



The challenges faced by college students in remote areas in adapting to distance learning during the covid-19 pandemic: an interpretative phenomenological analysis (ipa)

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APA Citation: Hastowohadi (2024). The Challenges Faced by College Students in Remote Areas in Adapting to Distance Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). <i>iRecall Journal: An Indonesian Journal for Language Learning and Teaching</i> , 3(1), 01-15.	
Received 10/01/2025	ABSTRACT Learning in Far-flung area is never easy for students to run out their semester-period for over time. Indeed, Covid-19 outbreak limited them to directly learning in face-to-face mode, moreover, the internet access tried to support distance-learning. On the contrary, the students were challenging to link with the internet connection because of the signal, however, they need to struggle out with this unprecedented covid-19 outbreak. Using a qualitative research method, three students who lived in far-flung area were interviewed and the interviews were transcribed verbatim, then analyzed by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This study describes the process of the students- struggles, students-adaptation, and the implication for future distance-learning that will be discussed. Keywords: Distance-learning, Far-flung, IPA
Received in revised 27 /01/2025	
Accepted 02/03/2025	

Introduction

In the recent years, teaching education around the world has begun to adapt to online learning caused by the spread of COVID-19. On the Other hand, universities must be sensitive to this issue where they have to close classrooms, the move them to online learning (Wheeler & Chavda, 2021). With online learning, learning will not necessarily take place smoothly due to several factors to support online learning, including the availability of a capable internet network, smooth access to the internet, and also the availability of tools in the form of mobile phones or laptops that can be connected to the internet (Fabito et al., 2020). With these supporting factors, online learning is expected to run smoothly technically. If this factor are not met, it is certain that online distance learning will not run smoothly. Unfortunately, these obstacles can occur anywhere and anytime. One of them is the area where students live is influential in their smooth learning online. For students who live in remote areas, this is of course a challenge for them. Internet access, which is usually smooth for students who live in both urban and rural areas, may not apply to them. One of the underlying reasons is internet access that is not affordable for them. The students who live in remote areas are trying to find the best way so that they can access online learning.

On this basis, we are trying to dig up their stories about their efforts in obtaining online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We try to compile a narrative about how they try to access online learning and the process of adapting to that access in the midst of their remote and remote areas of residence. We analyzed this narrative using interpretative phenomological analysis (IPA). We want to take an in-depth look at the experiences of students living in remote areas to study in distance-learning mode during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that after getting an emotional description of their experience; how students try hard to learn during this pandemic, this study can contribute to the development of learning modes far in the future.

Students Challenge to Distance learning mode

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the learning that has been carried out face-to-face to become online. Students have to adjust to situations like this where they will not be in the classroom anymore (Reference). They have to leave the learning mode from face-to-face to online which of course requires extra effort for them to adapt. This is in line with the statement (Quezada, Talbot, & Parker, 2020) that

colleges should close their classes and then move on to online learning in light of the consideration of the impact caused by COVID-19. Therefore, the campus must

prepare facilities and infrastructure to support students to be able to carry out distance learning. As additional information, educational settings should focus on online learning activities (Zuriah et al., 2021). With these points, students must at least have supporting facilities such as laptops or smartphones, as well as qualified internet access (Reference). This is of course a challenge for students, especially those who live in remote areas.

Interpretative approach as a medium of expression

The interpretative approach serves as a powerful medium of expression, particularly in qualitative research, by allowing individuals to convey their lived experiences in a manner that transcends mere description. This approach focuses on how participants interpret and make sense of their world, providing rich insights into their perceptions, beliefs, and emotions. In this context, the researcher carefully analyzes these interpretations, often seeking to understand the surface-level narratives and underlying meanings and structures that shape individuals' experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

One of the interpretative approach's core strengths is its ability to give participants a voice, allowing them to express their perspectives on their terms. This method acknowledges the complexity of human experience, recognizing that meaning is often subjective and fluid, influenced by various cultural, social, and personal factors. By interpreting these meanings within their specific context, researchers can uncover deeper understandings of phenomena, such as how individuals adapt to new challenges or negotiate their identities in response to changing circumstances (Ponterotto, 2005).

