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## Investigating Online Classroom Interactions in Islamic Related Courses

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### Abstract

Effective interaction is one of the most important elements in the online learning and teaching environment. Interaction can be seen taking place between students with lecturers, students with students, and students with teaching materials. However, issues such as failing to take lessons until the end of the semester, failing in final exams and various other problems are often reported since students started lessons online. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of interaction factors in online classes in Islamic-related courses. To achieve this goal, a total of 51 respondents from selected countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei participated in this quantitative study. The findings of the study clearly show that the interaction between students and teaching materials is the most important factor in the success or failure of online teaching and learning. Similarly, the interaction between students and instructors also plays an important role in its success. Therefore, due attention should be given to this matter so that the problems that arise can be resolved immediately.

**Keywords:** Online Classroom, Interactions, Islamic Related Courses, Higher Education in ASEAN Countries

### Introduction

#### Background of Study

Interaction is the basis of learning. Without it, success is very difficult to achieve because it is the main process of learning. The main focus of the discussion in this study is interaction, specifically learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor and learner-to-content engagement in an online learning environment. This focus is in line with the current situation which prioritizes online learning to curb the spread of Covid-19 worldwide.

The different experiences of students and lecturers in the online learning have opened a new dimension in the field of national education. This reform involves all courses in institutions of higher education, including Islamic studies courses at universities. For example in Malaysia, Islamic studies courses in all public and private institutions of higher learning that were previously conducted face-to-face have been converted to full-time online learning. This method requires a higher level of concentration on the part of the participants because the instructor is not directly in front of them but instead is on their computer screens or smartphones. All teaching materials based on the syllabus that has been determined since the beginning of the semester are also delivered directly in online learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Effective learning is learning that can achieve the desires or objectives of learning. Among the factors that influence the effectiveness of learning in the classroom is the existence of two-way interactions between teachers and students. The concept of learning of the past which is better known as the talk and chalk approach has changed in accordance with the development of the current technology that uses sophisticated and the latest information technology approaches. Interactions between teachers and students in the past were only face-to-face but have now changed with the approach of virtual or online interaction. According to Ibrahim & Razak (2021), among the advantages gained from online learning is teachers and students can use the software that offers interactive educational elements. This interactive learning approach is more popular with students because it is creative, innovative and interesting and can even be accessed anywhere. Students are more interested in interacting and engaging in such interactive learning activities. The study of Hashim & Zulkifli (2021) also stated that teaching materials that use various media with animated and narrative elements will entertain students and reduce boredom.

In addition, the interaction of students with teachers in an online learning is more secured and controlled; teaching materials are also easily accessible without restrictions and allow them to access the use of technological tools as optimally as possible. These were the findings of the study presented by Hashim et.al (2020) who conducted a quantitative study involving 80 teachers of Islamic Education.

However, there are also studies that highlighted that the lack of interaction between students and instructors during online learning sessions a study conducted by Amin & Nasri (2021), 55.1% of respondents reported that they have never attended any online learning before the Covid-19 pandemic occurred. This resulted in a lack of student interaction with instructors due to the lack of skills in using appropriate devices or gadgets. From their findings, the writers felt that both students and instructors should be aware and sensitive to the suitability of devices and gadgets that are. In another study, Anuar Ahmad, a lecturer at the Center for Education and Community Wellbeing, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), reported that online learning without any face-to-face involvement was found to be less suitable for students due to the lack of infrastructure. This is because not all students have good internet access in their homes, especially in villages and rural areas. Therefore, direct online learning apps like Zoom is a second option. The best choice then is the online learning that is asynchronous or not in real time such as using Google Classroom, Telegram and so on (Bernama, 2020).

With the above discussion as the background, this study explores what learners perceive about online learning. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following research questions:

- How are learner-to-learner interactions done during online learning?
- How are learner-to-instructor interactions done during online learning?
- How are learner-to-content interactions done during online learning?

### Literature Review

The spread of the Corona virus has prompted education institutions to move from the offline mode to the online mode of pedagogy. Understanding the dire need of the current situation, many universities around the world have thus fully digitalized their operations (Dhawan, 2020). With the online teaching styles, this means teachers can give a lecture to a large number of students at any time and in any part of the world.

