






Online Teaching and Learning: Reconceptualising Classroom Interaction

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Abstract. The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic transformed traditional classroom dynamics, especially classroom interaction—an essential component of second language learning. However, limited research has examined how English language educators conceptualise and promote interaction in fully online synchronous environments. This study investigates educators' perceptions of online classroom interaction, the strategies they employ to foster engagement, and the challenges encountered in virtual English language teaching. Data were collected through a 90-minute online focus group involving three English language educators from two Malaysian higher learning institutions. The discussion focused on their experiences with teacher-student and student-student interaction in synchronous online classes. Findings reveal that online classroom interaction differs markedly from physical classroom interaction. Participation commonly shifts from oral to written modes through chat functions and digital tools. While some learners demonstrated increased confidence online, others remained passive, relying on anonymity, avoiding oral responses, or citing technical issues. Educators used various strategies—including direct questioning, leading prompts, interactive applications, breakout rooms, informal communication, and selective L1 use—to encourage interaction. Student-student interaction occurred more frequently and more naturally in breakout rooms when instructors were absent. Effective online classroom interaction needs to be reconceptualised to include digital competencies, multiple modes of interaction, and supportive environments that reduce anxiety. The study highlights the need for innovative pedagogical approaches that promote meaningful online engagement, particularly in oral communication.

Keywords: Online Interaction, Reconceptualisation, Digital Competencies

1 Introduction

Online teaching and learning have been pervasive even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In this 21st century era, developing digital skills among future graduates is vital to produce human capital who are able to address the needs and challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era. The skills required for this era include learning skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication), literacy (information, media and technology) and lifelong learning [1]. Even with the need to address these demands, online teaching and learning was seen as supplementary to face-to-face [2]. There was no urgency to shift to fully online teaching and learning at the time.

Face-to-face instruction within physical classroom settings has been the dominant mode of teaching and learning [3]. Through this mode of teaching, teachers are able to provide immediate guidance and adapt their pedagogical strategies based on their students' responses while students have the opportunities to obtain spontaneous clarification. Nevertheless, the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 fundamentally altered the education landscape, as teaching and learning experienced a sudden transition from physical, face-to-face classrooms to fully online learning environments. This shift is found to limit two-way interactions between teachers and students, as well as social interactions among the students [4, 5]. Within this contexts, English language educators may not be able to develop students' English language and communicative abilities.

In designing online teaching and learning, English language educators need to take into consideration the diversity of students' learning abilities. Teachers' instructions and materials should address students' language learning needs. Nonetheless, poorly designed online teaching and learning could make students feel intimidated, demotivated, affecting their language learning engagement [6]. This could lead to low participation among the students in a virtual classroom, making it challenging for teachers to design activities that require students to perform collaborative tasks.

Several studies have shown that virtual classroom could be as effective as face-to-face courses, but only if learners are provided well-designed interaction activities [7, 8]. Croxton [9] found that purposefully designed and engaging interaction tasks played significant roles in learner persistence in online courses. Therefore, online teaching and learning needs to be framed in such a way that it provides an online learning environment that supports meaningful interactions for learners [10, 11].

Classroom interaction is important in language learning as it helps to improve learners' communication skills, particularly in a second language learning context. As such, educators hold a responsibility of providing opportunities for the students to interact through their classroom activities. Studies have shown that online teaching and learning is perceived positively by teachers [4, 5]. However, these studies have also highlighted limitations that need to be addressed. One of these limitations is lack of two-way communication between teachers and students, and social interactions among the students.

Moore [12] identified three types of interaction, namely student-to-content interaction, student-to-teacher interaction, and student-to-student interaction. In their study, Moore et al. [13] examined students' desire for student-to-student interaction during online teaching and learning. The study found that graduate students did not prefer to have student-to-student interactions during their online classes. Their priority was more on the content that they received rather than participating in the class. Based on this

study, the key consideration that is highlighted learning intention or outcomes that students need to achieve. This suggests that educators need to make the learning outcomes of a lesson clear so that students are able to prioritise their learning.

Online learning can be intimidating for second language learners. This can be found in Zhang's [14] study, affecting students' understanding and consequently reducing their engagement. Students in this study perceived learning as instructor-centred with the instructor being the authority. This raises the need for educators to create a learning environment which can make students feel comfortable and not perceived of as an authority. In addition, online teaching and learning not only need to be student-centred, but also interactive. In another study, it was found that participation among the students was not well-distributed [15]. The study highlights that effective online teaching and learning depends on clear learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement. In other words, educators need to make clear the learning outcomes, and design activities that could increase students' motivation and engagement.

