, meeting schedules, and assessment criteria.

Figure 1. 'Welcome Note' to greet students online
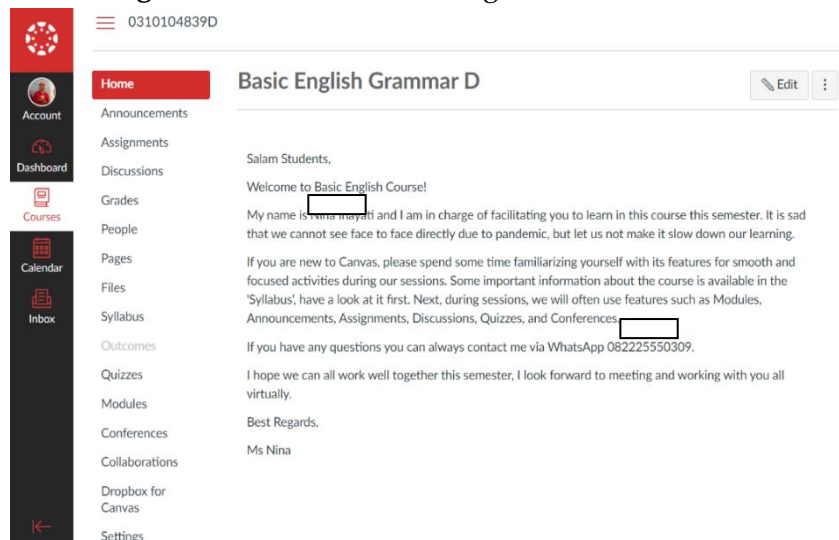
Then, students are directed to open the 'module' menu, which displays the detail of the activities and materials of each meeting. Here, students could see an overview of the daily activities that would be carried out in each meeting, as well as access various materials, links, and details of daily activities they must do in the grammar course. The activities in the module are designed to combine synchronous and asynchronous activities, with the main focus on asynchronous activities. For example, asynchronous video conferencing was conducted once in two meetings, which was about 40 minutes out of the 100 minutes allocated each session. This is in line with the university's official advice to restrict video conferencing, which was technically considered relatively burdensome for some students. Here is the main display on the menu 'Module.'

Figure 2. The Display of the Module menu
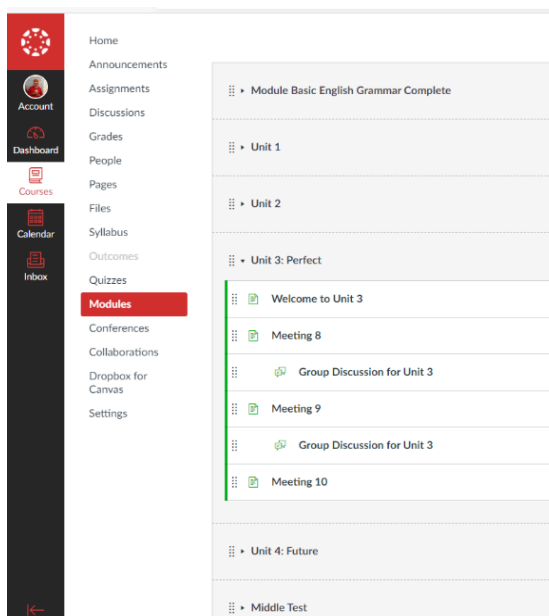
As seen in Figure 2, the activities in the module were arranged based on the discussion units following those presented in the syllabus. In each unit, students could see an introduction page that contained various important information for the unit, such as the primary material, links to video conferences, and daily attendance links. On this page, students were then directed to press the 'next' button and view activity details for each meeting. For example, Figure 3 contains the details of activities for students to do in one meeting. In this session, students were asked to do asynchronous learning by watching the explanation videos prepared by the lecturer, doing exercises, and then checking the results of the exercises using the available answer keys. After that, students were asked to discuss the material and exercises that had just been done by conducting the asynchronous discussion in small groups (4-5 students) and discussing in large groups involving all students and lecturers to follow up the small group discussions. After one meeting was conducted in fully asynchronous mode, the next meeting was conducted synchronously, involving video conferencing for about 40 minutes, to clarify and strengthen students' understanding.

In addition to the pattern described previously, students were assigned to present some topics in groups at several meetings towards the end of the semester. This was done to bring up changes in activity patterns to minimize students' boredom. Besides, group presentation projects were carried out at the end hoping that students would know each other better and already know the general learning patterns. Students were allowed to prepare ahead of time and were welcome to consult with the lecturer when necessary. This presentation process was followed by additional discussions and explanations by the lecturer, thus providing opportunities for students to learn and discuss more actively.

