"KEEP ON TRYING": A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF INDONESIAN VOCATIONAL STUDENTS ON RESILIENCE POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The research aimed to find out what Indonesian vocational students' constructions of resilience in relation to academic achievement and improvement of English writing skills post the COVID-19 pandemic. A narrative inquiry method was adopted in order to make sense of the unique and common vocational students' experiences. Specifically, narrative inquiry informed the whole research process by focusing on three aspects of the research process: data collection, data transcription, and data analysis. Excerpts from semi-structured and focus group interviews with 11 participants from three provinces on Java Island were analyzed. Research results indicate that academic resilience is reinforced by personal qualities, such as the capacity to keep trying, the ability to handle hard circumstances, and self-discipline. It also reveals that teachers' support, students' hope and optimism appear to play a protective role in assisting the students to cope with available English writing challenges. Finally, the research concludes with pedagogical implications, mainly for vocational school teachers.

Keywords: resilience, post pandemic, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

The global transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic has spread, impacting many sectors, most notably education. Students and teachers are not permitted to attend school to prevent the spread of the virus, so they have to study from home. Therefore, distance learning turns out to be an excellent alternative for teachers and students to develop arrangements by introducing and using different online platforms like Blackboard, Zoom, and so on (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

Accordingly, teaching and learning can be done online in many ways. However, because of a shortage of budget, knowledge, infrastructure of ICT, WiFi connectivity, and instructional resources, the switch from a classroom to digital education is challenging for educators, pupils, and their families, as well as the nation's government. In Irawan, Dwisona, and Lestari (2020), the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture has noted that online education is unavailable to 34,5% of students. It is paradoxical since each student deserves a quality education regardless of family circumstances.

Apart from these challenges, there have also been tremendous issues about the mental well-being of students. In this matter, older students tend to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression over the past years. Many existing studies focus on the Indonesian higher education context, but few on the Indonesian vocational students' context. Regardless, there are studies on students' resilience, but studies using the narrative inquiry approach are hard to find. It is intriguing, therefore, to look at how high school students manage with or bounce back from challenging situations. The present research seeks to answer the question, "What are Indonesian vocational students' constructions of resilience in relation to the academic achievement and improvement of English writing skills post the COVID-19 pandemic?" The research,

therefore, aims to make sense of the unique and common vocational students' experiences in dealing with their academic and English writing difficulties after the coronavirus pandemic.

As time passes, the world begins to clean up and adapt to its surroundings, including developing a vaccination. Some sectors of life are beginning to recover, and the education sector is one of them. The government and educational institutions have begun implementing hybrid learning while some continue offering traditional onsite instruction. As shown in UNESCO (2020a), students' participation and rights are one of nine concepts for public action in a post-COVID future. Many COVID-19 comments advise children and young people to curtail their freedoms and postpone their education to safeguard elders and older generations. However, children's and youth's rights to participate in decisions that affect them, particularly those concerning their future, must not be compromised.

El Rizaq (2021) has claimed that the proper learning approach in long-term education is blended learning since, during the post-pandemic transition era, students have not fully assimilated some educational ideas that can only be imparted through the classical learning process. Blended learning, as a cutting-edge hybrid technique, continuously occurs in both traditional face-to-face and online learning environments (Cronje, 2020), improving learner engagement and allowing for more flexible learning experiences (Hrastinski, 2019). Therefore, blended learning is a key strategy in education to encourage active learning and improve learning outcomes.

Despite any challenges in the way that one of them is the video conference's internet connection (Sidupa, 2019), blended learning, in fact, offers students several benefits. The flexibility of blended learning, which is based on the fusion of technology and conventional face-to-face instruction, may help learners break free from the constraints imposed by traditional instruction and provide them with a variety of opportunities that will support their development as autonomous, independent learners in line with humanistic learning covering dialogical learning, democratic learning, and reflective learning (Al-Obaydi, 2021). In addition, it may have an impact on students' psychological and behavioral psychological results. Psychological results can improve their self-regulation toward learning, contentment, and participation during their study. Regarding behavioral results, it assists their academic success in certain subjects (Ashraf et al., 2021). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the finding highlights the value of blended learning for students' vocabulary acquisition, enabling teachers to alter their practices to include more technology in the classroom (Alipour, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, learning using blended learning from home for Indonesian students in senior high school surely poses certain problems. On the one hand, learning loss or poor academic knowledge and skills (Schleicher, 2020) occur. *Direktur Guru dan Tenaga Kependidikan Pendidikan Dasar Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Kemendikbud),* Rachmadi Widdiharto, has said potential learning loss could happen due to the reduced intensity of teacher-student interaction during the learning process (Kasih, 2021).

