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An English teacher's lived experience on online vs limited face-to-face learning

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools worldwide, including those in suburban Indonesia, to shift from traditional classrooms to online and later limited face-to-face learning. This transition challenged both teachers and students, particularly in terms of teaching strategies, confidence, and learning motivation. Despite a growing body of research on online learning, limited studies explore teachers' lived experiences in suburban contexts where resources and access are constrained. This study aimed to investigate an English teacher's self-belief and perception of students' motivation during online and limited face-to-face learning. Employing a phenomenological qualitative design, data were collected through classroom observation and in-depth interviews with a junior high school English teacher in West Borneo, Indonesia. Data were analyzed through descriptive narrative steps, including classification, interpretation, and thematic narration. The findings revealed that the teacher maintained strong self-belief and confidence in both learning modes, yet faced different challenges. In online learning, unstable internet connectivity hindered participation, while in limited face-to-face learning, restricted instructional time reduced teaching effectiveness. The teacher perceived that students' motivation declined more during limited face-to-face learning compared to online learning. This highlights the importance of teacher adaptability, motivational strategies, and emotional support in transitional learning contexts. The study offers practical insights into suburban education during post-pandemic recovery and suggests the need for policies that strengthen teacher resilience and student engagement.

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1. Introduction

English is one of the compulsory subjects taught in junior high schools, making it inseparable from the national education system since it is part of the curriculum (Azarnoosh, 2014). It holds significant importance for students at this level because it functions as a foreign language subject and is often seen as a gateway to wider academic and professional opportunities (Nurdiansyah et al., 2019). Yet, for many learners, especially those in suburban or less-developed regions, English remains unfamiliar and difficult to master (Agung, 2019; Do et al., 2022). The complexity of learning a foreign language in such contexts makes teaching English more challenging. To address these difficulties, teachers are expected to design creative classroom activities that can make learning enjoyable. Joyful learning activities not only enhance students' interest but also create a sense of motivation and enthusiasm. Therefore, teachers play multiple roles as designers, managers, motivators, and facilitators of learning. Their ability to build a supportive and pleasant classroom atmosphere is essential, as this environment can strengthen both student and teacher motivation (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). Ideally, teachers must be skilled professionals capable of adapting strategies that meet the needs of their students in various contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic that spanned from 2019 to 2022 disrupted this traditional understanding of teaching and learning. Schools in suburban areas of West Borneo, Indonesia like many other regions worldwide, were compelled to adjust their teaching models. Online learning quickly became the only viable option, but it raised substantial challenges for both teachers and students (Agung & Surtikanti, 2020; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). Virtual learning required a level of technological readiness and access that was often limited in suburban communities, creating barriers to equitable education (Ahmady et al., 2020; Kurbakova et al., 2020). These conditions made teaching and learning stressful and less effective. When restrictions began to ease, schools transitioned from full online learning to limited face-to-face learning. This shift was greeted with relief but introduced new challenges, such as shorter classroom hours and strict health protocols. During this period, teachers had to redesign their teaching strategies and adapt to the changing environment (Sari et al., 2022; Sumardi & Nugrahaini, 2021). Teacher performance, confidence, and adaptability became central in ensuring that learning continued effectively despite constraints.

The ability of teachers to teach with confidence during such transitions has been recognized as a critical factor in classroom success. In limited face-to-face learning, teachers' self-belief and sense of efficacy are particularly important, as students can directly observe and interact with their teachers (Almekhlafy, 2021; Goldenson et al., 2022). Teaching with confidence may enhance student enthusiasm and encourage greater participation in the classroom. However, the pandemic raised important questions about how teachers' confidence levels were affected when switching between online and limited face-to-face modes. Understanding these dynamics is especially important in suburban schools where resources are restricted, and both teachers and students face greater obstacles than their urban counterparts. In this context, research into the lived experiences of teachers can provide valuable insights into how teaching strategies, self-belief, and classroom perceptions develop in response to sudden and disruptive changes.

