



## **Exploring English Teachers' Challenges at Indonesian Vocational Schools amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Photovoice Study**

**Suwarno**

*Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
Politeknik Negeri Batam, Indonesia*

**Dina Rafidiyah**

*Universitas Muhammadiyah Banjarmasin, Indonesia*

**Fazri Nur Yusuf**

*Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia*

**Ahmad Kailani**

*Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia*

**Anis Rahmawati**

*Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia*

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented change in educational practices in which face-to-face learning and teaching were replaced by fully online/virtual modes. In this respect, the role of teachers becomes important in assuring how students engage in online/virtual learning. It requires teachers to adapt to this alteration of pedagogical approaches (Flores & Gago, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). Along with working from home, teachers need to integrate technology into online/virtual modes of instruction that espouse teaching and learning activities (Carillo & Flores, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020). The reality shows that this new pedagogical landscape poses both technical and non-technical challenges for teachers in implementing synchronous or asynchronous modes of instruction.

Prior studies have documented teachers' challenges with online/virtual teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the surrounding environment, recent studies have reported that distractions encountered by teachers when teaching from home come from their children who still need assistance (MacIntyre et al., 2020) and the noise of pets around them (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). In terms of technology, the disruption of internet connectivity and unfamiliarity or inexperience in using e-platforms to enact online/virtual teaching, supervision, and assessment are common obstacles (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021; Teng & Wu, 2021). In this case, it would also be an obstacle for teachers in the instructional delivery if technical problems happened to their students. Furthermore, teachers also face heavier



workloads such as planning lesson content or instructional readiness appropriate to their teaching platform (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Teng & Wu, 2021).

To extend earlier studies, this report explores the complexities faced by English teachers in Indonesian vocational schools. During the pandemic, apart from adapting to the alteration of teaching modes, English teachers at Indonesian vocational schools had to work hard to meet learners' needs for vocational English. In this case, the current curriculum in Indonesia (2013 curriculum) provides the same English learning materials (textbooks) between vocational and non-vocational high schools, which tend to be general English. This matter might affect teachers and students pertinent to teaching and learning motivation, even more so during this COVID-19 pandemic. Further, while most previous reports have been grounded in interview studies, this report is undertaken by adopting the photovoice method to offer a more nuanced approach. It is expected to provide in-depth analysis and new insight to the educational institutions and stakeholders concerning English teachers' lived experiences of online/virtual teaching in vocational schools, aiming to understand more fully their adversities and hear their suggestions. In doing so, this report attempts to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What challenges do Indonesian English teachers face in vocational schools during online/virtual teaching?
2. What are the teachers' recommendations to overcome the challenges?

## Literature Review

### Voicing Teaching Experiences through Photography

A widely used principle in the advertising sector can also be applied in this research domain, called the photovoice method. It is adopted in this report as a participatory-based method which uses photography as the primary empirical data. In this sense, visualizing an event or phenomenon is easier and faster to attract the target audiences' attention. In other words, the disclosure of a phenomenon through images can attract readers' initial attention and generate new information that may not be obtained when information is only conveyed in text form. Further, as a visual method, photovoice harnesses the visual image's immediacy to furnish evidence and promote an effective means of sharing competence and knowledge (Wang & Burris, 1997). It means that photovoice is suitable for exploring lived experiences as applied in previous projects (see Call-Cummings et al., 2019; Ferdiansyah et al., 2020; Koltz et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is hoped that English teachers, as participants in this report, can better describe their daily experiences through visual data about online/virtual teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants are expected to express their grasp, emotions, thought patterns, and ideas on their experiences that cover challenges and recommendations as problem solving and then visualize them. Henceforth, to formulate a conclusion of the participants' voices, there will be a dialogue session between researchers and participants (Wang, 1999; Wang et al., 1998) with democratic processes (Sutton-Brown, 2014).

## Method

The present photovoice study explores English teachers' challenges in delivering online/virtual teaching at Indonesian vocational schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photovoice methodology was adopted to capture teachers' experiences in the form of photographs accompanied by stories or narratives. Images and stories which complement each other will be the point of departure for understanding their teaching experiences, including obstacles, emotions, thought patterns, and ideas.

