

Learning Asian Languages Using Online Platforms during Pandemic Times: Evidence from Indonesian Youth

Indira Kastaty and Ella S. Prihatini

International Relations Department, Faculty of Humanities,
Bina Nusantara University
Jakarta, Indonesia 11480
indira.kastaty@binus.ac.id, ella.prihatini@binus.edu

Abstract

Asian languages such as Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean have become popular among Indonesian youth, as more people are interested in acquiring the foreign languages. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face learning approach has been restricted. This leaves a window of opportunity for online platforms to fill the gap by providing the means to learn Asian languages for the Indonesian young generation who tend to consume pop culture products from China, Japan, and Korea. This article examines the experience of Indonesian youth in learning the mentioned Asian languages using online platforms during pandemic times. An online survey conducted in March 2022 with a sample of study consists of 310 research participants aged 16 to 30 years old, and 14 of them agreed to take part in the interview sessions. The findings suggest that the Indonesian young population continue to show substantial interest in learning Asian languages, especially Korean (85%), followed by Japanese (68%) and Mandarin (51%). Around 84% of participants were satisfied using online platforms to learn foreign languages. Nevertheless, learning foreign languages online is not always smooth sailing, as internet connection often hinders learners to maximize their excellent experience with the process.

Keywords

Online Learning, Asian Language, Pandemic, Foreign Language and Indonesian Youth.

1. Introduction

According to Babble's Top 10 Most Spoken Languages in the World in 2021, Mandarin and Japanese are listed at the first and the ninth spot, with 1.3 billion and 126 million native speakers respectively. On the other hand, Korean is also on the rise in terms of popularity since the huge success of the Korean wave phenomenon (Pickles 2022). These three Asian languages are also quite popular among the Indonesian young generation with movies and soap operas, among other pop culture products, from China, Japan, and Korea being consumed on a regular basis (Blanco 2020). However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has affected how people are learning foreign languages, including Asian languages.

With physical distancing policies in place, many people are now turning to e-learning mode to embark or to continue their learning journey. Online learning or usually referred to as e-learning is a learning technique based on information and communication technology that requires assistance from a computer system (Chang 2020). Online learning includes all learning methods that are supported by electronic media, especially through the internet, web, and computers that involve knowledge and skills (Kopylova 2018). These elements of online learning support distance education and nurture a virtual learning environment that is more student-centered, more effective and innovative (Nedeva and Dimova 2010).

1.1 Objectives

Against the background above, this paper aims to examine the experience of Indonesian youth in learning Asian languages (Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean) using online platforms during pandemic times. The findings will shed some light on their perceptions toward the importance of learning the languages and the experiences in using online platforms.

2. Literature Review

Online learning has three types of educational processes, namely, (1) self-study: is where an individual learning by using electronic media to access educational materials and continue to get consultation from the teacher, (2) passive tutoring: teachers' passive guidance with offline consultations; (3) blended learning: learning using electronic media and under the guidance of a teacher. Currently, blended learning is considered as the most effective method since the approach reduces hours of class and it provides sufficient time for individual activities with minimum supervision (Chang 2020). The use of online learning methods has numerous advantages for both learners and teachers. Using online learning mode, students can study anywhere as long as there is access to a computer and internet connection.

Therefore, online learning offers flexibility for students to learn any time of the day (Kopylova 2018). Through online learning, multimedia content and other learning resources from online lessons can be accessed anytime. Hence learners can plan online lessons according to their time availability (Dhawan 2020). Online learning also allows learners to have full control on their own study, so they can learn and practice at their own pace (Soliman 2014). This will accelerate learners to take in more knowledge and be able to absorb knowledge (Ying et al. 2021). The online learning method will be a more productive choice for students because it is successful in fostering independent learning according to the rate they prefer. Also, online learning does not only use one learning method, but there are many preference options. Thus, learning will be more interesting and easier to understand (Dhawan 2020). When the learners have found an online platform that they prefer, it will certainly increase their motivation and interest in learning (Mada and Anharudin 2019).