Previous research has highlighted the difficulties of online learning and the adjustments teachers had to make (Khanal, 2021; Phillips, 2022). Yet, there remains a significant gap in understanding how teachers, particularly those in suburban districts, personally experienced the transition between online and limited face-to-face learning. This study addresses this gap by focusing not only on teaching strategies but also on the psychological aspects of teaching,

namely, teachers' self-belief and their perceptions of student motivation. Teacher belief, as described by Too and Saimima (2019), is related to what educators know, believe, and consider when making pedagogical decisions. Self-belief, often linked to self-efficacy, reflects a teacher's confidence in their ability to complete teaching tasks effectively (Usher & Pajares, 2008; Chaeruman et al., 2020). These constructs are crucial because they shape how teachers approach challenges and maintain resilience in demanding conditions. By situating self-belief at the center of this inquiry, the present study seeks to contribute new insights into teacher development and motivation under crisis-driven circumstances.

Alongside self-belief, perception plays an equally critical role in shaping teaching and learning experiences. Perception, according to Rips (2011), enables individuals to align their actions with the realities they face. In teaching, perception involves the ways teachers interpret students' behaviors, engagement, and motivation. It is the lens through which they evaluate classroom dynamics and determine the effectiveness of their strategies. Perception is not merely an individual viewpoint but also reflects broader judgments of quality and standards in teaching (Agung & Surtikanti, 2020; Setyawan, 2019; Siboro & Agung, 2022). In the context of the pandemic, teacher perception of student motivation became particularly significant, as students' psychological and emotional states fluctuated due to uncertainty and disruption. For teachers in suburban areas, where access to technology and resources was already uneven, interpreting and responding to students' motivation levels required heightened sensitivity and adaptability. Exploring this dimension provides a deeper understanding of how teaching was shaped by extraordinary circumstances and how teachers navigated their roles beyond simply delivering content.

Against this background, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of an English teacher in a suburban district of West Borneo during online and limited face-to-face learning. Specifically, it addresses two central research questions: (1) How did the teacher perceive their self-belief when teaching in online and limited face-to-face modes? and (2) How did the teacher perceive student motivation in these two different learning contexts? By focusing on these questions, the study seeks to illuminate both the strengths and struggles teachers faced during the pandemic. The novelty of this research lies in its phenomenological approach, which prioritizes teachers' lived experiences rather than solely relying on performance indicators or student outcomes. This perspective offers a more humanized account of education during a crisis and highlights the importance of teacher confidence and perception in sustaining learning continuity. Ultimately, the study provides insights not only for educators and policymakers in Indonesia but also for the broader field of education, where teacher resilience and adaptability remain critical in the face of global disruptions.

2. Method

This study employed a phenomenological approach with a descriptive narrative design. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows researchers to explore and describe lived experiences as they are perceived by individuals in real contexts. The focus of this study was an English teacher working in a junior high school located in a suburban area of West Borneo. The teacher was selected as the key informant because of his direct involvement in both online and limited face-to-face teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the only participant, the teacher's experiences provided rich qualitative insights into the challenges and adaptations required in two distinct learning modes. The phenomenological design

ensured that the study prioritized the teacher's perspectives, feelings, and reflections in order to capture the depth of his lived experience.

The data for this research consisted of field notes and transcriptions obtained through two main instruments: classroom observation and in-depth interviews. Classroom observation was carried out to examine how the teacher managed learning activities in both online and limited face-to-face settings. The main focus was on students' participation during class activities and the teacher's confidence in presenting the material. Observational data were documented in detailed notes that highlighted behavioral patterns and teaching interactions. In addition, a set of interview questions was prepared to guide the in-depth interviews. These questions were designed with probes and prompts centered on the teacher's perceptions of student motivation and his self-belief in both teaching contexts. The combination of observation and interview data provided complementary sources that helped triangulate the findings and increase their credibility.