In educational research, for instance, an interpretative approach can be used to explore how students make sense of their learning experiences, particularly in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, or narratives, researchers can capture the nuances of students' emotional, cognitive, and social responses to distance learning, providing a more holistic view of their educational journeys.

Furthermore, the interpretative approach is flexible and dynamic, allowing researchers to engage in an ongoing dialogue with their data. It encourages reflection, critical thinking, and an openness to multiple interpretations, making it a valuable tool for understanding complex and multifaceted issues. Whether applied in social sciences, education, or health research, this approach helps translate

abstract concepts into concrete expressions of human experience, offering a meaningful and empathetic lens through which researchers and practitioners can understand and address the challenges individuals face.

Research Methods

This study employed the qualitative methodology that offers interpretative phenomenological analysis of students' experience. Halliday (1994) describes ideational framework in systemic-functional grammar. The ideational component refers to the function of communicating ideas and representing a state of affairs (Talbot 2007, p.14). Constructing a picture of reality and understanding the human experience of what is happening around them and within them is the nature of language that is inherent in them (Halliday 1994, p. 101). It offers life world of participants how they get immersed in lived-through concrete and meaning-experiences (Cassidy, McIntyre & Talewar 2019). It also stance to scrutinize the subjective experience and how to make sense both internal and external world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Participants & Procedure

This study recruited three participants that study in a private university in Central Java who live in far-flung area. We tried to communicate with the gate keeper who is their lecturer to negotiate in contacting the participants. As an emic positioning, it is a vital pivot to get closer with participants to get trustful relationship (Bergman & Lindgren, 2017). We communicated with them by using whatsapp to ask permission whether they wanted to take the opportunity or not. This process took several days since we texted them and finally we got it. Interview dates were arrange latterly after communicating intensively with the participant when would they have leisure time on their ongoing busy days. In addition, ethical consideration covers anonymous that protecting students personal identity to show up their narration fluently. We proposed to not posting their personal identity to keep their privacy as a part of research ethic.

The analytic process

The interview facet, we tried to divide become several data transcriptions are verbatim data from zoom interview and phone call. The data transcriptions were anonymised to maintain confidentiality. The zoom transcription was printed into paper, then read by us to select the relevant-focus answer that connecting to the prompt-queries we brought. After reading individually, we selected the targeted-answers and tried to select into some interpretative paradigm by using inductive

approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After inserted and brokedown into several categories, we did reread the narrative voice of participants that deal with thematic-analysis. Afterwards, we did proceed with thematic-coding then to come up the analytical concept in terms of IPA. We did conceptual presentations among us to gain final emergent themes and narrative voice while conducting the depth-

interpretative analysis. Final interpretation is done by presenting linking-theory of IPA and the narrative form. IPA is concerned with detailed concentration of personal live experience, the interpretation of experience and how participants make sense of their genuine experience (Smith, 2011).

Demography of participants

Participants characteristic

We conducted a selective procedure to recruit some participants by identifying where they from and what semester to possess fruitful data to be narrated. The participants are from first year up to last year of the academic. There are three participants from English department; first, fifth, and seventh semester that have face to face experience and no experience with classroom interaction because she was at first semester.

Name	Age	Sex	Semester
Siti	18	Female	1 st
Joko	21	Male	5 th
Maemunah	22	Female	7 th

Interview

The interviews took place recently in the early September 2021. We had undergone the interviews via Zoom from their workplaces that have good internet connectivity. In order to make it easy, we encouraged them by providing theoretical scaffolding to the questions we had. Scaffolding aids to relate the gaps between the researchers and participants to succeed in the task unaided, so the participants take on fully activity (Taber, 2018).