Even so, according to Kamal et al (2020), university lecturers and students face a hardtime trying to readjust their preparedness to tackle the challenges in the migration from offline to online learning.

Malaysia, like many countries around the world, introduced the Movement Control Order (MCO) to flatten the curve of the spread of Covid-19. The Ministry of Higher Education announced that all public and private universities in Malaysia are to conduct teaching and learning activities via online learning (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). Therefore lessons, projects, group work, presentations, and assessments were all conducted online.

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a public university in Malaysia, started online learning on 12th April 2020. During this time, a learning management system (LMS), *UFuture*, was launched to complement the earlier i-Learn system. Prior to the full implementation of the online learning, blended learning was used. The concept of blended learning was introduced to most disciplines by combining the traditional face-to-face teaching with online communications. Lecturers also use more user-friendly and free platforms such as Google Classroom and other social media such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube (Chung et al., 2020). It is aimed to prepare the students for self-directed learning, but the overall satisfaction for learning theory and conducting practical sessions with this approach is poor (Abu Seman et al., 2018).

The implementation of the online learning is divided into a triad of synchronous and asynchronous, blended learning, and hybrid learning (Berestok, 2021; Bashir, 2021). Synchronous learning provides real-time interaction, such as an instructor's lecture with a facility for the questions-answer session. However, the asynchronous session requires simultaneous student-teacher presence. Synchronous learning involves various forms of interactions, namely: students can receive information, work with it independently or in groups, and discuss it with other students and teachers; the teacher has the ability to assess the reaction of students, understand their needs, respond to them - answer questions, choose a pace that is convenient for the group, monitor the student's involvement in the process and "return" him to the group if necessary. Instruments for asynchronous learning are by e-mail, whereby lecturers and students can send assignments, links to materials and tests, and class schedules via mail (Berestok, 2021).

According to Wilson (n.d.), there are three categories of online learning. Web-supported online learning where a program and course provide students access to limited online materials and resources. Access is optional, as online participation is likely to be a minor component of

the study. Another category, web-enhanced, is where a course expects students to access online materials and resources. Access is expected, as online participation is likely to make a major contribution to study. Finally, web-based is where a program and course require students to access the accompanying online materials and resources. Access is required, as online participation is required.

As the interaction between lecturers and students takes place virtually, it is therefore important to examine whether the interaction really occurs and if it has an impact on students. For this study, a special focus is given to the impact of the interaction among students of Islamic Studies.

According to Apanna (2008) the effectiveness of an online course is not achieved from just converting traditional teaching materials into electronic format but also involves factors in coordinating and organizing the characteristics of students, preparation by instructors and the development of teaching strategies. Problems of online learning should also be seen from various angles such as the lack of two-way communication between students and instructors, the risk of isolation resulting from the lack of encouragement or encouragement from friends or instructors, motivation in following online learning, and the diversity of websites (~~web~~) that provide similar content. This leads to students facing difficulties to select ~~as a~~ referencesources (Adonis et.al., 2020).

Overall considerations of online learning readiness include student behavior, self-confidence, self-knowledge, self-control, communication, and self-expression. Thus, in order for students to have a good online learning and action experience, they must be mentally prepared. This readiness is highly related to the personality traits of the student (Engin, 2017). Borotis & Poulymenkou (2004) define readiness to follow online learning means being mentally and physically prepared to receive instructions and actions as a result of online learning. Hung et al (2010) in their study of students' readiness to follow online learning found that there are two dimensions that need to be given main attention; learner control and self-directed learning. In the study help and guidance from instructors to students is needed in mobilizing self-directed learning, student control skills as well as attitudes, especially in the context of online learning.

#### *Past Studies*

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the problems of online learning. Apriliana (2021), conducted a study, *The Problem of Online Learning in Islamic Primary School in Yogyakarta* while Afnibar et al (2020) reported on an analysis of student learning difficulties in online lectures (Study of Islamic Counseling students at Imam Bonjol Padang State University).