On the other hand, a survey of *Gerakan Sekolah Menyenangkan (GSM)* in 2021 has stated that 80% of the students do not like studying at home. The survey also indicates the reasons for students' unhappiness. The highest percentage is longing to meet friends (40%), then boredom (20-26%), difficulty in understanding the instructions (19%), internet problems (13-14%), and concentration difficulty (14-15%) become other causes for their unhappiness (Akbari, 2022). Furthermore, according to a poll of more than 3200 kids from elementary through high school carried out by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Safety, 93% of students between the ages of 14 and 18 exhibit depressive symptoms during the 'New Normal' period (Wijaya, 2021).

The vocational school students, with their challenges related to academic competence and adversity, call for exceptional resilience. Resilience, hence, turns out to be an essential characteristic for all students, irrespective of their educational path. As stated by Lohner and Aprea (2021), students with resilience are able to overcome adversity and continue to work toward their objectives. By cultivating the competencies and characteristics associated with resilience, students can better manage the challenges and stressors they face throughout their academic careers and beyond. Besides, students in vocational schools must be able to quickly adapt to new environments and situations (Jin et al., 2022). They may be required to switch between classroom instruction and on-the-job training or to adapt to any alterations in their schedules or program requirements.

Due to previous theories that play a role as frames of reference for the present research, the researcher is interested in unearthing the different emergent themes from vocational students' experiences, particularly in dealing with the challenges regarding academic competence and improvement of English writing skills post-pandemic. Stories in narrative inquiry are surely helpful for leading the researchers toward a better understanding of phenomena. By conducting the research, it is expected that the results might benefit Indonesian vocational school students who suffer from adversity during the epidemic and could struggle to bounce back from it. At the same time, teachers could develop strategies that assist students in coping with adversity, especially regarding their efforts to enhance academic performance and English writing skills.

METHODS

The narrative inquiry method is used to make sense of the unique and common participant's experience (Hennig et al., 2022). In particular,

conducting a narrative study provides rich and thorough descriptions of individual traits and contextual circumstances (Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, participants' personal experiences are recognized as the information source in representations of sociality, temporality, and place. Sociality, here, covers the social and personal contexts. In the matter of temporality, narratives shift as a consequence of what people have gone through at that specific timeframe. The physical setting in which experiences actually happen across time has been referred to as place (Dewart et al., 2019). In terms of the temporality, sociality, and location elements, stories are analyzed using a multi-layered approach with an emphasis on form (how the story is presented), content (what is stated in the narrative), and context (where the story is generated and conveyed) (O'Toole, 2018). Personal stories are, consequently, made up of those three elements.

In the research, the stories vocational students told are about the mental health hurdles encountered in their academic performance and writing skills in English after the Coronavirus outbreak. Vocational students as research participants come from three provinces in Java (West Java, Central Java, and East Java). The sample is a purposive sample consisting of 11 students with ages ranging from 15 to 18. In fact, there are three participants from West Java, five participants from Central Java, and three participants from East Java.

Based on the research settings, there are three focus groups categorized. Two researchers manage the interviews of focus groups. In order to hear the participants' stories, a semi-structured interview is conducted to gain a better understanding of their feelings and beliefs. As a method for gathering data, semi-structured interviews suggest the format of the interaction between the participant and the researcher and provide guidelines for addressing the expanded participant demands that emerge from the inquiry of the analyzed experiences (Husband, 2020). Besides, such an interview is able to create a space for the participants to narrate their lives in sufficient depth (Poole, 2020). During the interviews, open-ended questions are asked to encourage the participants to tell their experiences before and after using the application for a month (Sidupa et al., 2022). The interviews are audio recorded and verbatim transcribed by a third-party transcriptionist.

The materials used are mainly three transcripts and individually analyzed using open coding. Open coding is a method of categorizing data in which the researcher seeks to discover different concepts and themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Data are displayed in narrative text and quotations to gain an in-depth understanding. Utilizing the technique would enable the researchers to focus and organize their thoughts by linking and comparing the information to gain emergent themes. The emergent themes supported with relevant quotes describing the research participants' experiences would, therefore, be regarded as the research findings (Sonday, Ramugondo, & Kathard, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research is conducted to explore 11 vocational students' personal stories about resilience concerning academic achievement based on data in Table 1 and the improvement of writing skills post the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aims to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of vocational students on academic resilience and English writing post-pandemic. The emergent themes would be scrutinized regarding the research problem under examination.

