"Zoom'ing into MUET Students' Perception in Writing Skills Through Online Cooperative Learning

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Abstract

Technology and the internet has been used as an educational platform for years. Due to the pandemic learning online has become part of the norms. This study explored the use of cooperative learning by using the feature of breakout room in Zoom application towards Malaysian University English Test (MUET) students’ writing skills. Besides this study investigates students’ perception towards online cooperative learning methods. This study uses case study research design. There were 18 students chosen as a sample of this study who were from a secondary school in Malaysia that at the pre-university level (19 years old) which have never tried breakout room features in Zoom application but all of them are digital literate. The participants underwent six sessions of online cooperative learning treatment. Participant journals and individual interviews were used to collect data which highlighted their opinion on these methods and also the challenges that they were facing while using this platform. Findings reveal that the participant had positive perception towards online cooperation learning via breakout room in zoom application for writing skills. Another implication that can be derived from this study is that even in virtual classroom cooperative learning improves the participants’ social and problem solving skills. Thus, online cooperative learning is recommended to improve MUET students and it is aligned with Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) to promote student centered learning and create critical thinking students.

Keywords: Online cooperative learning, writing skills, breakout rooms, Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

Introduction

It is known that it is important to have a certain level of proficiency in English language as it is used as a language bridge globally. Most Malaysian students receive their formal English language education from they are seven years old up until they are 17 years’ old which is a minimum of 11 years of exposure towards English language in a formal education setting. However, English language proficiency among Malaysian students are still below satisfactory levels (Yunus et al., 2018). To acquire a language there are four main skills which are listening, reading, speaking and writing. Among the four skills, writing skills have the tendency to be the most challenging skills to be acquired by the ESL students (Nair & Sanai, 2018). Students face difficulties in fulfilling writing task requirements as their proficiency of the language is low (Yusuf et al., 2019). Phan and Ganapathy (2020) believe that ineffectiveness in learning writing at school is known as one of the factors that Malaysian students English proficiency is still low.
Students have the tendency to not complete writing tasks as it is difficult for them (Shah et al., 2011). Therefore, many researchers and teachers conduct cooperative learning to encourage students and improve their writing skills. Cooperative learning is one of the methods that promote students centered learning and number of researches have shown positive results of cooperative learning application towards ESL students’ writing skills (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018; Chandra, 2015; Siddique & Sarjit, 2016) However cooperative learning are often done face to face instead of through online learning.

Living in a community, communication and cooperation with each other are important in social life and academics. Chandra (2015) believed that, in every circumstance where people are being gathered in a group will train them to respect individual strength and weakness that allows them to contribute together towards the same goal. Implementing cooperative learning in a classroom not only improves students’ academic and knowledge development but their social skills. Numbers of research have shown positive outcomes in implementing cooperative learning towards students’ performance (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018; Bilen & Tavil, 2015; Davidson & Major, 2014; Nair & Sanai, 2018).

Aligned with Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) that aims to have pedagogy that is inclined towards students centred learning, cooperative learning is known to be part of the student centered learning methods. Researchers are still looking for new methods to improve Malaysian students’ proficiency towards English language as English language is important where it is widely used as the bridge of communication globally and a lot of academic advancement requires good comprehension of English language especially in the level of pre-university and above.

This study intends to implement cooperative learning through an online platform. As technology advances, a large amount of research in implementing cooperative learning through online platforms has been done (Adkins-Bowling et al., 2001; Aghajani & Adloo, 2018; Korkmaz, 2012; Nair & Sanai, 2018). There are four elements of cooperative learning that should exist while the activity is being conducted which are positive interdependence, individual accountability, face to face interaction, and interpersonal communication and social skills (Roger & Johnson, 1994). By implementing cooperative learning methods in online platforms the element of face to face often being discarded due to the technology limitation. However, with breakout rooms features that are provided by Zoom applications, it is not possible to include the element of face to face in online cooperative learning. Hence this study hopes to explore the student’s experience and perspective after undergoing writing activity via an online cooperative learning using breakout room feature that is provided in the Zoom application.

Literature Review

Writing Skills in ESL and EFL Context

English as Second Language (ESL) learners and English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, indicate that the students’ native language is not English language. Acquiring a first language to a fair degree of success is a natural capability of most human beings (Oxford, 1994). However, learning a second or foreign language takes extra effort and a variety of methods to be a competent user as the vocabulary and sentence structure of the language will be different. In Malaysia naturally English language is treated as a second language, thus the students are required to master all four skills of the language which are listening, speaking, reading and writing (Yusuf et al., 2019).

All four skills have their own challenges, however writing is well known to be the toughest skill to be mastered among the other skills (Yusuf et al., 2019). The researcher added that. Good writing involves a certain standard in the form of grammar, syntax and word choices. Good mechanics are also part of good piece writing with excellent organization of paragraphs and content. Writing is considered as a creative skill as it involves the process of thinking out of the box, exploring and discovering ideas.

The importance of writing skills has been acknowledged widely as it is a skill that is inclusive of many aspects such as thinking, planning, reinforcing vocabulary, grammar, improving editing skill and revising skill (Yunus & Chien, 2016). Besides, by improving writing skill, other skills such as
listening, speaking, and reading improve simultaneously as all the skills are interrelated (Saed & Al-Omari, 2014). Writing activities automatically made learners explore, think and reflect in the targeted language which is English language for this study.