Apriliana (2021) looked at the obstacles in online learning and teaching activities during the pandemic at one of the largest religious schools in Yogyakarta, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. In this study, three basic research questions were explored: What are the students' obstacles to online learning activities? What are parents' obstacles to online learning activities? And what are the teachers' obstacles to online learning activities? This qualitative research uses an online survey questionnaire which requires respondents to give responses to open-ended questions. Participants are students, parents and teachers of the madrasah. The findings showed that factors related to obstacles faced by parents were the most frequently reported drawbacks in online learning. These factors include parents' work, parents' limited teaching knowledge, lack



of budget for internet connection, students' limited learning facility as well as issues related to teaching materials and parents' difficulty in building students' motivation. Inadequate facilities and teachers' limited access to ~~create~~ creative teaching materials are among the obstacles that faced the teachers.

On the other hand, a study conducted by Afnibar et al comes with the analysis of student learning difficulties in online lectures (Study of Islamic Counseling students at Imam Bonjol Padang State University). 60 respondents are selected from two groups of Islamic Counseling students. In this qualitative research, participants were asked about the difficulties in managing their online learning. Among the responses, they said that they find it difficult to only learn the theory without practicing it. Another response was they were unable to focus on the lessons because they were needed to help their parents in completing house chores. They also reported on the lack of learning materials, problems of slow internet access and inadequate facilities to join their online classes. Finally they related on the health disorders due to the excessive use of phones and computers.

### *Past Studies*

Many studies have been done to investigate online learning especially in terms of issues like the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Among them, Al Rawashdeh et al (2021), conducted a study about the advantages and disadvantages of using e-Learning in university education according to students' perspectives in United Arab Emirates. Mokhtar et al (2020) conduct a study about advantages, limitations, and recommendations for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic era in education institution in Pakistan.

The study of Rawashdeh et al (2021) aims to identify the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning in university education in United Arab Emirates. It is a descriptive study design using randomly select students from Ajman University, who were enrolled in 2018/2019 academic year. A close-ended structured questionnaire was constructed to collect data from students. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyse the data collected. The findings of the study shows that 81% students stated that e-learning provides scientific material in an interesting way. Similarly, 80% students have responded that e-learning increases the possibility of contact between students among themselves and between the students and the teacher. 73% students indicated that due to increasing social isolation, they spend more time in front of the technical means of social interaction account and face-to-face with others. 70% students have indicated that there is a presence of electronic illiteracy among parents, which reduces their ability to follow their children electronically. Therefore, it is essential for potential e-learners to understand the differences between an e-learning classroom setting and a conventional classroom setting as there are both advantages and disadvantages of e-learning to both environments that can probably influence their overall performance as a student.

The study by Mokhtar et al (2020) is about advantages, limitations, and recommendations for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic era in education institutions in Pakistan. The study explores the perceptions of teachers and students regarding online learning. The study was done by a qualitative case study from March to April 2020. Using maximum variation sampling, 12 faculty members and 12 students from the University College of Medicine and University College of Dentistry, Lahore Pakistan took part in the study. Four focus group interviews, two each with the faculty and students of medicine and dentistry were carried out.

Data were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed using the qualitative analysis software *Atlas Ti*. The researchers found that the advantages of online learning included remote learning, comfort, and accessibility, while the limitations involved inefficiency and difficulty in maintaining academic integrity. Online learning modalities encourage student-centered learning and they are easily manageable during a pandemic or lockdown situation. The researchers also recommend to the faculty to have a training session on using the online learning methods and developing lesson plans with reduced cognitive load and increased interactivities.

### Conceptual Framework

This study is rooted in Martin & Bollinger's (2018) concept of online engagement (Figure 1). Firstly, in an online learning environment, learner engagement refers to the quality and quantity of learners' participation in the course. Next, learner-to-content engagement is the learning process by the learners to interact with the content of the online lesson. Finally, learner-to-instructor was deemed as the most valued among the three types of engagement. Learners depend on the instructor to plan activities to make the most of the online sessions.