Concerning vocational education, an interview with the head of the human resources department (HRD) of a large coal company revealed that there are still many Indonesian vocational school alumni who failed to get jobs in multinational and international companies since they cannot demonstrate good English skills during job interviews (Rudi, personal communication, 2018). This may cause their ideas to be less well conveyed. This is a very sad fact since one of the goals of joining vocational education is to get proper jobs based on the competencies of each major (Littrell et al., 2014). Therefore, this is not an easy task for English teachers when they are forced to shift from a face-to-face meeting to a virtual one, along with its challenges and pitfalls. The pandemic has made online English classes more challenging to teachers and students, particularly at vocational schools. Thus, teachers' challenges would be interesting to explore and may become research findings that inform current pedagogical practices.

## Participants

Four experienced vocational schools English teachers (with English teaching experiences ranging from three to seventeen years) who teach in private and public vocational schools in Indonesia participated in this project (see Table 1). Pertaining to the participant recruitment procedure, all of them were contacted individually. They were also informed that instructions, interviews, data collection, and other activities during the study would be conducted through virtual meetings. All participants' names and identities are confidential to ethically ensure their privacy (Allen, 2012).

TABLE 1

### *Participants' Profile*

<i>English teachers</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Vocational schools</i>	<i>Major</i>
A	Female	36	Public VS	Computer Network Engineering & Small Vehicle Engineering
B	Male	40	Private VS	Motorcycle Engineering, Small Vehicle Engineering, & Nursing
C	Female	26	Private VS	Office Automation and Governance
D	Female	27	Public VS	Motorcycle Engineering

## Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Anchored in Wang (1999), data collection procedures using photovoice methodology include introductory workshops, collecting photos, interviews with participants, and theme validation. The introductory workshop is a mini-workshop on how to take a photo for a photovoice study. The participants were introduced to photovoice, techniques of taking suitable photographs, ethics, and photovoice reflections. Then, each participant was given a two-week task of taking at least five photographs representing their English class during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The photo can be a real or metaphorical image (the exposure of someone's face in the photograph is always with prior permission). Participants took photos using their cameras and were free to take any sort of photograph as long as it was in line with the topic of this project. Thereafter, following Koltz et al. (2010) and Ferdiansyah et al. (2020), participants were asked to write a caption on each photograph that covered the context of taking the photo, the reason for taking the photo, and their emotional reactions. All of the collected photographs served as guided artifacts for in-depth interviews conducted using Zoom and WhatsApp.

This report also adopted Wang's (1999) "SHOWED" technique in discussing the collected photographs. The SHOWED stands for: What do you see here?, What is really happening here?, How does this relate to our lives?, Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?, and What can we do about it? Further, following Widodo (2014), interview procedures include the following phases: listening to the recording carefully, transcribing participants' voices correctly, interpreting data by comprehending each word and sentence, communicating whether the data match with participant's intentions, and building data credibility by asking participants for feedback on interpretation of data. The transcription

was read many times until we had a clear understanding and was classified into several themes, of course, after getting prior permission from the participants. The themes found were noted down and used as parameters for qualitatively analyzing and interpreting the findings. In this sense, the findings were confirmed to participants before publication and dissemination.

## Findings and Discussion

Drawing from the collected data, analysis were organized thematically relating to challenges during online/virtual learning as well as perceptions and recommendations from participants. The themes include learning interaction, motivating students, and teachers' recommendations.

### Lack of Learning Interaction: We Are Together but Separated

One characteristic of learning with a pedagogical approach is that students do not act independently. The teachers' role is dominant in directing students to achieve the expected knowledge and evaluating learning activities. Canning (2010) argues that the active interaction of students and teachers in learning is a major component of pedagogy. The pandemic, which forced learning to be carried out remotely, created a kind of partition between teachers and students that seemed to be a barrier to creating active interactions among students and between students and teachers. The partition is literally in the form of a monitor screen where teachers and students can see and greet each other but with a very limited intensity of interaction. As shown in Figure 1, Teacher D describes such conditions as a glass partition that separates the rooms. Due to the boundary of the glass partition, people from both sides of the rooms could see each other, but the sound between the rooms could not be heard clearly.



- Context** This photo was taken when I had dinner in a restaurant last month. The restaurant is nice and cozy. There are a glass door and window separating outside and inside area. I chose to sit on a bench outside, so I could take some fresh air.
- Reasons** It reflects the virtual classroom situation at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the glass door was closed, I could see some people eating and chatting inside, but I couldn't catch their words clearly.
- Emotion** This photo illustrates my mood and mind during the social interaction in virtual class. In teaching and learning activities, I and my students could see each other through the conference window. Students could hear what the teacher say, but sometimes they couldn't catch every word clearly because of the signal problem. It seems like there is a glass window in front of us, difficult to attract their attention except we wave to call them. This pandemic literally teaches us to be more patient in the teaching process and more appreciate the warmth of meetings.