Results

Superordinate themes of Distance Learning in the COVID-19 Outbreak

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted education, pushing students into an unprecedented learning environment. Students, particularly in remote areas, faced challenges with technology, connectivity, and a lack of support from educators. The transition to distance learning often led to isolation, as students felt

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disconnected from their peers and instructors, highlighting the need for greater engagement and understanding from educators. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience by adapting to new learning methods, such as asynchronous activities, and seeking solutions to connectivity issues. They called for more flexible, personalized approaches, such as extended deadlines and offline materials, to accommodate their unique circumstances. The pandemic also

exacerbated feelings of stress and anxiety, underscoring the importance of addressing students' mental health. Ultimately, the study suggests that distance learning must be more inclusive, flexible, and responsive to students' needs, especially in times of crisis.

Online-learning-Access

Accessing online learning in far-flung areas during the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a significant challenge for students striving to continue their education. Despite the promise of online platforms to bridge the gap created by the abrupt halt in face-to-face learning, internet access posed a substantial barrier. Students often faced severe connectivity struggles, with weak or inconsistent signals forcing them to seek specific locations, such as hilltops or other elevated spots, to maintain a stable connection. This daily quest for connectivity added to their already stressful learning environment. Additionally, access to devices was another critical hurdle. Many students lacked personal laptops or smartphones, necessitating shared usage within their households. This limitation disrupted learning schedules and required students to negotiate time with siblings or parents. Economic challenges further compounded these issues, as the cost of internet packages became a financial burden for families. For households with multiple students, the expenses associated with online education created significant stress, emphasizing the disparity in access to education during the pandemic.

Three participants have opened up the conversation with us by responding that the online-learning access; starting from the emotional facets due to technology use in learning environment, such as disappointment, unhappiness up to the struggle to study in remote area; how the students reached out the internet connectivity and independent learning. Two female students narrated the beginning of their stories by explaining where are they from and how they access internet.

Siti is the youngest student in this narrative story that she was the first year students in her campus. She wished that she can join classroom activity with her classmates; she wanted to greet and meet her colleague at her new campus, doing face-to-face conversation, sharing directly with her lecturers and doing physical learning activity. She cannot wait for this from the beginning of her imagination when she

was accepted in this university. Unfortunately, she could not do it because the COVID-19 pandemic stuck learning at campus down; it was overwhelming disaster of her dream to having real classroom activity with her friends and lecturers, however, she tried to accept it. Her campus instructed to allow their students learning from home in order to anticipate the COVID-19 impact. Her regretful experience when she shared her opinion about distance learning activity, as follows:

Siti

I mean I was unhappy (Subjective perception) when i heard that I need to shift offline to online (Regulation guides) because i want to interact to my friends and get into them emotionally.(Engagement) I suppose that I could study at my classroom because i want to know my first experience as a new student.(Self-identity) I was unhappy with this unpredictable situation.

Another two students, they were at five and seven semester. They should get in touch with unavoidable learning atmosphere they had no experience. Joko have ever had face to face learning classroom with his classmates, but at the moment, he could not do anymore because his institution instructed their students to have distance-learning activity. Nevertheless, he felt fortunate having experience with face-to-face classroom interaction. Here, he shared his opinion about distance learning that best-described as follows:

Joko

I was still thinking that I would complete my study (Subjective perception) at campus. Unfortunately, I cannot do it in the rest of my study at campus.(No Engagement) However, I was eager to learn face to face and do my final achievement with my classmates and also lecturers. (Engagement) I was sad when I heard that I need to move from offline to online learning.(No Engagement) However, I could not deny that this was the only one option to avoid corona virus. (Regulation guides)

In another story, Maemunah told us the moment she has been waiting for, before she graduated from her campus. She wished to have physical learning interaction in the rest of her study, moreover, she must do distance-learning activity from her home during her last year studying at campus. It was falter experience she had to complete her study with unexpected feeling.