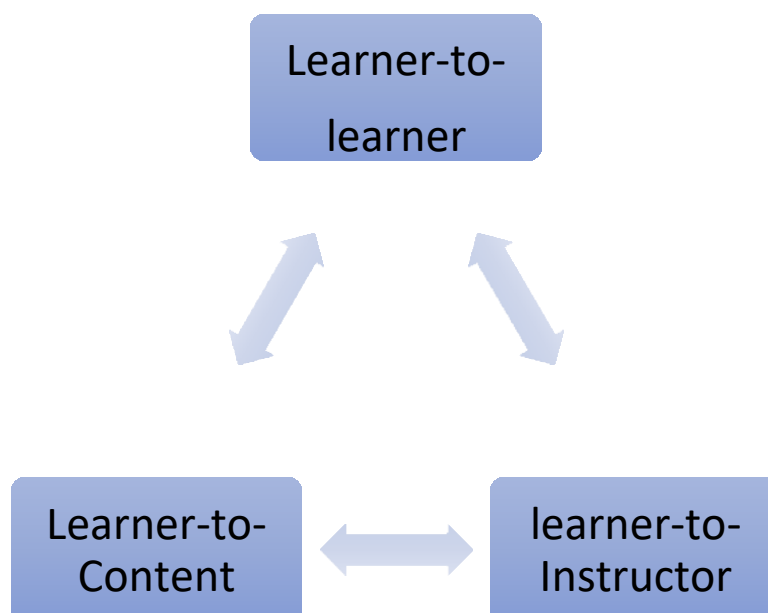


Figure 1- Theoretical Framework of the Study - Online Classroom Interaction (Source: Martin & Bollinger)

### Methodology

This quantitative research is done to investigate the interactions between learners, lecturers and content in an Islamic Studies course. The instrument used is a survey adapted from (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). The survey has 3 main sections. With reference to Table 1, section A has items on the demographic profile of respondents. Section B has 6 items on learner-to-learner engagement, Section C has 8 items on learner-to-instructor engagement and section D has 8 items on learner-to-content engagement. 51 respondents were purposively chosen to answer the survey.

Table 1

*Distribution of Items in the Survey*

SECTION	Description	Items
B	LEARNER-TO-LEARNER	6
C	LEARNER-TO-INSTRUCTOR	8
D	LEARNER-TO-CONTENT	8
Total items		22

Table 2

*Reliability Statistics***Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.933	22

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .933 thus showing a high internal reliability of the instrument used. Data is collected online via Google Form. Data is then analysed using SPSS version 26. Analysed data is presented in the form of percentages and mean scores to answer the 2 research questions.

**Findings**

## Findings for the Demographic Profile

## Q1. Country of Origin (51 respondents)

1	Malaysia	72%
2	Singapore	4%
3	Brunei	12%
4	Indonesia	8%
5	Others	4%

Figure 2- Percentage for Country of Origin

The figure above shows the country of origin of the respondents who answered the questionnaire of this study. Most respondents are from Malaysia (72%). This was followed by respondents from Brunei (12%), Indonesia (8%), Singapore (4%) and others (4%).

## Q2 Gender

1	Male	47%
2	Female	53%

Figure 3- Percentage for Gender

The figure above shows the gender of the respondents who answered the questionnaire of this study. Most respondents were female (53%) compared to male (47%).



## Q3.Place of Study

1	Malaysia	82%
2	Singapore	4%
4	Indonesia	0%
5	Brunei	12%
6	Others	2%

Figure 4- Percentage for Place of Study

The figure above shows the study place of the respondents who answered the questionnaire of this study. Most respondents are from Malaysia (82%). This was followed by respondents from Brunei (12%), Singapore (4%) and others (2%)

## Q4 Age Group

1	18-20 years	67%
2	20-25 years	20%
3	25-30 years	4%
4	31 years and above	10%

Figure 5 Percentage for Age Group

The figure above shows the age of the respondents who answered the questionnaire of this study. Most respondents (67%) were from the age group of 18-20 years old. This is followed by those from the age groups of 20-25 years (20%), 31 years and above (10%) and 25-30 years (4%).

## Q5 Discipline

1	Engineering	54%
2	Islamic Studies	18%
3	Business Studies	22%
4	Education	2%
5	Others	4%

Figure 6- Percentage for Discipline

According to Figure 6, the majority of the students (54%) are from the discipline of Engineering followed by students from Business Studies about 22 %, Islamic Studies 18%, others 4% and Education 2%.