Figure 1. Teacher's photovoice pertinent to the barrier in a virtual class.

Likewise, synchronous learning through various online meeting platforms causes students and teachers to not hear each other's voices unless the microphone is turned on. Otherwise, online classrooms might

become very noisy, and difficult to grasp the meaning of each other's talks when all the mics are turned on. Also, a limited internet signal which is currently still encountered in several locations in Indonesia makes the sender's voice of the message inaudible to their audiences or recipients. Meanwhile, in English language learning, the clarity of sound in pronouncing words is a major part of learning materials. Due to this hampered communication, it is difficult to realize sustained student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions as the cornerstone for effective language learning. This situation may also trigger a lack of engagement and enthusiasm for teachers and students during the online learning process.

### Difficulty in Motivating Students

The COVID-19 pandemic that required learning to be carried out remotely has had a psychological impact on both students and teachers, which they had never before experienced. After undergoing distance learning for more than two years, many teachers encountered students whose motivation had decreased for participating in learning activities. Research from Aldridge and McQuagge (2021) describes stressful conditions during this pandemic experienced by students as a result of the pandemic-related conditions they had to face such as quarantine, isolation, and online learning. Students' minds and attention were torn between COVID-19 and learning.

Pertaining to students' motivation, Teacher C illustrates the lack of students' enthusiasm in undergoing virtual learning in Figure 2. Many students are less engaged because they do not attend virtual classes for various personal reasons. Even when joining synchronous learning, some students do not seriously engage in learning activities by turning off their cameras so that they escape the teacher's monitoring. It is hard for teachers to feel the classroom atmosphere, students' true emotions, and real problems that occur during classroom interaction. This situation is much different from face-to-face classes, whereby most students are active in their presence and rarely late except for convincing reasons. It seems to indicate that students were less motivated to participate in online learning during the pandemic.



Context	It is my schoolyard. I took this photo when I was in school. It was the day of my schedule to come to the school.
Reason	It feels so quiet. No one runs, passes by, or stands under the trees. There are just two trees standing there. The photo depicts my virtual classroom where students are not as enthusiastic as in face-to-face class.
Emotion	I feel it is like some students of mine desire in learning English. It is like my students' desire is the dried leaves and the pandemic is the wind. Their desire in learning English has swayed because of the pandemic. Their motivation has fallen slowly because they feel bored, miss their school, and want to meet their friends. I feel pandemic have changed their habits. They often missed online classes because of waking up late. I feel like it is hard to make them keep focus when we had a teleconference for English class. When they have to learn from home, they got so many distractions from people around them. I felt uncomfortable when it happened. I hope this COVID will go away and they can come to the school like before.

Figure 2. Teacher's photovoice in relation to motivating students.

In pedagogical learning, students receive motivation from others such as parents, teachers, and peers. Interactions between classmates in face-to-face classes, for instance, are intensively intertwined with communication without barriers and can directly witness each other's performances. Such circumstances

might increase students' motivation to learn and catch up with peers. Although students can still attend online/virtual class, the atmosphere and interaction differ. The condition of online learning in the time of the pandemic has further decreased their motivation for various reasons. For example, boredom with online classes and desire to meet friends affect students' psychological state. Moreover, similar to Liu's (2020) report on the context of vocational schools, all participants expressed that many students have a mindset as if English is not a vocational subject that needs to be mastered well so that has an impact on the low motivation to learn English. Thus, motivating students is getting more difficult due to the barriers in online/virtual classes.

## **Teachers' Recommendations for Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In line with Teacher C's experience regarding student motivation, Teacher A conveyed the condition of students in her class where their discipline decreased in attending synchronous learning sessions or completing school assignments asynchronously. In this case, student saturation in distance learning is viewed by Teacher B as the cause of the decline in student motivation. Responding to the decline in student motivation, Teacher A recommends the need for teachers to present creative and interactive learning. Teachers' understanding of student's interests will be very helpful for teachers in finding teaching methods that can foster student motivation. The example applied by Teacher A is to use films that are currently popular with students as a means of learning grammar. Each student is asked to review one of the films or drama episodes using certain tense functions. In addition, social media, which students can widely access, could be utilized as a learning tool. Meanwhile, Teacher B advocates games and songs, two modalities favored by students, as learning tools.