The procedures of data analysis were adapted from Setyawan (2013), which included several systematic steps: classroom observation, guided in-depth interviews, data classification, data analysis, data interpretation, and finally the narration of results. Data were first organized into meaningful units, then classified according to themes related to self-belief and perceptions of student motivation. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the underlying meanings and to identify patterns across the data. To ensure validity, the study employed methodological triangulation by combining observational and interview data. Member checking was also conducted by sharing summaries of interview results with the teacher to confirm accuracy and authenticity. Reliability was supported by maintaining consistent procedures in data collection and analysis, as well as by keeping detailed documentation of the research process. Through these steps, the study ensured that the findings reflected the teacher's lived experiences with trustworthiness and rigor.

3. Results

The findings of this study are presented in two main themes: the teacher's self-belief in teaching English across online and limited face-to-face learning, and the teacher's perception of students' motivation in these two contexts. The results are drawn from classroom observations and in-depth interviews with the teacher, which provide detailed insights into his lived experience. For clarity of presentation, all interview quotations originally expressed in Indonesian have been translated into English without altering their intended meaning. In addition to the narrative explanation, a summary of the overall findings is presented in Table 1 to highlight the key differences and similarities between online and limited face-to-face learning.

3.1. The Teacher's self-belief in online and limited-face-to face learning

During the pandemic, teachers were required to quickly build confidence in online teaching. The teacher reported that unstable internet access made it difficult for students to participate, resulting in disrupted schedules and missed learning opportunities. Despite these challenges, the teacher emphasized that self-belief was a key factor in adapting to online teaching. To overcome connectivity issues, he sought alternative internet options and encouraged students to use affordable applications. This adjustment fostered self-discipline, both for the teacher in managing lessons and for students in coping with unpredictable conditions. Self-

belief therefore functioned as a psychological resource that enabled teaching continuity even under constrained circumstances.

> "Online learning became difficult due to unstable internet. Confidence was the key to adapt, because teaching still had to continue, even if limited to mobile devices. I felt 100% confident to face this challenge." [In-depth interview_01]

In the context of limited face-to-face learning, the teacher expressed greater confidence compared to online settings. He noted that teaching directly in the classroom was easier and allowed him to ensure that students could understand the material more effectively. Limited classroom hours, although challenging, encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning and to interact more actively with peers. This suggests that self-belief not only supported the teacher's performance but also indirectly nurtured student independence and collaboration.

> "I was able to complete all tasks during limited face-to-face sessions because materials were manageable and students had enough time to study them. They also enjoyed communicating and asking questions with peers." [In-depth interview_02]

These findings show that self-belief played a central role in both learning modes, although it manifested differently. In online learning, confidence was necessary to confront external barriers such as technology and connectivity. In limited face-to-face learning, confidence was associated with pedagogical clarity and classroom interaction. Both contexts required resilience, but the forms of confidence differed according to the nature of the challenge. This supports the view that teacher confidence is a protective factor in maintaining psychological health and teaching effectiveness during crises (Agyapong et al., 2023; Corrente et al., 2022).

From classroom observations, the teacher consistently demonstrated assurance in delivering lessons. During online sessions, he maintained eye contact through the camera, explained tasks clearly, and encouraged students to respond even with unstable connections. In limited face-to-face classes, his body language and tone conveyed authority and enthusiasm, which helped create a positive atmosphere despite shortened instructional time. Observation notes confirmed that students responded more actively in direct classroom settings, asking questions and interacting with peers, while online sessions showed lower but still evident engagement. These observations reinforce the interview findings that the teacher's self-belief contributed to sustaining student participation and minimizing learning disruptions.

3.2. The teacher's perception towards the students' motivation in online and limited-face-to face learning

The teacher observed that students' motivation declined significantly during online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted physical learning routines but also affected students psychologically, resulting in decreased enthusiasm, weaker study habits, and less active engagement. In this context, the teacher believed his role was critical in sustaining motivation. He encouraged students with supportive remarks, shared positive messages, and consistently reminded them of the importance of continuing their studies despite the difficulties. Communication was used as a tool to maintain students' emotional stability, while

motivational messages and video materials provided additional support. Self-reflection was also encouraged, as the teacher believed that students could build internal motivation by recognizing the value of education even in uncertain times.