## Q6 Semester

1	1-2	49%
2	3-4	29%
3	5-6	14%
4	7-8	8%

Figure 7- Percentage for Semester

Based on figure 7, Most respondents (49%) who answered the questionnaire were from the first and second semester of their studies. This is followed by students from semesters 3-4 (29%). Only 14% of students represented semesters 5-6 and 8% for students from semesters 7-8.

## Q7 Background of Residence

1	Rural area	31%
2	Town area	69%

Figure 8- Percentage for Background of Residence

According to figure 8, 69% of respondents come from town areas and only 31% come from rural areas.

## Q8 Internet Access

1	Paid data	69%
2	Free Wifi	31%

Figure 9- Percentage for Internet Access

According to Figure 9; the majority of respondents used paid data for internet access (69%) and only 31% used free WiFi.

## Findings for learner-to-learner engagement SECTION B - LEARNER-TO-LEARNER INTERACTION

Statement	MEAN
L2LQ1 Does collaborative learning promote peer-to-peer understanding?	3.8
L2LQ 2 Are you more likely to ask for help from your peers?	4.1
L2LQ 3 Do you prefer to be in the same group with your chosen peer for online activities?	4.3
L2LQ 4 Do you think that the sense of community helps you to engage in online class?	3.9
L2LQ 5 Do you think support from peers motivates you to finish tasks?	4.2
L2LQ 6 Do you think that support from peers prevent you from dropping out of course?	4

Figure 10- Mean for Learner-to-learner Engagement

Figure 10 shows the mean values for Learner- to-learner Engagement. The question "Do you prefer to be in the same group with your chosen peer for online activities?" has the highest mean score of 4.3. It is then followed by the question "Do you think support from peers motivates you to finish tasks?" with a mean of 4.2. The question of "Are you more likely to ask for help from your peers?" and "Do you think that support from peers prevent you from dropping out of course?" scored mean values of 4.1 and 4 each. It is then followed by the question "Do you think that the sense of community helps you to engage in online class?" with mean of 3.9. The lowest mean of 3.8 goes to the question "Does collaborative learning promote peer-to-peer understanding?"

## Findings for learner-to-instructor engagement

## SECTION C - LEARNER-TO-INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION

No	Statement	
Q11	L2IQ1 Does your instructor's teaching style involve students' active participation?	4.2
Q12	L2IQ 2Do you feel encouraged by your instructor to keep engaged in online classroom?	3.9
Q13	L2IQ 3Does your instructor provide feedback from your previous assessment?	4
Q14	L2IQ 4Do you feel feedback from your instructor on your performances are clear and positive?	4
Q15	L2IQ 5Does your instructor use more than two communication tools to stay connected with students?	4
Q16	L2IQ 6Do you think that online platforms used by your instructor for your online class are effective and convenient?	3.9
Q17	L2IQ 7Does your instructor maintain the ongoing interaction with students after online class?	3.8
	L2TQ8Do you think ODL promotes greater participation and interaction among learner and instructor?	3.5

Figure 11- Mean for Learner-to-instructor engagement

According to Figure 11, the highest mean score (4.2%) shows that the instructor's teaching style involves students' participation. Three factors share the same second highest mean score (4.0%) : instructors' feedback, feedback about student performances and instructors' use of more than two communication tools. Moreover, instructors' engagement in the online classroom shows a mean score of 3.9%, using effective online platforms (3.9%), interaction with a student after an online class (3.8%),and ODL promotes participation and interaction among learners and lecturers (3.5%).

*Findings for learner-to-content engagement SECTION D - LEARNER-TO-CONTENT INTERACTION*

No	Statement	
Q18	L2CQ1 Do you think that the synchronous activities (i.e. online discussion) could offer immediate assistance?	3.6
Q19	L2CQ 2 Do you think that the asynchronous activities (i.e. assignment) could offer immediate assistance?	3.7
Q20	L2CQ 3 Do you think the activities could improve the understanding of subject matter?	4.2
Q21	L2CQ 4 Do you think the activities in online learning could improve your critical thinking skills?	3.8
Q22	L2CQ 5 Do you think you can use relevant knowledge wisely in the learning process?	3.9
Q23	L2CQ 6 Do you feel that the ease of online content is important?	4.1
Q24	L2CQ 7 Do you feel that it is important to get an overview of the content before the class begins?	4.3
	L2TQ8 Do you think that ODL give more benefits than drawback?	3.5