Firstly, the research finding comprises resilience in relation to academic achievement. The vocational students explain how their understanding of resilience connects with their academic performance. Therefore, emergent themes about how they withstand academic challenges are encountered in their classrooms.

As the vocational students explain what resilience means to them regarding academic achievement, they believe good things to happen. "Keep on trying" is how most participants express their adversity-coping capability. According to Lohner and Aprea (2021), resilient students are able to overcome adversity and continue working toward their goals. The development of resilience is an ongoing process that requires conscious effort and practice. Students can better manage challenges and stressors throughout their academic careers and beyond if they develop the characteristics and skills associated with resilience.

It, indeed, helps the student participants persevere and be certain in handling hardship. As student 5 has noted, "Keep trying until I understand. When I have an obstacle in understanding the materials, I will ask my friend. When it turns out that friends cannot help me, I can ask my teacher. Then, I begin to realize that I must take notes when the teacher explains the materials to avoid the confusion that may occur in the future." Another student agreed with this view. As student 6 has mentioned, "Keep trying until I comprehend the materials. When I have problems understanding certain materials and feel confused by myself, I can ask my friend. It turns out that my friend was also confused. Then, I can ask my teacher at school because when I message my teacher and ask about the material, it will commonly take a long time for the teacher to text me back."

The last pandemic has caused learning loss in many levels of Indonesian education that requires the implementation of an Independent Curriculum for all levels of education, starting from primary education to higher education, including vocational schools (Safar, Mulyasa, & Fauzi, 2022). This new curriculum is expected to provide more enjoyable learning environments for students. Thus, it has been applied during the COVID-19 outbreak until today. Therefore, Coronavirus has, indeed, influenced the education system in Indonesia (Schleicher, 2020). To prohibit

and secure every student and staff from spreading the Coronavirus, most schools, colleges, and universities are closed for extended periods.

For other students, resilience could also be interpreted as the "ability to withstand a difficult situation". A 16-year-old male student labeled as student 2 has explained, "Now, in our class, there is tough competition. It often discourages me since there is hardly any motivation for those who come to the bottom of the class to see that others are better than me. I should not be frustrated. Instead, I must still say to myself that I can be like them. I will study harder than before. It also happens when I do poorly in a subject and have to join a remedial class." After that, student 8 has added, "As I had bad scores in my exams, I would do a reflection about why I had bad scores. What did I need to do so that my parents would be proud of me? Then, I realized that I had to study harder and harder. That was what I did, hence." It can be said that developing the capacity to endure challenging situations is an ongoing process that requires deliberate effort and practice. By cultivating the characteristics and competencies associated with resilience and effective coping, students could better manage the challenges and stressors they face throughout their academic careers and beyond.

Student participants, moreover, indicate their resilience by cultivating self-discipline, which is the capacity to stand up to any form of negative pressure. A 17-year-old female student labeled as student 5 builds and develops self-discipline when she has noted, "During the pandemic, I often underestimated the materials. I was not serious about doing assignments or exams. After the pandemic, I always say to myself that I want to work harder to do well in my studies so that I will not be left behind by my other friends who have good scores. I, then, study harder for my assignments and exams now." Student 9 has mentioned, "I have to be diligent in doing any assignments, listening to teachers' explanations, and taking notes on the material given so that I gain good grades and a broad insight."

Some students say they have to understand and accept the consequences of their actions. As student 1 has said, "Dare to accept the consequences when you are doing and collecting assignments given by the teacher after the due date. I, for that reason, need to perform your responsibilities well without complaining too much." Student 9 has added, "I will not succeed in the learning process if I am not happy and enthusiastic in doing everything that becomes my responsibility as a student."

The capability to persevere, react, adjust, manage adversity, overcome challenges, and bounce back from perceived failure, disappointment, or rejection is known as resilience. The ability of students to overcome challenges will impact their future employment and interpersonal interactions (Lohner & Aprea, 2021). For students to succeed in overcoming difficult and stressful circumstances, resilience building is crucial. Besides, they are able to preserve a sense of self-worth (Higgins & Misawa, 2022).

In addition, resilience is one of the most crucial factors for student happiness, satisfaction, and a smooth transition into higher education. Consequently, the correlation between resilience and academic achievement is a prominent theme throughout (Foley, Dinan-Thompson, & Caltabiano, 2020). While the development of resilience is deemed essential for a wide range of careers, it is deemed especially relevant for specific industries and demographic groups. Resilience has been demonstrated (Brewer et al., 2019) to be a successful response to tension, hardship, or upheaval. Resilient people can withstand stress or adversity, maintain their health, and return to their previous state. Individuals demonstrate resilience when they are positively transformed by adversity, ultimately resulting in growth or learning. Nurtjahjanti, Prasetyo, and Ardhiani (2021) have argued that it is also believed that the environment and a person's interactions with and within it influence resilience. A person's resilience could be enhanced throughout their lifetime.