Maemunah

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I was disinclinate to study online (No engagement) because I was eager to study lively from campus and get interaction with lecturers and also classmates. (Engagement) I never thought that this bad situation would come up and I need to shift from offline to online atmosphere; (No engagement) I could never meet my classmates again in my future learning environment physically. It was my last semester and I must spend the entire learning experience at home and I think it would be boring. (No engagement)

Online-learning-Adaptation

The abrupt shift to online learning demanded high student adaptation, requiring academic and emotional adjustments. Students modified their study habits to cope with this new learning environment, integrating time-management strategies to navigate asynchronous and synchronous sessions. Balancing academic responsibilities and household obligations became a daily struggle, but many students overcame these challenges. The isolation caused by online learning was another significant issue, as students missed direct interaction with peers and teachers. Despite this, they displayed emotional resilience by finding creative ways to stay engaged. Virtual study groups and social media platforms provided a sense of community, helping to mitigate feelings of loneliness. The level of teacher support also played a pivotal role. Some students benefited from teachers who offered consistent feedback and engagement, while others struggled due to the lack of immediate interaction. This disparity highlighted the importance of instructional design and the availability of supportive teaching practices in online education.

In the second chapter of our narration is about students' struggle to learn from their home which was remote area. It pinpointed the efforts that students have certain limitations and they need to overcome the barriers in front of them. Indeed, they need to reach out internet connectivity because the poor of the connection. Furthermore, they need to literate their autonomous learning by themselves; the learning task foster the students to get immersed in mobile assisted to grasp the goal of learning in a semester. Some narrations were transcribed beneath:

Siti portrayed her original condition at her house that was far from town. Her home was surrounded by humps and it was difficult to get strong internet signal. She struggled out to have internet signal by walking out form her home to paddy's field nearby.

Siti

I live in a far-flung area in Central Java, Indonesia. To reach my house it takes extra hard work (No expectation) because the road is quite narrow and bumpy. It takes about 10 kilometers from the subdistrict center to reach my house. There is no wifi access in my area, (No support) so i rely on the internet on my cellphone. I have to go to the rice fields to get a good signal, (Expectation) although sometimes it gets lost. For me distance learning is quite annoying. (No Engagement)

Joko had same experience as Siti; he found hard to access strong internet connection within his house, so he decided to looking for the signal at paddys'

field. The internet sometimes get lost and he tried to move around to earn high internet connection. This learning experience can be described as a barrier for him to enjoy distance learning atmosphere.

Joko

I come from a remote village in Central Java, Indonesia. The access needed to get to my village is 30 minutes from the sub-district center. The wifi network in the village cannot be reached, (No support) so when there is a lecture, I have to go to the fields because the internet signal is quite easy, although sometimes I have to change positions because the signal suddenly disappears. I even went to the fields quite often in the middle of the night because of the deadline given by the lecturer. Experience with distance learning, I don't feel comfortable at all. (No expectation)

A unique story was narrated by Maemunah when she told us her unpredictable experience and feeling at the rest of her study with her campus. She felt that it was not easy to have distance learning activity, moreover, she spent most of her study lively at campus. She thought that she should accept the unprecedented learning moment before she graduates. Here, she delivered her plot of narrative story:

Maemunah

I come from small village in Central Java, Indonesia with limited access to my hometown which surrounded by hills. I could not access internet connection in my house (No support) so that I need to hike to hills behind my house. Sometimes, I go to the center of my district to upload my work. Furthermore, I go to hills at night to submit. Distance learning makes me enjoyable with (Expectation)

Future distance learning

The experiences of students navigating online learning during the pandemic offer critical insights into shaping future distance-learning strategies, particularly for those in remote areas. Improving internet infrastructure is essential to ensure reliable connectivity in far-flung regions, reducing the physical and emotional toll

of searching for stable signals. Investments in technology and infrastructure are paramount for addressing these gaps. Equally important is fostering digital literacy among students and teachers. Providing training can bridge the skill gaps that became evident during the pandemic, equipping both groups with the tools needed to excel in a digital learning environment. Additionally, hybrid learning models, which combine face-to-face interaction with online components, could offer a balanced approach to education. This model addresses connectivity issues while retaining the benefits of peer and teacher interaction. Policy interventions must also prioritize equity in education. Subsidizing internet access and providing devices to underprivileged students are critical steps to ensure no student is left behind. By addressing these systemic challenges, future distance-learning programs can be more inclusive, efficient, and resilient, offering better opportunities for students in remote and underserved communities.