Online teaching and learning could be fun and engaging when it is conducted live or synchronously. This could be observed in a study conducted to examine university students' perceptions of virtual classrooms [16]. The result shows that these students prefer synchronous learning to asynchronous (pre-recorded lecture or YouTube). However, poor connectivity may restrict students from participating in synchronous sessions [17], hence hindering them from participating in any interaction activities. Further investigation is needed to determine the impacts of this issue on lack of interactions among students in school.

In designing teaching and learning that promotes interactions in online classes, educators need to have high competencies in digital skills and good understanding in designing learning activities appropriate for online teaching and learning and encourage online classroom interactions [5]. In their study, Lukas and Yunus [18] have raised the need for educators to be ready and prepared to use technology in their teaching. The study found that teachers were not able to promote student participation in their teaching and learning due to the fact that they were not well-equipped with digital skills. Thus, educators need to understand the purpose of using particular online tools and the learning outcomes that can be achieved using such tools. Another study examined teachers' experience in transforming in-person learning to remote or distance learning [19]. The researchers found that students' learning needs were addressed better when synchronous sessions were conducted. This is due to the fact that students are able to reflect on their own ideas, express ideas and clarify their thinking to others.

In their study, Motz et al. [20] conducted a survey on online teaching and learning and responses were collected from 6000 participants which included educators and students. The study highlighted that only few online classes were able to promote interactive learning experiences. With the lack of digital competencies, teachers are not able to fully utilise the use of technology in their teaching and design appropriate learning activities that can promote student interactions [21]. Teachers' digital skills have great impacts on the effectiveness of the learning activities designed [22]. This highlights the importance of digital competencies in promoting student participation and interaction during online teaching and learning.

This study focuses on English language educators' attempts to promote interactions in the online classroom. The study examined how English language educators perceive and

conceptualise classroom interaction in online classrooms. The strategies that these educators employed, and the impacts of these strategies were also identified. Lastly, the challenges in promoting online classroom interactions were also discussed.

2 Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project investigating students' online interactions during synchronous English language teaching and learning sessions from the perspective of English language educators. This paper presents the findings related to classroom interactions from educators' perspective. A total of three English language educators from two different higher learning institutions were invited to participate in this study. An invitation email was sent to each participant individually. An information sheet containing information about the research and a consent form were attached to the email. Upon receiving the consent form, a focus group session was set.

The three participants were given pseudonyms Ana, Nur and Ita to protect their confidentiality. These pseudonyms were chosen as they were common female names in Malaysia. The focus group session was conducted through video conferencing using TEAMS as the two institutions were far apart and it was not convenient to group the participants together. The session took about 90 minutes. Once the focus group ended, the researchers transcribed the data and analyse it using Braun and Clarke's six step thematic analysis [23].

3 Findings and Discussion

The findings show there is a need to revisit the conceptualisation of classroom interaction within the context of online teaching and learning. This conceptualisation demands that different strategies are used to promote classroom interaction. However, promoting online digital classroom interaction is not without challenges.

3.1 Conceptualising Online Classroom Interaction

Online classroom interaction needs to be perceived differently from physical classroom interaction. The findings indicate that there are differences between physical classroom interactions

I try to apply the same interaction I practise in a physical classroom

[Ana 1].

Initially, Ana treated online classrooms the same way she treated physical classrooms. Later, she realised that there are differences between the two in terms of classroom interaction.

Student interaction in online classes is undoubtedly less spontaneous compared to face-to-face classroom interaction. Many students tend to be passive learners or observers rather than being active participants in online classes [Ana 2].

In this instance, online classroom interaction is perceived as interactions that are less or non-spontaneous when students assuming the role of an observer than physical face-to-face interaction.

The lack of interaction and participation in an online classroom is due to the absence of physical presence [24]. In a face-to-face classroom, educators can facilitate interaction and participation through non-verbal cues. However, these non-verbal cues are limited in an online classroom. In order to promote active online participation and classroom interaction, educators need to be creative and create the concept of physical presence during their online classes.

Another crucial element that can reduce online interaction and participation is the lack of technical support.