Moreover, depression among vocational middle school students is impacted by stress reactions and psychological resilience during the early COVID-19 pandemic. Jin et al. (2022) have said that during a pandemic, it is discovered that depression levels and stress responses vary significantly by grade, gender, and spatial distance resilience moderates the relationship between pandemic panic and depression in a negative manner. Resilience moderates the relationship between pandemic evaluation and depression significantly and positively.

In addition, students in a vocational school face various learning difficulties that may hinder learning by diverting their attention from their studies or can improve learning by motivating them to overcome obstacles as they emerge. As indicated by Ainscough et al. (2018), there are five obstacles that will test the resilience of students: (1) non-academic obstacles, such as lack of time, work responsibilities, social responsibilities, unspecified responsibilities, and falling behind in revision or preparation; (2) motivational factors, such as lack of motivation and procrastination; (3) academic commitments, such as academic commitments and content complexity; (4) difficulties concentrating in lectures, such as obstacles paying attention in lectures due to factors including lecture length, fatigue, and difficulty focusing; (5) difficulty understanding information, such as difficulty grasping ideas and course materials and missing or arriving late to lecture. In order to build and develop resilience, schools and teachers need to cooperate, especially in giving the students the required support for their academic performance.

Secondly, the research finding comprises resilience in relation to English writing improvement as well. Here, the vocational students explain how their attitude toward the difficulties they encounter when writing in English. Therefore, emergent themes would emerge.

In one of the questions, as students explain

Table 1 Transcript of Interview

No	Question of Interview	Answers
1.	How would you deal with difficulties in learning process?	S1: In my opinion, you need to be tough in learning. For example, I have to collect and do all assignments from the teachers. I also have to submit them in time. If not, we need to dare to accept any consequences. Just like the rules my friends and I have made in our study groups. We as students, for that reason, need to perform your responsibilities well without complaining too much.
		S2: Now, in our class, there is tough competition in the classroom. It often discourages me since there is hardly any motivation for those who come to the bottom of the class to see that others are better than you. I should not be frustrated. Instead, I must still say to myself that I can be like them. I will study harder than before. It also happens when I do poorly in a subject and have to join a remedial class.
		S3: I have to be tough. Don't want to lose. Don't give up on ourselves. So, like it or not, you have to do something called learning.
		S4: When I am learning and finding something I don't understand, I can directly ask the teacher. Then, at home, for example, if I ask my friend via online it's complicated. If I ask my friend, I have to chat him/her first. Now, if I'm embarrassed to ask the teacher, I just ask my friend.
		S5: Keep trying until I understand. When I have an obstacle in understanding the materials, I will ask my friend. When it turns out that friends cannot help me, I can ask my teacher. Then, I begin to realize that I must take notes when the teacher explains the materials to avoid my confusion that may occur in the future. During pandemic I often underestimated the materials. I was not serious in doing assignments or exams. After pandemic, I always say to myself that I want to work harder to do well in my study so that I will not be left behind from my other friends who have good scores. I, then, study harder for my assignments and exams now.
		S6: Keep trying until I comprehend the materials. When I have problems understanding certain materials and feel confused by myself, I can ask my friend. It turns out that my friend was also confused. Then, I can ask my teacher at school because when I message my teacher and ask about the material, it will commonly take a long time for the teacher to text me back.
		S7: If, for example, I don't understand the material, and I may be assessed for that subject, the score may be quite low, for example, under the KKM (Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal). We can look for material from outside, ask the teacher or seek learning applications. We have to be more ambitious in the lesson on social media.
		S8: As I had bad scores in my exams, I would do a reflection about why I had bad scores. What did I need to do so that my parents would be proud of me? Then, I realized that I had to study harder and harder. That was what I did, hence.
		S9: I have to be diligent in doing any assignments, listening to the teacher's explanation and taking notes on the material given so that I gain good grades and a broad insight. I will not succeed in the learning process if I am not happy and enthusiastic in doing everything that becomes my responsibilities as a student.
		S10: I should be tough in learning. In my opinion, it's like learning new material. Studying new material has to be done to gain new knowledge.
		S11: In my opinion, I have to study harder. For an example, at school we are promoting the profile of Pancasila students, so while studying, we are implementing Pancasila values in school, community and home life.

how they deal with any difficulties in writing English, most students mention and describe a social support system in their vocational school experiences. Here, English teachers have helped them encounter the challenges they found in English writing. As student 11 has described, "Sometimes when I have difficulties writing in English, I will ask the teacher. Of course, the teacher will help me. He is very supportive." Student 4 has also explained, "For example, if it is an Indonesian word, then I cannot find its appropriate English word. I have also consulted my dictionary, but I cannot find it. Then, I asked my teacher. The teacher will help me so that I will not be confused by myself." Student 6 has added, "The difficulty is sometimes making sentences.