From the empirical evidence, it showcases that distance learning in remote area in Indonesia should represent the students' voices to earn a visible institution guidance through faculty members. They should empower the need of students and also the solution in solving the problems in learning from remote areas, such as poor internet connectivity, and learning tasks. It can be seen from the bundles of the narration below:

The pivotal role in this significant stories has been set up by Siti to her entire journey since the early point up to future distance learning facet. This description hones impactful narration to the readers about what would be implication for future distance learning setting. It best fit described by her to suggest her lecturers or his institution to prepare learning-need-analysis before the distance learning mode starts.

Siti

From my genuine experience in learning from remote area was quite challenging. (Subjective perception) As far as I am concerned, the lecturers should obtain learning need; (Subjective perception) the lecturer should ask the students what are the main problems in learning from remote area and the solution of tasks accomplishment. Certainly, it would bring us to get easier in following the learning activities from our home.

Meanwhile, Joko showcased that his story would contribute significantly to the evolution of distance-learning practices in the future, providing valuable insights to improve the experiences of university students like him. Drawing from his genuine experience, Joko emphasized that learning from a remote area was inherently challenging in terms of accessibility and engagement.

He believes that lecturers play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. According to Joko, educators must focus on understanding their students' specific learning needs. It can be achieved by actively seeking feedback and asking students about the primary issues they face in remote learning, particularly regarding internet connectivity, resource accessibility, and task completion.

Furthermore, Joko suggested that solutions tailored to these challenges, such as flexible deadlines, simplified assignments, or providing offline alternatives, could make a significant difference. By addressing these issues collaboratively, students would find it easier to follow and engage with learning activities from their homes, fostering a more inclusive and effective distance-learning environment. His insights underline the importance of a student-centered approach in designing and implementing remote education practices.

Joko

I definitely found that my learning journey from my home was not effective. In addition, task submission burdened me because I need to struggle out to send my work as soon as possible; it happened because the time of submission was short and I must go to the rice field in the middle of the night. My suggestions are the faculty members needs to examine the students' need from remote area and ask us about our main obstacles in learning from our home.

The learning journey described in the prompt highlights significant challenges students face in remote areas, underscoring the limitations of the current distance-learning system. The student's experience reveals that the effectiveness of their learning was compromised due to a lack of consideration for the realities of their environment. One key issue was the burden of task submission within short deadlines. For the student, this challenge was exacerbated by limited internet access, forcing them to travel to the rice field in the middle of the night to send their work. This situation reflects the logistical difficulties of online learning in remote areas and the mental and physical strain placed on students to meet rigid academic requirements. The student's suggestions emphasize the importance of a needs-based approach to education. Faculty members are urged to engage with students from remote areas, actively seeking to understand their obstacles and challenges. It could involve conducting surveys or holding virtual meetings to gather feedback on issues like internet connectivity, accessibility, and time management. Institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment by tailoring learning plans and submission schedules to accommodate the unique circumstances of

students in remote regions. This approach alleviates undue stress on students and enhances the overall effectiveness of distance learning.

Maemunah

I should never give up on this unpredicted moment, otherwise, I would have spent my last academic year with no face to face classroom interaction. I supposed that I need to strive with autonomous learning activity, but I did not have any clear guidelines from my lecturer. My suggestion was the lecturer should give learning tasks that direct me to do asynchronous online learning with a few face to face online zoom because of poor internet connectivity.