> "During online learning, students' motivation decreased. They relied too much on phones and lacked enthusiasm. I motivated them by giving encouragement, telling them not to give up, and sending videos to inspire them." [In-depth interview_03]

In limited face-to-face learning, the teacher also recognized challenges that affected motivation. The reduced classroom time restricted opportunities for thorough instruction, leaving both the teacher and students feeling unsatisfied. Lessons often had to be condensed, with minimal time for practice or discussion. Despite this limitation, the teacher emphasized his role in offering encouragement, maintaining student engagement, and creating opportunities for interaction, however brief. He encouraged students to share their feelings about the new learning arrangements and responded empathetically to their concerns. Through this, he sought to create a sense of solidarity and mutual support, showing that motivation could be fostered even in restricted conditions.

> "In limited face-to-face classes, time was too short, and students felt unsatisfied. I focused on giving motivation, inviting them to interact, and encouraging them to express complaints or feelings." [In-depth interview_04]

These findings highlight that the teacher perceived his motivational role as indispensable in both contexts. In online learning, motivation was primarily challenged by technological barriers and psychological fatigue, whereas in limited face-to-face learning, it was constrained by reduced instructional time. Nevertheless, in both modes, the teacher positioned himself as a motivator and emotional supporter, acknowledging that learning could not succeed without addressing students' emotional needs. This interpretation is consistent with prior studies indicating that transitions between learning modes created anxiety for students, which required teachers' supportive interventions (Chandra, 2021; Rashid et al., 2022).

Classroom observations supported these interview insights. During online sessions, many students showed passive behavior, responding briefly or remaining silent due to connectivity issues and lack of confidence. The teacher frequently intervened by calling students' names, offering reassurance, and sharing motivational comments to sustain attention. In limited face-to-face settings, observations showed that students were more active in interacting with peers but still constrained by the short lesson duration. The teacher often used the limited time not only to deliver material but also to uplift students' spirits, reinforcing his perception that maintaining motivation was as important as teaching content. These observations confirm that the teacher's motivational strategies were consistently integrated into both learning modes, although adapted to suit the different challenges.

To summarize the overall findings, as shown in Table 1, the findings highlight both similarities and contrasts between online and limited face-to-face learning. In terms of self-belief, the teacher demonstrated strong confidence in both contexts, though the sources of that confidence differed: adaptability and technological solutions during online learning, and direct interaction and classroom control during limited face-to-face learning. Regarding student motivation, the table illustrates that online learning was hampered by technological and psychological barriers, while limited face-to-face learning was constrained by shortened

instructional time. Nevertheless, in both situations, the teacher actively positioned himself as a motivator, using encouragement, communication, and emotional support to sustain student engagement. This comparison emphasizes that while external challenges varied, the teacher's self-belief and motivational role remained central in maintaining learning continuity.

Table 1. Summary of the findings

Theme	Online Learning	Limited Face-to-face Learning
Teacher's self-belief	◆ Confidence was challenged by unstable internet access and unpredictable schedules. ◆ Teacher relied on affordable apps and alternative internet to adapt. ◆ Self-belief helped him remain 100% confident despite constraints. ◆ Observation: Teacher maintained composure online, encouraged participation, though engagement was limited.	◆ Teacher felt more confident as direct instruction was easier. ◆ Able to complete teaching tasks effectively with manageable content. ◆ Confidence encouraged student independence and peer interaction. ◆ Observation: Teacher's body language and enthusiasm created a positive class atmosphere, fostering active student participation.
Teacher's Perception of Student Motivation	◆ Students' motivation decreased due to psychological stress and reliance on phones. ◆ Teacher motivated them with encouragement, positive messages, and inspirational videos. ◆ Communication and self-reflection promoted emotional stability. ◆ Observation: Many students were passive online, teacher actively called on them and gave motivational comments.	◆ Students had limited learning opportunities due to reduced class time. ◆ Teacher noted dissatisfaction among students but tried to sustain engagement. ◆ Encouraged interaction and emotional sharing during brief lessons. ◆ Observation: Students interacted more with peers but time shortage limited depth of learning; teacher prioritized motivation alongside instruction.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight two interrelated aspects of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: the teacher's self-belief and the teacher's perception of student motivation in both online and limited face-to-face learning contexts. Overall, the results indicate that the teacher was able to maintain confidence across both modes of teaching, despite the external challenges of unstable internet in online learning and restricted instructional time in limited face-to-face learning. At the same time, student motivation appeared to fluctuate differently across these contexts, declining more during limited face-to-face sessions than in online settings. These findings are significant as they reveal that teacher self-belief and motivational strategies played a critical role in sustaining learning continuity. More importantly, they