...technical issues including internet connection, or microphone and camera not working are the most common excuse [for not participating] when they are being called to answer or respond. [Ana 3].

Although some students may genuinely experience technical issues, there is evidence that shows students use technical issues as an excuse not to participate or interact. Tobi et al. [25], for example, reported that students avoided turning on cameras due to discomfort or low confidence. In Donelan et al.'s [26] study, students felt anxious about being called on in online environments and therefore used technical issues to avoid responding to their lecturers.

The online classroom interaction requires more than just abilities to communicate and use language. It also involves having technical support and willingness to be seen or heard online. The findings show that the mode of communication has also shifted from oral to written forms.

They love to do activities [which require them to write their answers]...they do not have to speak directly in the class [Ana 4].

In this instance, it could be observed that students prefer written interaction in online classrooms.

...even though some of them are quite active in physical class, they still prefer to stay low or passive in online mode [Ana 5].

Written forms of interaction in online classrooms allow students to participate and yet remain unseen. Apart from that, this form of communication provides opportunities for students to express ideas more carefully as they have more time to think about what they say [27] This reduces anxiety and is less intimidating compared to spontaneous verbal participation [28].

While Ana's students seemed to be unwilling to interact spontaneously in online classrooms, Nur, however, experienced a different situation.

...they have new-found confidence, just unmute and start asking questions...they can't see their friends because they shut down their cameras...[Nur 1].

In Nur's case, her students became more active in online classroom. By not seeing their friends, they developed confidence in communicating in English.

I had a student who was not so good in the language but every single time he would be so eager to speak...language barrier is toned down

because it is not physical interaction...[although] he struggled with the language...it is a new-found confidence [Nur 2].

Language anxiety seems to reduce while confidence levels increase through online classroom. Studies such as by Tabuchi et al. [29] and Russell [30] reported that language anxiety can be reduced in online classrooms but with appropriate strategies. In the case of Nur's classrooms, further examination was conducted to determine the strategies that she used to reduce language anxiety among her students.

Online learning became widely used in Malaysia since Covid-19. At the beginning of the pandemic when teaching and learning abruptly shifted from physical to virtual classroom, classroom interaction was largely affected.

At first, when we started doing online learning, interaction was very very low...it is something new for the students, maybe they don't know how to interact, how to participate in online classes [Ita 1].

This indicates that there is a difference between physical classroom interaction and online classroom interaction. Online classroom requires more than just speaking up. It also requires digital skills to optimise the online platform features to interact with each other.

But then, after a while, there is an increase...students are already comfortable with the situation [Ita 2].

Being comfortable with the situation and getting used to using online platform increases participation and online classroom interaction.

Based on the above instances, it can be concluded that online classroom interaction in an English class is not only about having a good command in English and good communication skills. It also requires digital skills to enable students to interact. Students need to be comfortable with the situation, leading to their willingness to participate. In addition, classroom interaction in digital contexts is not only about oral interaction but also written interaction. This suggests online classroom interaction needs to be redefined and reconceptualised differently from physical classroom interaction. In addition, the discussion in this section has also highlighted that students can either be willing or unwilling to interact in online classrooms. This raises the importance of teaching strategies to promote online classroom interaction.

3.2 Fostering Online Classroom Interactions

According to Moore (1989), classroom interaction is categorised into three types, which are, teacher-student/student-teacher, student-student and student-content interaction. This study examined interactions related to teacher-student and student-student interaction. In his classification, more treated teacher-student and student-teacher as the same category. In this study, teacher-student and student-teacher are treated as different category to highlight the common type that occurs in online classroom interaction.

In fostering interaction, it could be observed that strategies commonly used in physical classrooms are also employed in virtual classrooms. One of the strategies reported by Ana is calling the students' name.

...Sometimes it [the questions] is a simple yes or no answer, sometimes I ask for explanation and elaboration... I will call [out] a few names to answer where no volunteer steps in [Ana 6].

In this instance, it could be observed that this statement reflects teacher-student interaction where Ana prompted her students to interact by asking questions. However, the interaction was not always voluntarily where she had to call out students' name.

Most of the interactions are teacher-student...through the chatbox and uses of emoticons to respond to my questions. It is a rare situation where students will unmute themselves to speak unless they are very confident or only if I specifically ask them to... [Ana 7].