A review and a summative test were presented at the end of a unit to measure students' understanding of the topic they had just learned. The meetings usually started with a video conference to review all the material in the unit and to discuss questions about things that still confused students. Lastly, students were asked to do a quiz as a form of summative test.

Figure 3. The Display of Daily Activity Information

3.2. Students' Perceptions of Online Grammar Learning Using Polysynchronous Model

The data regarding students' perceptions of online grammar learning through the polysynchronous learning model were obtained from the students' responses to a questionnaire that was part of the end-of-semester reflection activity. In total, there were 73 responses to the short survey given. The following is a complete description of the analysis results of the students' perceptions of online grammar learning.

3.2.1. The Strengths of Polysynchronous Online Grammar Instruction

In general, there are three areas that students viewed as advantages of this polysynchronous online grammar learning model. Presentation of the survey analysis results is ordered from the theme with the highest frequency to the lowest. First, how to teach became the topic most frequently mentioned by students (n=30). Some of the qualities, that were appreciated by students, were the relaxed learning atmosphere, friendliness, clarity of explanation, flexibility, and appropriateness of learning pace. The following are examples of responses given by students.

> *"The way of teaching is effective and fun. For material always makes you curious, (they) raises curiosity" – S17*

> *"The class is so enjoyable. The lecturer is very calm and often explains the material thoroughly. I think this class has the best system of any other class. From the meeting until the attendance record and also the division of the tasks. It's so easy to find the material that is used and the file isn't cluttering on my save file. The lecturer is what I loved about this class. When you like the teacher, you will love the class I suppose. Even if basic grammar is hard for me, I still love to learn it." – S66*

Second, students also appreciated the types of online learning activities provided (n=22). For example, flexibility in activities, small group discussions, and presentation assignments are the three areas students most often mention as strengths in this learning design. The following is an example of a response given by students

about a group discussion conducted after they did the exercises and checked their work in the answer key provided.

> *"I liked it best that we could have the opportunity to get the explanation from our friends or we got to explain it to the others because if I explain it to others, it makes me more understand the materials." – S11*

> *"I like it when we are told to do presentations because I become more active and study harder when I get a presentation schedule. And become more understanding when my friends try to explain in easy language." – S33*

Furthermore, students also valued the types of the material provided (n=18), which were considered new, challenging, engaging, relevant to everyday life, and generally helpful in improving their English skills. The following are examples of responses given by students.

> *"I like basic grammar because I can study so many materials that I didn't know before. Such as how to use 'the', difference between 'its' and 'it's', etc. I also learned about so many things that look simple but it's very important to help me improve my English skills." – S72*

> *"I like most of the material in the Basic Grammar course. After learning all of the materials, my knowledge about Grammar has been increased. There is a lot of material that I didn't know before I start reading it, such as the specific uses about noun and pronoun, subject-verb agreement, and many others." – S18*

3.2.2. The Weaknesses and Suggestions for Improvement of Polysynchronous Online Grammar Instruction

Some aspects considered necessary to be improved are also divided into three main areas: material, technical problems, and learning management. First, the problem most often mentioned in the open survey responses was the grammar material, which was considered quite challenging (n=28). For example, the material about Tenses in English was often considered confusing. For this reason, the advice students gave to provide additional material in addition to the existing explanatory modules and videos. The following are examples of responses given by students.

> *"The learning system runs smoothly, but the material is still confusing (especially) about tenses." – S17*

> *"Sometimes, I think I didn't like when there were some confusions that hadn't been resolved, and I had to search the answer by myself. I think my suggestion is the lecturer should give other material than the modules that can help students, I mean like other sources that can add a little more specific about the material in the modules." -S18*

The second aspect considered a weakness in online grammar learning is the technical problems, as mentioned by no less than 15 students. Some of these technical problems included the teacher's microphone, which was sometimes considered too soft, background noise that interferes during video conferences, the form of attendance that students must do independently, the dominance of English versus Indonesian used in the learning process, and conflicting students' expectations about video conference—some wanted it to be extended because it was considered to help to understand. On the other hand, some wanted it to be shortened for technical reasons

(e.g., financial or signal issues). The advice given was generally specifically related to the problems expressed, for example, about the presence format they preferred, suggestions to eliminate the background noise during video conferences, and the hope of offline sessions to be conducted immediately. The following are examples of responses given by students.