suggest that the dynamics of teaching and learning in suburban schools during the pandemic were shaped not only by structural constraints but also by the psychological and pedagogical resilience of teachers.

The finding that teacher self-belief served as a stabilizing factor across both learning contexts corresponds to the theoretical notion of self-efficacy proposed by Bandura, which emphasizes that an individual's belief in their capacity to perform tasks strongly influences actual performance (Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020; Usher & Pajares, 2008). In this study, the teacher's self-belief enabled him to persevere with online teaching despite technological limitations, and to remain effective in limited face-to-face teaching even when instructional hours were reduced. This resonates with Chaeruman et al. (2020), who argued that self-belief is not only a personal conviction but also a psychological resource that equips educators to adapt under changing circumstances. By interpreting the findings through this lens, it becomes evident that teacher self-belief is not context-dependent but instead serves as a transferable quality that empowers teachers across different teaching environments.

At the same time, the findings suggest that teacher self-belief manifested differently in online and limited face-to-face learning. In online teaching, confidence was tied to adaptability in using technology, managing connectivity problems, and encouraging student participation through digital tools. These conditions align with Agung and Surtikanti (2020), who reported that Indonesian teachers faced substantial challenges in online learning but developed resilience by employing simple, accessible applications. Similarly, Ahmady et al. (2020) and Kurbakova et al. (2020) emphasized that the transition to virtual learning required teachers to cultivate new forms of self-efficacy related to technological skills. Conversely, in limited face-to-face learning, teacher self-belief was associated with clarity of instruction, classroom presence, and fostering peer interaction. These findings correspond with Phillips (2022), who argued that teacher confidence in face-to-face settings can encourage student participation by leveraging the immediacy of physical presence. Thus, while the challenges differed across contexts, the underlying principle remains that self-belief provided a foundation for effective teaching.

The teacher's perception of student motivation also reveals critical insights. In online learning, students' motivation was perceived as unstable, largely due to psychological fatigue and overreliance on mobile devices. However, the teacher viewed his role as central in sustaining motivation, offering encouragement, positive reinforcement, and inspirational resources. This finding supports the perspective of Too and Saimima (2019), who argued that teacher beliefs directly shape classroom interactions and student outcomes. It also resonates with Chandra (2021), who reported that students experienced heightened academic stress during online education, making motivational strategies essential. By contrast, in limited face-to-face learning, the teacher perceived student motivation as declining more sharply, primarily because of shortened class durations that left students feeling unsatisfied. This interpretation expands upon the findings of Sari et al. (2022) and Sumardi and Nugrahaini (2021), who noted that teachers needed to redesign classroom strategies in post-online transitions. Here, the present study adds nuance by showing that reduced instructional time directly undermined student motivation, highlighting the importance of temporal adequacy in sustaining engagement.

A striking feature of the findings is that in both online and limited face-to-face contexts, the teacher consistently viewed motivation as inseparable from emotional support. The emphasis on encouragement, solidarity, and empathy reflects the recognition that learning during a crisis was not merely a cognitive process but also an emotional experience. This

interpretation aligns with Corrente et al. (2022) and Agyapong et al. (2023), who demonstrated that teachers' psychological strategies and emotional engagement with students can alleviate stress and protect mental well-being. Furthermore, it echoes Dörnyei and Muir's (2019) notion of a motivating classroom environment, which stresses the role of teacher enthusiasm and supportive communication in creating positive learning conditions. By connecting these theoretical perspectives with the current findings, it becomes clear that teacher motivation strategies served as a form of emotional scaffolding that allowed students to cope with the uncertainties of the pandemic.