So, to handle the difficulty, I will usually ask the teacher."

Moreover, most of the student participants have found that resilience is defined as hope and optimism. Student 7 has demonstrated, "Frankly speaking, I cannot write English well. Thus, when writing a story, I have difficulties making and varying sentences because I cannot do that due to the lack of vocabulary. Now, I want to be capable of writing well. Thus, I can make good sentences." Student 10 has added, "Sometimes I have problems with spelling as I mispronounce words like 'apologize'. Because I mispronounce it as 'apolojiz', I write it as it is. I will keep writing by myself until I can spell the words

appropriately. I believe I will not forget to spell the words by keep writing."

Students, teachers, and parents, in the meantime, face obstacles when these educational institutions are closed. Distance learning turns out to be a good solution as a means to sustain the education system. However, developing nations lack network infrastructures, computers, and Internet access impedes distance learning. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on students' education in nations with limited resources differ from those with more significant resources (Noori, 2021). Süt and Öznaçar (2017) and Kurniawati (2021) have agreed that nations have developed a plan to implement educational technology, online learning resources, and broadcast teaching. According to Perdani (2022), the expansion of technology in the components of the learning model for delivering materials to students is ever-increasing, and more technological innovations have emerged concerning the presentation of information.

As a matter of fact, due to challenges in the educational system, such as those involving intake, process, and outcome, Indonesian education is still of lower quality than that of foreign countries (Safar, Mulyasa, & Fauzi, 2022). Given that the education issue appears multifaceted, the curriculum typically gets a great deal of focus because it becomes the component most likely to affect students' achievement in their education. Therefore, it needs immediate action from Indonesian high schools to adopt up-to-date innovation embedded in the curriculum.

In addition, the Minister of Education and Culture claims that numerous anti-mainstream schools have incorporated the concept of independent learning and carry out various curricular advances in the areas. It is also mentioned that one of the numerous anti-mainstream schools in Indonesia innovates curriculum and practices independent learning. They discover that independent learning is enjoyable and freeing when students are permitted to pick what and how to learn utilizing digital project-based learning strategies. It also could be applied in vocational schools as the graduates need to be creative and be able to adapt to the working field (Safar, Mulyasa, & Fauzi, 2022).

Next, Rosina et al. (2021) have stated that vocational schools in Indonesia must provide graduates with soft skills and hard talents that are compatible with business and industry. For this reason, vocational education graduates will have no difficulty adapting to technological advances in their respective industries when entering the workforce. According to the research, implementing a vocational education program can prevent any incompatibility between particular skills and the community.

Due to the prolonged pandemic, the closure of schools negatively impacts the mental and physical health of students, parents, and teachers worldwide, particularly in developing nations. Besides, the students do not experience continuous online teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2020b). In addition, the Coronavirus lockdown may allow the students to experience stress, fear, and anxiety, such as fears of passing away and losing loved ones. Another research has also found that students become bored with online learning after the first two weeks. Also, there is a great deal of anxiety among student participants whose parents generate limited earnings about having to purchase internet packages to take advantage of distance learning; mental issues are prompted by the numerous tasks, as well as the fact that the students think online learning is ineffective. The findings emphasize the significance of taking into account support networks in personal well-being to engage students who are more likely to experience loneliness during the global disease outbreak as schools and researchers debate future strategies for integrating traditional classroom instruction and digital modules (Elharake et al., 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The research investigates how Indonesian vocational students define resilience and cope with the difficulties of learning English as a foreign language after the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings, based on the vocational students' perspectives, strengthen resilience for their learning achievement, particularly after the Coronavirus period, and encourage further advancements in digital education, most notably in vocational schools. The teachers should help with their students' adverse mental health problems by supporting them with appropriate strategies that address positive guidance, relationships, and learning environment. The research is limited in scope due to the small number of participants in order to gain their stories. It would be more comprehensive if stories from other participants, especially from eastern Indonesia, are taken into consideration for further research. Besides, the findings would be more typical of the country, in this matter Indonesia, and encourage other studies on mental well-being in relation to other English language skills so that the research is more exhaustive.

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