> *"I don't like if the attendance record (is) on google form, I prefer the attendance to (be) call(ed) when the class started." – S61*

> *"Not a lot of advice, I'd prefer to have frequent meetings in the zoom, for example, as it makes (better) understanding." – S46*

Finally, the aspect that according to students needed to be improved was regarding learning management, which 10 students mentioned. Some students' complaints in this area were, for example, regarding time management—especially for doing asynchronous learning, feeling that there were too many exercises, limited study time, and group discussions that were considered too passive. Furthermore, some of the suggestions were the hope that the discussion time would be extended, the discussion would be conducted before the video conference, or the practice time would be more flexible. The following are examples of the responses given by students.

> *"Actually, I don't have anything I don't like about this class. It's just perfect what I reckon. Maybe just the discussion isn't just made for questions, but also for giving insight about a material, or maybe being a place for discussing a material before a meeting."- S66*

> *"There are too many exercise tasks, so sometimes I don't have time to do it." – S62*

> *"Nothing, but I hope we can do the offline class as soon as possible." – S26*

4.   Discussion

The online grammar learning described above shows a fairly high relevance to the basic concepts of the polysynchronous learning model suggested by the university. The polysynchronous learning model during and after the Covid-19 pandemic is suitable for situations emphasizing indirect interactions. Polysynchronous learning, according to Oztok, et al. (2014) and Kolour, et al. (2018), allows the flexible and simultaneous flow of synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching and learning based on students' and teachers' needs. In the current study, such multi-modality was accommodated by combining three learning modes: face-to-face (offline), synchronous (online with video conference), and asynchronous (online without video conference). The proportions of the three modes are adjusted to the situation, for example, the severity of the pandemic condition or the technical capabilities of lecturers and students. In the online grammar learning reported in this study, the pandemic conditions still did not allow offline meetings, so the learning model was entirely online by combining two modes: synchronous and asynchronous.

In addition, like other forms of distance learning, the online grammar learning described above also focuses on aspects of student self-learning in the form of self-regulated learning (Wong, et al., 2019). In this case, the lecturer prepares various teaching materials and activities presented coherently through the LMS to be followed by the students. Even though the lecturer has directed it, students also had ample space to organize their learning individually, for example in terms of time

management, materials, and the implementation of asynchronous learning activities. This is to support the flexibility of polysynchronous instructional design in the way that it allows the socially-constructed temporal and spatial nature of learners' experience in the online learning contexts (Ngan, 2019).

In terms of learning interactions in online classes, research by Arifani, et al. (2020) shows that from various forms of interaction that appear in learning (e.g., lecturer-students, students-students, students-teaching materials), the interaction between students and teaching materials becomes the determining factor in the success of online classes. Considering this, the forms of teaching materials and activities in online grammar learning are made in such a way to encourage positive interaction between students and teaching materials. For example, the variety of activities and learning modes was one of the strengths of the online grammar learning, from the provision of written text modules, explanation videos, exercises, practice answer keys, small group discussions, large class discussions, and reflection on the learning process.

Regarding the online grammar learning process, students generally appreciate the relaxed, fun, and flexible teaching style. This may be due to the large aspect of human interaction in this study. As stated by Wong, et al. (2019), the human touch aspect is an important aspect often left behind in fully online learning. Therefore, Wong suggests the importance of human touch in online learning, a concept that this study tries to present. In addition, this is suspected to be the main focus of the difference between the full online classroom learning during a pandemic and non-pandemic. In other words, if in a fully online course, the activity design is generally carried out fully asynchronously, in online learning during this pandemic the lecturer is present (albeit virtually), which adds the human touch aspect of the online grammar class.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the online grammar learning that had been carried out has shown sufficient relevance to the suggested polysynchronous learning concept during and after the pandemic. In addition, in general, students appreciated these forms of online grammar learning in three main aspects: the way the lecturer taught, the learning activities, and the teaching materials. Furthermore, students also offered some suggestions regarding the shortcomings of the learning process, namely related to the delivery of material, overcoming the technical problems, and the learning management that emerged. As such, teachers and lecturers who consider polysynchronous instructional design are expected to take into account some lessons from the current study. This can be done, for example, by integrating the principles of self-regulated learning during the development stage of the online materials and activities and by ensuring sufficient human interaction support as part of the online activities.

This research is descriptive qualitative because it presents a form of best practice in online grammar learning that the lecturer had carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the teaching process and student perceptions cannot be generalized, the insights and ideas conveyed could still be useful for foreign language teachers and lecturers who want to teach grammar online, especially using the polysynchronous learning model. Further research can be focused on the more

profound investigation of online grammar instruction by involving more lecturers and students as respondents.

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