Comparing the findings with previous studies, this research demonstrates both consistency and divergence. On the one hand, the teacher's reliance on motivational strategies in online learning is consistent with prior reports that highlighted the role of teacher encouragement in sustaining student engagement during the pandemic (Agung & Surtikanti, 2020; Khanal, 2021). On the other hand, the finding that students' motivation declined more in limited face-to-face than in online learning appears somewhat counterintuitive, as earlier studies generally suggested that face-to-face interaction enhances motivation (Phillips, 2022). This divergence may be explained by the unique conditions of limited face-to-face learning, where time constraints and health protocols restricted opportunities for deeper engagement. Such insights suggest that not all forms of face-to-face learning automatically enhance motivation, but that instructional time and interactional quality are crucial determinants. This difference represents a novel contribution of the current study, particularly in the context of suburban schools with limited resources.

Another important interpretation of these findings is the role of context in shaping teaching and learning experiences. Suburban schools often face resource limitations, including weaker internet infrastructure and fewer technological tools. These conditions magnify the challenges of online learning compared to urban areas. At the same time, limited face-to-face learning in suburban schools was constrained not only by time but also by the lack of supplementary resources that might have compensated for reduced classroom hours. This context-specific perspective enriches the broader literature by demonstrating that educational experiences during the pandemic were not homogeneous but instead varied significantly by location and resource availability. In this way, the present study adds an important dimension to the global conversation on pandemic-era education by foregrounding the lived realities of suburban teachers.

Theoretically, these findings reaffirm the importance of teacher belief and perception in educational research. They show that teacher self-belief is not a static attribute but a dynamic construct that adapts to context-specific challenges, thus expanding the understanding of self-efficacy theory in crisis situations. Similarly, the findings highlight that teacher perceptions of motivation are shaped not only by observable student behavior but also by structural and temporal conditions, suggesting a more complex interplay between pedagogical environment and psychological factors. Practically, the results underline the need for policies that provide stronger support systems for teachers, including professional development in motivational strategies, technological training for online teaching, and structural adjustments to ensure sufficient instructional time in limited face-to-face contexts. Most importantly, the findings suggest that love and care within the teaching profession, as reflected in the teacher's emphasis on encouragement and empathy, serve as a powerful motivational force for students.

5. Conclusion

This study explored an English teacher's lived experience in teaching during online and limited face-to-face learning in a suburban junior high school in West Borneo. The findings revealed that teacher self-belief remained a crucial factor across both modes, functioning as a psychological resource that sustained confidence and teaching effectiveness. In online learning, self-belief was demonstrated through adaptability in handling technological challenges, while in limited face-to-face learning, it was expressed through direct classroom presence and assurance in instruction. The teacher also perceived student motivation as unstable in both contexts but declining more sharply in limited face-to-face settings due to reduced instructional time. These results highlight that teacher not only act as knowledge providers but also as motivators and emotional supporters, showing that self-belief and perception play central roles in maintaining learning continuity. The implications are twofold: theoretically, the study affirms and extends self-efficacy theory in crisis contexts; practically, it emphasizes the need for teacher training and policies that strengthen resilience, adaptability, and motivational strategies in transitional learning environments.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The findings were derived from a single teacher in one suburban school, which limits the generalizability of the results. The study also focused primarily on teacher perspectives, without incorporating students' voices, which could provide a fuller picture of learning dynamics. Additionally, the scope was limited to English language teaching, while experiences might differ across subjects. Future studies are therefore recommended to involve multiple teachers across diverse regions, include students' perspectives on motivation, and compare different subject areas to capture broader insights. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in examining how teacher self-belief and perceptions of motivation evolve as education systems transition into post-pandemic stability.

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