However, several studies have revealed some disadvantages of online learning, such as dependence on internet access and speed of the internet (Ying et al. 2021). Learners with limited skills on technology and the internet will be unable to follow the learning process due to these technical limitations (Rahmat et al. 2021). Obstacles related to internet access will affect learners in receiving material by their teacher (Dhawan 2020). Online learning also reduces the number of face-to-face meetings between lecturers and learners, hence minimizes social relations in learning activities (Mohammadi et al. 2011). Not a few of them feel the dilemma of the difference between online and face-to-face learning methods (Ying et al. 2021). Online learning media also has limitations in conducting questions and answers. Learners need more time to research the answers to their questions, there is even no guarantee that the answers are correct unless they have communicated with the lecturer. From here, it can be seen that if learners face obstacles in the learning process, it can reduce their motivation to study online (Ying et al. 2021).

Other study finds that in foreign language learning, online tools are highly used by undergraduate students to facilitate their learning journey (Abdelouahed 2019). Students consider online platforms are easier and more flexible to do learning (Ozudogru and Hismanoglu 2016). They prefer to use online learning methods rather than traditional ways of learning as the platforms are easily adapted by learners with gamification that can increase their excitement in the process (Mutambik 2018). Other study also suggests that language learning using online platforms can develop speaking and listening skills in real situations because online platforms include audio to listen and videos to watch as much as desired (Rahmat et al. 2021).

3. Methods

This study applies a quantitative approach in gauging the experiences of Indonesian youth, those between 16 to 30 years old, in learning Asian languages (Mandarin, Japanese, Korean) during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have collected responses from 310 research participants who completed an online survey conducted in March 2022. The respondents were purposefully invited to participate in the study as they have learned Asian languages using online platforms during the pandemic or tweeted about learning either Mandarin, Japanese, or Korean. We asked them to provide answers to multiple choice questions and open questions regarding their interest and experience in using online platforms for learning Mandarin, Japanese, or Korean. To complement the descriptive statistical analysis, we further invite respondents to participate in an interview session to elaborate their answers in the survey. Out of 310 respondents, 14 of them agreed to take part in the interview session and this makes the response rate sit at around 4.5%. The narratives gathered from the interviews allow us to comprehend the pros and the cons of learning foreign languages using online platforms.

3.1 Sample of Study

Law No. 40 of 2009 concerning Youth defines the young population as those between 16 to 30 years old, hence we use this definition as the scope of our study. Table 1 and Table 2 display the distribution of respondents based on their

age and their current activity. A vast majority of the respondents are university students (76%) and aged 21-25 years old (64%).

Table 1. Distribution of age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
16-20	100	32.3
21-25	199	64.2
26-30	11	3.5

Table 2. Distribution of activity

Activities	Frequency	Percentage
Student	40	12.9
University Student	234	75.5
Worker/Employee	30	9.7
Lecturer	1	0.3
Entrepreneur	3	1
Content Creator	1	0.3
Job Seeker	1	0.3

4. Results and Discussion

Despite limitations in face-to-face interaction during the pandemic times, our data suggests that Indonesian youth continue to have a significantly high interest in learning foreign languages. As presented in Table 3 and Table 4, nearly all respondents were interested in learning foreign languages during pandemic times. Their motivation varies with 55% of them interested in learning a new language in order to expand their knowledge and around 25% assert that having foreign language skills will be very useful for their future career. We also asked the level of interest in learning Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean. Table 5 shows that the strongest interest was given to the Korean language, with nearly 85% of respondents indicating interested and very interested in learning it. Meanwhile, the lack of interest was expressed towards Mandarin with 24% of respondents suggesting that they do not have the intention to learn this language.

Table 3. Interest in learning foreign languages

Scale	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	309	99.7
No	1	0.3

Table 4. Motivation in learning foreign languages

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
I want to learn a new language.	173	55.8
I have my own educational purpose.	22	7.1
It will be useful for my future career.	110	25.5
I want to improve my skills.	1	0.3
It will help me when I'm watching foreign movies / series.	1	0.3
I want to follow the trend.	2	0.6
All of them are true.	1	0.3