Figure 12-mean for learner-to-content engagement

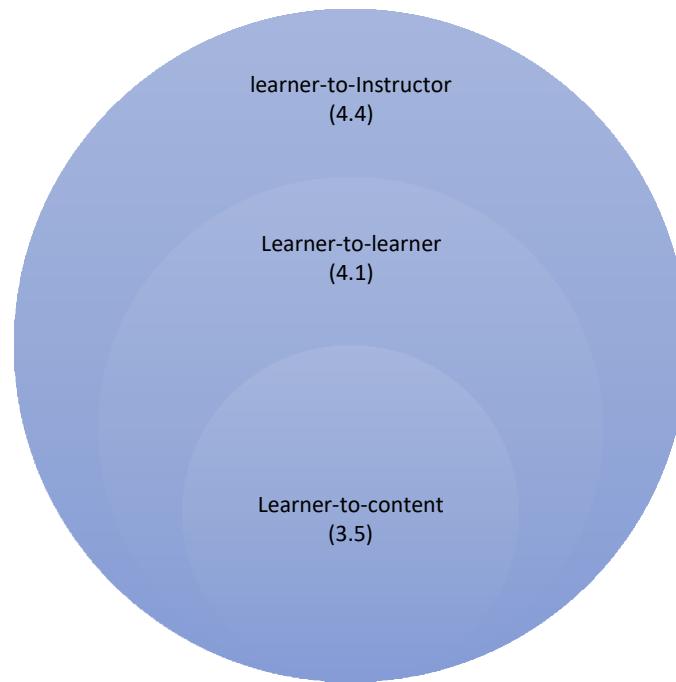
Figure 12 above shows the mean values for student engagement to the content. The question "Do you feel that it is important to get an overview of the content before the class begins?" has the highest mean with a value of 4.3. This is followed by the question "Do you think the activities could improve the understanding of subject-matter?" with a mean value of 4.2. The question "Do you feel that the ease of online content is important?" with a mean value of 4.1. While the question that got the lowest mean value is "Do you think that ODL gives more benefits than drawback?" with a mean value of 3.5.

**Conclusion**

## Summary of Findings and Discussion

2<sup>nd</sup>

LEARNER-TO-LEARNER	4.1
LEARNER-TO-INSTRUCTOR	4.4
LEARNER-TO-CONTENT	3.5



The overall findings of this study prove that the instructor is a major factor in the success of students in online lessons. The better methods and ways used by the instructor to attract the attention of students, the higher the level of motivation of students to continue to remain in online studies. This indirectly increases the interest of students, especially when they can understand and follow the lesson. Rawashdeh et al (2021) also found that instructors play a key role in increasing students' interest in learning online where 80% of the students surveyed agreed on this point.

Students' relationship with each other is also a factor that contributes to the success of online learning in this study. Generation Z students have already been exposed to the use of information technology and are accustomed to communicating with each other through this method. They can complete group assignments given by the instructor together without going through much trouble. This finding also coincides with the research results of Mokhtar et al (2021) who stated that students interact easily with other members of their study group through online platforms even though they are in different faculties of medicine and dentistry.

However, the student's interaction with the online lesson materials scored poorly according to the respondents. The results showed that students are easily confused in understanding the materials shared online. They need an instructor to help them understand the materials being shared as well as the activities that need to be completed. This is also found in a study conducted by (Hashim et.al., 2020). They felt that the materials shared throughout the online learning process should be interesting and easy to understand. Additionally, the shy students often find it a hindrance to interact and this causes them to be less focused throughout the learning process.

#### Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Face-to-face learning gradually began to be implemented after the restrictions on Covid-19 were eased. From this study, it is clear that the materials used for online learning are less

effective in attracting the interest of students and consequently made it difficult for them to understand the lessons to be delivered. Just as many materials have been prepared for face-to-face lessons in the lecture room, so too should it be completed as best as possible and as much as possible for online lessons. This is because the online platform will continue to be used in the future.

Therefore, it is proposed that similar studies focusing on the online learning materials be done in the future. New innovations need to be considered so that students can understand their lessons easily and this can reduce the feeling of boredom.

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