Teachers have to present online learning that is more creative and interactive. For example, students are asked to review videos in the form of films or dramas that are on the rise using the simple past tense (Teacher A, WhatsApp interview, 22 August 2021).

Materials are kept as simple as possible. Usually, we learn through games or listening to songs together (Teacher B, WhatsApp interview, 24 August 2021).

The success of efforts to motivate students to be actively involved in distance learning during a pandemic is also influenced by good cooperation between the school and students' families. In this case, Pan et al. (2021) concluded that family greatly influences the mental health of vocational students, especially during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It takes cooperation and mutual understanding between parents and teachers so that student learning can still run well even though it is carried out remotely. For Teacher A, students' learning can be executed optimally when teacher's efforts in preparing all the curriculum tools required for distance learning go hand in hand with parents or student's family members who are ready to accompany and support at home. Of course, as also expressed by Teacher B, student's family members need to be more patient and pay more attention to students undergoing distance learning from home. They should be aware of students' time to study as this is not a school holiday even though students are at home.

The most important thing is the collaboration between teachers and parents to understand each other's conditions and support each other so that students can learn more optimally during virtual learning. For the government, it is enough to minimize the teachers' administrative tasks because many are running out of time and do not reach the learning targets carried out online (Teacher A, WhatsApp interview, 22 August 2021).

The main thing is that students' families are aware that even though their children stay at home, it does not mean school holidays (Teacher B, WhatsApp interview, 24 August 2021).

The government as an education policymaker has a pivotal role in the success of distance learning during the pandemic. Teacher A hopes that the government will issue a policy related to simplifying teacher administrative tasks so that teachers can focus more on assisting students in learning and preparing ideal distance learning tools and materials according to learners' needs.

## Conclusion

The present photovoice study explores English teachers' experiences in Indonesian vocational schools during the COVID-19 pandemic to grasp their adversities and listen to their recommendations. Regarding teaching and learning activities, the findings revealed that social interaction and motivation are still the main issues in virtual learning. Hence, family members must assist students at home during their learning activities. On the other hand, teacher creativity in determining learning methods, tools, and materials is no less important than maintaining student motivation and engagement in distance learning. Even so, in the context of vocational schools, we contend that learners' needs for vocational English steadfastly should be a concern for English teachers or practitioners in any condition. Designing learning tasks or activities in online learning, for instance, should be oriented to vocational settings (see Suwarno et al., 2021). Last but not least, teachers' experience with implementing online tasks or activities in the context of vocational schools is suggested for future studies.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the participants for their contributions to this research.

## The Authors

*Suwarno* is an academic staff member at Politeknik Negeri Batam, Indonesia. He undertook a master's degree in Applied Linguistics Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia. His research interests lie in English for specific purposes, critical discourse analysis, SFL, and corpus linguistics.

Politeknik Negeri Batam  
Batam, Indonesia  
Email: suwarno.scp@gmail.com

*Dina Rafidiyah* is an English lecturer at Universitas Muhammadiyah Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. She graduated from Pennsylvania State University, USA; majoring in Workforce Education and Development School to Work. Her research interests are materials development, vocational education, TESOL, using technology in education, and teacher professional development.

Universitas Muhammadiyah Banjarmasin  
Banjarmasin, Indonesia  
Email: dinarafidiyah@umbjm.ac.id

*Fazri Nur Yusuf* is a lecturer in the Department of English Language Education, Faculty of Language and Literature Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia. His research interests

include EFL curriculum and instruction, EFL teacher education, and professional development.

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia  
Bandung, Indonesia  
Email: fazrinuryusuf@upi.edu

*Ahmad Kailani* is a teaching staff member at the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Banjarmasin, Indonesia. He did his MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Currently, he is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. He is interested in English for specific pedagogy and systemic functional linguistics implementation in EFL/ESL and ESP practices.

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia  
Bandung, Indonesia  
Email: ahmadkailani@upi.edu

*Anis Rahmawati* (corresponding author) is a lecturer in Building Engineering Vocational Teacher's Education at Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia. Her research interests include vocational learning and sustainable building engineering.