Table 5. Interest in learning Asian languages

Language	Very Interested	Interested	Neutral	Not Interested	Not at all Interested
Mandarin	71 (22.9%)	87 (28.10%)	78 (25.2%)	57 (18.4%)	17 (5.5%)
Japanese	90 (29%)	122 (39.4%)	52 (16.8%)	36 (11.6%)	10 (3.2%)
Korean	173 (55.8%)	89 (28.7%)	29 (9.4%)	11 (3.5%)	8 (2.6%)

As the government of Indonesia imposes physical distancing policies, many programs were shifted to online mode, including teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, the interest to learn Asian languages was not deterred as people continue to show their willingness to study their preferred language. Table 6 displays those interested in pursuing their learning journey tend to incline to utilize online approach (82%). Reason behind this is because online platforms are user friendly, and it makes the learning process more fun to do. However, it is important to note that about 18% of respondents suggest that they like the offline approach as it provides direct in-person interaction with the teacher.

Table 6. Preferences learning method during pandemic

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Online	255	82.3
Offline	55	17.7

Table 7 further exhibits that the current pandemic is not an obstacle for Indonesian youth to learn Asian languages. Most respondents (94%) agreed that the pandemic did not stop their desire to learn a foreign language. In fact, over 90% of participants agree or strongly agree with the statement “I am more interested in learning foreign languages during pandemic times”. Furthermore, one possible explanation as to why people are very keen to learn foreign languages using online platforms is because these channels allow people to learn with flexibility and following their own pace.

Table 7. Learning foreign languages during pandemic

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Pandemic didn't stop me from learning foreign languages.	128 (41.3%)	167 (54%)	14 (5%)	1 (0.3%)
I am more interested in learning foreign languages during pandemic times.	99 (31.9%)	184 (59%)	26 (8%)	1 (0.3%)
Pandemic has made me more skilled in the usage of online platforms.	91 (29.4%)	207 (66.8%)	12 (3.9%)	0
Online platforms make learning activities more flexible during pandemic times.	121 (39%)	181 (58%)	7 (2%)	1 (0.3%)

As we asked respondents to reflect on their experiences using online platforms, we found that 84% of participants were satisfied and very satisfied (Table 8). This finding offers interesting insight as to how online platforms can serve as an alternative medium to learn foreign languages. Table 9 displays the experience of using online platforms for learning Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean. Around 86% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that learning through online platforms is improving their writing skills. And about 91% of them suggest that online platforms have systematic course distribution which helps them to navigate the learning process in a much-standardized mode. Likewise, more than 85% of respondents agree and strongly agree that online platforms have clear instructions to help students complete their tasks.

Table 8. Satisfaction level using online platforms

Scale	Frequency	Percentage
Very Satisfied	72	23.2
Satisfied	189	61
Neutral	43	14
Not Satisfied	5	2
Not at all Satisfied	1	0.3

Table 9. Experience using online platforms

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learning through online platforms expands my writing skills (kanji, hiragana/katakana, hangul).	38 (11.6%)	229 (74%)	41 (13.2%)	4 (1.3%)
Learning through online platforms improves my communication skills.	45 (14.5%)	222 (72%)	41 (13.2%)	2 (0.6%)
Online platforms have a systematic distribution course.	35 (11.3%)	248 (80%)	26 (8%)	1 (0.3%)
Online platforms directions and navigation are clear.	55 (17.7%)	240 (77%)	15 (5%)	0
Online platforms help me to improve my foreign language skill.	87 (28.1%)	211 (68%)	11 (4%)	1 (0.3%)

However, learning foreign languages using online platforms is not always a smooth sailing experience. Instead, some obstacles were identified by respondents with terrible internet connection being the biggest challenge with more than 62% of respondents experiencing them, followed by bugs in the application (44%), and the amount of time given to finish a task (27%) (Table 10).