In addition, the responses by her students were not always in oral interactions. In most cases, the responses were in written form, highlighting the concept of written interaction as a form of teacher-student online classroom interaction. Ita also used the strategy of calling out students' name.

The simplest strategy for me is to call [out] their names. Just pick any name from the list and then students will be focused... [Ita 3].

Although calling students' name in online classrooms can be intimidating [24], in Ita's case, the purpose of this strategy was not only to promote teacher-student interaction, but also to make students stay focused in the online classroom.

At first, they were shocked and did not like it. But later, they know that is my way of teaching...every class they already know that I will call them. They know they need to be prepared [Ita 4].

The use of this strategy needs to be continuous and consistent so that this will become a routine to the students. Donelan et al. [26] raise the need for setting the ground rules in online classrooms so that students understand their lecturers' expectations. Nur, however, has a slightly different idea.

I used a lot of leading questions. I implement volunteering system in my class. I would not call names. I would spend one minute or two minutes to just waiting for them to...they know I will not move forward until someone answers, someone volunteers. I will be staring [at the camera] and say anyone? Anyone? Anyone? So, they force themselves to answer [Nur 3].

In this instance, Nur was persistent in making her student to volunteer by continuously prompting and patiently waiting for them to respond to her questions. She stood firm that the lesson would not move forward unless someone responded to her questions.

Another strategy is the use of applications such as Mentimeter, Padlet and Wayground (formerly known as Quizizz).

I realised that students respond better when there are activities that require their participation. For example, I frequently use tools like Padlet, Mentimeter, live polls or gamification (Quizizz/ Kahoot) to make the class interactive and less intimidating. This might be because they do not have to speak directly in the class [Ana 8]

The applications do not require students to speak but only require them to type or key in their answers. This suggests a different form of teacher-student interaction, which is through written interaction.

...I used Quizizz (Wayground)...and I do use some applications like Mentimeter because it will give you there and then feedback...students [key in their] answer...even though I don't know if everyone submitted [their answers] or not, but at least I get some feedback from them [Ita 5].

The use of applications increases classroom interaction as students can be anonymous. This suggests that anonymity can be the key to effective online classroom interaction. Online anonymity helps reduce anxiety and promotes participation among students who are comfortable with physical classrooms [31]. Anonymity reduces social pressure and helps quieter students to voice their ideas [32].

Students do not like us to talk much during classes. They like us to use applications because they want to do something in the classes. They don't want to just listen and listen [Ita 6].

The use of applications also provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in their learning.

The use of all these apps like Mentimeter and Quizizz [Wayground] inject some sort of excitement in the classes. Because online learning or online interaction, humans have this capacity how long they can endure the talk [Nur 4].

This excerpt highlights the importance applications in promoting online classroom interaction.

Students love competing against each other. So, when use Quizizz, they want to see their name first in the scoreboard [Ita 7].

It can be concluded that not only teacher-student interaction occurred but also student-student interaction in the form of written interaction. This also raises the need to revisit the conceptualisation of student-student interaction in online classroom interaction.

In promoting interaction in online classrooms, there is also a need for human connection. This was indicated in Nur's response.

I applied informal communication...I conducted my class like speaking to a friend, not a lecture [Nur 5].

This is also reflected in Ana's response.

...the lecturer's responses and behaviour affect the environment of the class where it goes the same with the physical classroom...Using warm tone, humour, calling names in a gentle way, giving constructive feedback or scaffolding could help to change the classroom to a welcoming atmosphere and encourage students to participate in the class [Ana 9].

To create this atmosphere, Nur used L1 (in this case Malay language) in her classroom.

I noticed if I apply a lot of L1, the interaction will gradually get better, because I think it lower down the students' anxiety...But I will remind them "It is OK for me to use BM (L1, but you need to try to use English" [Nur 6].

In the previous section, it has been discussed that students were willing to interact more when they feel comfortable. The above excerpt (Excerpt Nur 6) illustrates that the use of students' L1 reduced language anxiety and improved interaction.

...I find that this is very helpful to reduce [language] anxiety. They are more willing to turn on their microphone [to speak] because they know that this lecturer will not judge them, or lash at them for using broken English [Nur 7].

Students' comfort levels significantly influence the extent to which they engage and participate in their learning [33]. When students' apprehension and language anxiety reduce, online classroom interaction improves [24]. In this case, the interaction is in the form of oral interaction. This highlights the importance of the educators' or instructors' personality and behaviour in creating a comfortable learning environment.