Universitas Sebelas Maret  
Surakarta, Indonesia  
Email: anisrahmawati@staff.uns.ac.id

## References

- Adedoyin, O. B., & Soykan, E. (2020). Covid-19 pandemic and online learning: The challenges and opportunities. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1813180>
- Aldridge, M. D., & McQuagge, E. (2021). "Finding My Own Way": The lived experience of undergraduate nursing students learning psychomotor skills during COVID-19. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 16(4), 347-351. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teln.2021.07.002>
- Allen, Q. (2012). Photographs and stories: Ethics, benefits and dilemmas of using participant photography with Black middle-class male youth. *Qualitative Research*, 12(4), 443-458. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941111433088>
- Call-Cummings, M., Hauber- Özer, M., Byers, C., & Mancuso, G. P. (2019). The power of/in photovoice. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(4), 399-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2018.1492536>
- Canning, N. (2010). Playing with heutagogy: Exploring strategies to empower mature learners in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher*, 34(1), 59-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770903477102>
- Carillo, C., & Flores, M. A. (2020). COVID-19 and teacher education: A literature review of online teaching and learning practices. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 466-487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1821184>
- Ferdiansyah, S., Widodo, H. P., & Elyas, T. (2020). Photovoice in the English as an additional language (EAL) writing classroom: No need to rush to love writing because love will grow with time. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 17(1), 269-279. <https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2020.17.1.19.269>
- Flores, M. A., & Gago, M. (2020). Teacher education in times of COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal: National, institutional and pedagogical responses. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 507-516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1799709>



- Koltz, R. L., Odegard, M. A., Provost, K. B., Smith, T., & Kleist, D. (2010). Picture perfect: Using photovoice to explore four doctoral students' comprehensive examination experiences. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 5*(4), 389-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2010.527797>
- Liu, I. F. (2020). The impact of extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, and social self-efficacy on English competition participation intentions of pre-college learners: Differences between high school and vocational students in Taiwan. *Learning and Motivation, 72*, 101675. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lmot.2020.101675>
- Littrell, J. J., Lorenz, J. H. & Smith, H. T. (2014). *School to career*. The Goodheart-Willcox Company Inc.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Gregersen, T., & Mercer, S. (2020). Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions. *System, 102352*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102352>
- Moorhouse, B. L. (2020). Adaptations to a face-to-face initial teacher education course 'forced' online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 46*(4), 609-611. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1755205>
- Moser, K. M., Wei, T., & Brenner, D. (2021). Remote teaching during COVID-19: Implications from a national survey of language educators. *System, 97*, 102431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102431>
- Pan, Y., Yang, Z., Han, X., & Qi, S. (2021). Family functioning and mental health among secondary vocational students during the COVID-19 epidemic: A moderated mediation model. *Personality and Individual Differences, 171*, 110490. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110490>
- Quezada, R. L., Talbot, C., & Quezada-Parker, K. B. (2020). From bricks and mortar to remote teaching: A teacher education programme's response to COVID-19. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 46*(4), 472-483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1801330>
- Sutton-Brown, C. A. (2014). Photovoice: A methodological guide. *Photography and Culture, 7*(2), 169-185. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175145214x13999922103165>
- Suwarno, Triyono, S., & Ashadi. (2021). Tasks in national and international ESP textbooks: Do these textbooks teach ESP? *The Journal of Asia TEFL, 18*(4), 1463-1475. <https://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2021.18.4.27.1463>
- Teng, M. F., & Wu, J. G. (2021). Tea or tears: Online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 47*(2), 290-292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2021.1886834>
- Wan, S. W.-Y., Chu, C. K.-W., Cheng, A. H.-H., Hui, E. S.-Y., Fung, K. C.-K., & Yu, H. H.-W. (2021). "Getting ready to teach": Using photovoice within a collaborative action research project. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 47*(1), 125-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1841553>
- Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health, 8*(2), 185-192. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.1999.8.185>
- Wang, C. C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior, 24*(3), 369-387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>
- Wang, C. C., Yi, W. K., Tao, Z. W., & Carovano, K. (1998). Photovoice as a participatory health promotion Strategy. *Health Promotion International, 13*(1), 75-86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/13.1.75>
- Widodo, H. P. (2014). Methodological considerations in interview data transcription. *International Journal of Innovation in English Language Teaching and Research, 3*(1), 101-109.

(Received June 30, 2022; Revised October 30, 2022; Accepted December 10, 2022)