Table 10. Obstacles in learning using online platforms

Obstacle	Frequency	Percentage
Internet connection	193	62.3
Application bugs	138	44.5
Time given in answering question	86	27.7
Not supported device	36	11.6
Payment method	1	0.3
Too much advertisement	1	0.3
Question and answer	1	0.6
None	8	2.4

During interview sessions, we gathered more information from the respondents regarding the usefulness of online platforms in learning Asian foreign languages. Table 11 displays the distribution of interviewees by age, background, and preferred language. Each participant was coded as P and the number on the list, for example P1 refers to our first interviewee and the person is a fresh graduate who has learnt or is interested in Japanese and Korean. To the question of how useful is learning foreign language using online platforms, their responses are as following:

Online channels are very helpful, especially expanding my knowledge about vocabulary followed by improving pronunciation. (P1)

*The usage of online channels during a pandemic time is very helpful in learning a foreign language. (P6)
... using online channels regularly will help in mastering a foreign language. (P7)*

Table 11. Distribution of participants by age, background, and preferred Asian language

Code	Age	Background	Preferred Asian Language
P1	22	Fresh graduate	Japanese, Korean
P2	22	Staff in Japanese company	Mandarin, Japanese
P3	22	Staff in IT company	Mandarin, Korean
P4	24	Staff in IT company	Japanese, Korean
P5	19	University student	Japanese, Korean
P6	21	University student	Japanese, Korean
P7	20	University student	Japanese
P8	22	University student	Japanese, Korean
P9	22	University student	Japanese, Korean
P10	22	University student	Korean
P11	22	University student	Korean
P12	22	University student	Japanese, Korean
P13	30	Employee	Mandarin, Korean
P14	21	University Student	Korean

Our interviewees suggest that online platforms succeeded in increasing their knowledge regarding vocabulary and pronunciation using the correct intonation. Additionally, during pandemic times where face-to-face learning has been very limited, online platforms can be used as an alternative tool in learning foreign languages. However, some participants expressed different experiences in using online channels in learning foreign languages:

Online platforms give you knowledge about foreign languages, but if you wish to master it, you cannot rely on online channels. (P3)

...more to add insight because learning through online channels is used while mobile. Therefore, if you are willing to master the language, you have to concentrate more. (P14)

Online channels can indeed be used to learn foreign languages. However, if we want to master a foreign language, we still have to learn using a textbook or take a course followed by regular practice. In my opinion, learning through online channels is just for fun, not for mastering the language (P4)

The narratives above indicate that online platforms are sufficient in adding knowledge about foreign languages, but not to a point where one can master it. Since learning a foreign language requires strong knowledge and adequate understanding of grammar and conjunctions, the process cannot be achieved merely via online platforms. And as most users assert that they are using online channels as a means to learn language in a fun and interesting way, this highlights the feature of the utilization which is to fill their spare time. Further study is required to examine how and why the interest to learn foreign languages using online platforms may fluctuate, especially when the pandemic is over.

5. Conclusion

Our study has demonstrated that the current pandemic does not deter Indonesian youth from continuing learning Asian languages. In fact, the physical distancing policies put in place by the government stimulate people to use online platforms as the approach offers flexibility and access to the learning materials at any time. This paper unpacks the experiences of Indonesian youth in learning Asian languages (Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean) via online platforms during pandemic times using online surveys and interviews. The findings suggest that most respondents in this study are very keen to learn Korean, compared to the other two Asian languages, and their main motivation was to gain new language skills and to prepare for their future career endeavors. About 84% of research participants were satisfied and very satisfied with learning Asian languages using online platforms. Yet, the process of learning foreign languages online is not always smooth sailing, as internet connection often hinders learners to maximize their excellent experience with the process. This paper contributes to the literature on Asian foreign languages and the interest of Indonesian youth in utilizing online platforms to learn them. On another note, technology advancement such as social media is useful in helping creating gender parity and social inclusion (Prihatini 2020).

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Biographies

Indira Kastaty is an undergraduate student at Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia. She is majoring in International Relations with a concentration in Multinational Corporations and East Asia. Her research interest centered on Asian education and culture. She learned about other countries' pandemic education cooperation from her internship at the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture in the Bureau of Cooperation and Public Relations in the division America - Europe. She also experiences participating in one of the ASEM Education projects (Asia - Europe Meeting Education) during the pandemic times.

Ella S. Prihatini teaches International Relations at Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia. She received her PhD in political science and international relations from the University of Western Australia (UWA). She holds a BA in International Relations (University of Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia) and Master of Development Practice (University of Queensland, Brisbane). Her research interest centered on women's political participation, digital diplomacy, comparative studies, and electoral politics in Indonesia. She also serves as an honorary research fellow at the University of Western Australia (UWA), Perth.