In promoting student-student interaction, the participants used the features available in the online platform.

Breakout rooms are another interesting feature available in the video conferencing platforms, where I rely on and use especially when I want my students to speak. Students seem to communicate more comfortably in smaller groups [Ana 9].

Breaking students into smaller groups encourages student-student interaction. This is also illustrated in Ita's classes.

We do have assessments that need them to interact with each other for example, discussion, oral presentation where they have to work in pairs. For this, of course they need practice, whether they like it or not, they have to interact with each other [Ita 8].

In this instance, it could be seen that the students were placed in a situation where they were forced to interact among them.

So, I will have to force...I will put them in breakout rooms and then I will jump from one room to another. And I notice they participate [orally] actively in the breakout rooms...because the lecturer is not there to monitor what they are talking about [Nur 8].

Although Nur made the attempt to monitor discussions in each breakout room, she was not there all the time as she had to move from one room to another. Although they were forced to interact, the absence of the lecturer motivated the interaction among the students.

Based on the discussion in this section, it can be concluded that the most common type of interaction is teacher-student interaction. However, the interaction is mostly in the form of written interactions through chat box and applications. Oral interaction seldom occurs for teacher-student interaction. There are instances where student-student interaction occurs during group discussions in breakout rooms. Within this context, students are seen to interact orally more than in written form. It can be concluded that when teacher-student interaction occurs, the online classroom interactions are prone towards written interactions. However, when student-student interaction occurs, the online classroom interactions are prone towards oral interaction, especially when the lecturer is not in the room. This calls for a re-conceptualisation of classroom interactions for the context of online classrooms.

3.3 Constraints in Fostering Online Classroom Interactions

Employing strategies to foster online classroom interaction is not without constraints. The findings demonstrated that students would always find ways to avoid having to interact orally, although their English language proficiency is high.

Students prefer to stay passive unless being called directly and they prefer to stay silent with their cameras off. When they are being called to respond, most students prefer to use either the chatbox or the emojis (emoticons) available on the video conferencing... [Ana 10].

In this instance, it could be observed that students preferred to interact through written mode and were not enthusiastic to communicate orally, even for proficient students. When asked to interact orally, "...students sometimes claim that their cameras or microphones could not work [Ana 11]". When the participants persistently asked them to unmute and speak up, "they would always say, I went to the toilet" [Nur 9].

...in some cases, there are some students the microphone is not functioning, the camera is not functioning, then I will allow them to use the chatbox for them to give response. But most of the cases I will ask them to try to say something [Ita 9].

For Nur, there were instances where students would orally interact during their online classes when their cameras were turned off. However, once their cameras were turned on, "they became silent" [Nur 10].

One common challenge in online classrooms is the internet connection. In this case, there were students who were not able to interact with their lecturers or their friends.

I don't require them to turn on the camera because it requires larger bandwidth [Nur 11].

To a certain extent, teacher-student or student-student interactions may have improved when written interactions through platforms such as chat box or applications, however oral interactions remain limited.

...students now know how to "survive" online classes with minimal effort, by typing their answers...or completing tasks efficiently without much verbal interaction [Ana 12].

4 Conclusion

This study has explored English language educators' experience in conducting teaching and learning online that promotes classroom interactions. The has raised several key issues in online classroom interaction, suggesting the need for reconceptualising classroom interaction, specifically for online classroom.

The findings have demonstrated that there are differences between physical classroom interactions and online classroom interactions. Written form of communication is more preferred as it provides opportunities for students to carefully craft language before voicing their ideas. Apart from that, written form of communication allows students to be anonymous, creating a comfortable environment and reducing language

anxiety. In addition, it helps quieter students to gain confidence and provides the opportunity to participate. With these findings, the new conceptualisation should consider digital skills (both the educators and students), mode of interactions (oral or written interactions) and providing a comfort zone to promote willingness to interact and reduce language apprehension and anxiety.

In conclusion, there is need for innovative pedagogies that can boost students' online classroom interaction and participation, emphasising the need for reconceptualising classroom interaction that represents online classrooms contexts. Further investigation is required to look into ways in which a comfortable learning environment can be created to promote online classroom interaction, particularly in terms of oral interaction.

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