Maemunah powerfully portrayed specific learning contributions. She shared her experience of navigating the challenges of remote learning, particularly in the context of limited internet access. Reflecting on her journey, Maemunah highlighted the importance of lecturers ensuring that their lesson plans were structured around autonomous learning tasks that promote asynchronous learning. She argued that This approach would better support students facing difficulties in maintaining stable connectivity and allow them to learn at their own pace without being bound by the constraints of synchronous sessions. Maemunah expressed her frustration with the lack of clear guidelines from her lecturers, which left her struggling to navigate the demands of online learning without proper direction. She emphasized that, given her circumstances, it was essential for her lecturers to recognize the need for flexibility. As a suggestion, she proposed that lecturers incorporate more asynchronous learning activities, supplemented by occasional face-to-face online Zoom sessions, rather than relying solely on synchronous learning. It would address connectivity issues, as students like her could engage with course materials when internet access was more stable and avoid the stress of participating in real-time sessions often disrupted by poor internet connections. Her contribution is a valuable example of how distance learning can be better tailored to meet the needs of students in remote areas. By adopting a more flexible, asynchronous learning model, lecturers can ensure that all students have equal opportunities to succeed regardless of location. Maemunah's perspective illustrates the necessity of adapting learning strategies to the specific challenges posed by remote learning, ultimately creating a more inclusive and practical educational experience for students in far-flung areas.

Discussion and Conclusion

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This study explores the experiences of college students facing significant challenges in remote areas, particularly in the context of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. With three participants from far-flung locations, the study identifies key themes that reflect their struggles and adaptations in coping with the limitations of online education. The students' narratives were examined through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide a deeper understanding of the difficulties they encountered and the implications for future learning practices. The first central theme that emerged was the students' difficulty with internet connectivity. Living in remote areas, the students often struggled to connect to stable internet signals. To overcome this, they had to travel to higher grounds, hills, or even rice fields in search of stronger signals. While this created significant logistical challenges, the students interpreted their efforts as a necessary part of the learning process, showcasing their determination to stay engaged with their education despite the circumstances.

Another critical issue highlighted by the students was the lack of communication from their lecturers about the unique challenges those living in remote areas faced.

They expressed frustration that their lecturers did not inquire about the obstacles they encountered, such as poor internet connectivity and the difficulty of task submission under short deadlines. As a result, the students felt confused and unsupported in navigating the distance learning environment. This lack of engagement made them feel isolated in their learning journey, as their academic needs were not adequately addressed by those responsible for their education. In addition to the struggles with connectivity, the students also reported unmet expectations regarding face-to-face learning experiences. They expressed a desire for more interactive, classroom-based teaching and learning, which was not feasible in the online-only model imposed by the pandemic. Their inability to access this traditional learning environment contributed to feelings of isolation and disengagement. Maemunah's contribution to the discussion was particularly insightful. She emphasized the importance of adapting lesson plans to accommodate the realities of remote learning. She advocated for using autonomous learning tasks that promote asynchronous learning, allowing students to work at their own pace and avoid the constraints of synchronous sessions. By doing so, students could engage with course materials when internet access was more stable, alleviating the stress of trying to participate in live online classes disrupted by connectivity issues.

Maemunah also expressed her frustration with the lack of clear guidance from her lecturers, leaving her to navigate online learning without proper support. She
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suggested that lecturers should focus on providing more flexible learning activities that would allow students in remote areas to learn more independently and at their own pace. It would help students like her, who face significant connectivity challenges, succeed despite the limitations of distance learning.

The insights shared by the students in this study highlight the importance of a needs-based approach to distance learning. Joko, another participant, underscored the value of a student-centered approach, where lecturers actively seek feedback from students to understand their specific challenges. By tailoring learning experiences to meet the needs of students in remote areas, educators can foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment. It might include offering asynchronous learning opportunities, adjusting deadlines, simplifying assignments, and exploring offline alternatives to ensure all students can successfully engage with their education.

In conclusion, this study reveals the significant challenges students in remote areas face when engaging with distance learning. Educators can create a more supportive and inclusive educational experience for students living in far-flung regions by focusing on flexible, student-centered learning approaches. The findings underscore the importance of adapting educational practices to the realities of remote learning environments, ultimately helping to bridge the gap in access to quality education for all students, regardless of their location.

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