**Cooperative Learning**

Studies and theory of cooperative learning have been conducted as early as the 1920's (Slavin, 1980). However, cooperative learning is going through reestablishment globally including in Malaysian academics through MEB that is focusing on students' centred learning. As claimed by Slavin (1995), cooperative learning is a variety of teaching methods that requires students to be in small groups or at least in pairs to help each other in the academic development and aspect where they discuss, argue and interpret with each other to understand the topics given together. Nor & Samad (2006) described cooperative learning as a method that is socially structured to share information between learners.

In 1999, Johnson and Johnson came out with four elements of cooperative learning as positive interdependence, individual accountability, face to face interaction, social skills and group processing. In implementing cooperative learning, it is important to ensure the interdependence is positive instead of negative. Positive interdependence is known to be part of the factor that escalates individual achievement along with joint goals while negative interdependence causes a stunt or block towards the improvement in both individual and group (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Positive interdependence is one of the important keys to ensure the successfulness of cooperative learning (Korkmaz, 2012).

Most educators consider cooperative learning as completing tasks in a group (Nicole, 2002). However, cooperative learning is deeper than just group work where theoretically individual accountability is part of cooperative learning's important element. Poor execution of cooperative learning might cause some of the group members to be a freeloader (del Barco et al., 2017). Hence, even though cooperative learning is known for its student centred learning, educators have to act as facilitator and monitor their process to ensure task and discussion was done equally which lead to each individual learning and accountability. del Barco et al. (2017) believes that individual accountability of the students does not only depend on the teacher but the student's desire to learn and improve.

Face to face interaction is considered an important element in cooperative learning. Therefore, this is considered as a weakness when an educator tries to implement cooperative learning online. Face to face interaction is fundamental because some cognitive activities and interpersonal dynamics can only be developed by the process of supporting, helping, encouraging and praising between peers (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Face to face interaction has the ability to ease each other in the process of reasoning and making conclusions. Information that is conveyed verbally and nonverbal are considered important and face to face interaction allows students and educators to observe their improvement and development in completing tasks.

Social skills in cooperative learning are important as students need to communicate with each other throughout the process. Lack of social skills may lead to the existence of passive group members and this may cause motivation of other group members to drag down (Korkmaz & Yesli, 2011). Good interpersonal skill among the students increases the quality of their cooperative learning and positive motivation will develop between the group members (Patesan et al., 2016). Fifth important element in cooperative learning is group processing where each member contributes and discusses together towards the goal which can happen by using sufficient time to analyse instead of vague decision making (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Understanding the concept and elements of cooperative learning will ease the educator to implement this method and ensure all students are involved and have positive progress (Patesan et al., 2016).

**Cooperative Learning Model**

Cooperative learning activities (model) can be designed and adjusted to suit any level of Bloom’s taxonomy that is being targeted by the educator (Davison & Major, 2014). In 1956, Benjamin Bloom and associates came up with an order of thinking skills that is known as Bloom’s Taxonomy. It starts
from the lowest order of thinking skill which is knowledge, followed by comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation was considered as the highest in the order of thinking skills. However, Bloom’s Taxonomy was being revised in 2001 (Patricia, 2016). Revised taxonomy starts with remember as the lowest order of thinking skills followed by understanding, apply, analyse, evaluate, and create as the highest skills.

Main goal of cooperative learning pedagogy is to create an approach that switches students from working individually towards collaboratively which can promote their critical and creative thinking (Nair & Šanai, 2018). There are various types of models in cooperative learning, some require the students to work in pairs but most of the models require students to work in groups. One of the established models in cooperative learning is Student Team Achievement Division (STAD). STAD basically is an activity where few heterogeneous groups are formed to study together and have a common goal (Ishtiaq et al., 2017). STAD is one cooperative learning method that has been introduced early by Slavin during 1987. The STAD method is considered as one of the simplest cooperative learning methods that consist of five different components which are class presentation, group work, quizzes, scores of individual and team recognition (Slavin, 1994). This study will be implementing the STAD cooperative learning model to conduct the writing activity.

Online Learning

Online learning is part of E-learning that has been an interesting field to be explored by many researchers even before Covid-19 pandemic hit worldwide. Ultimately at the early age of E-learning, it is defined as teaching that was delivered via the internet, intranets or electronic devices CD-ROM or DVD (O’neil, 2008). However, in this study, the researcher is focusing on virtual learning, which is still under online learning using certain applications as a platform. Virtual means the process does not actually occurs in specific location but in a place where the system and it have similar dynamic and it have similar dynamic and aspiration as the real life (Mamun et al. 2020).

Online learning does not only involve the technical and methodological of the process but records of the learning management system (Grade et al. 2011). Therefore, in Malaysia, students’ records and certain information can be gained by the teachers and some authorities at the tips of their fingers. Each and every student in government primary schools and secondary schools are being provided with a personalised Gmail account so that even before pandemic virtual applications such as Zoom can be used. Thus, teachers and students can log in and communicate simultaneously on the platform without waiting time (Mamun et al. 2020). It is important for us to keep up with technology such as virtual class as technology is part of the elements that are globalising fast.

Past Studies on Online Cooperative Learning

There is much research done on cooperative learning in many areas including learning English language. In 2018, Mojtaba Aghajani and Mahso Adloo conducted research on online cooperative learning through telegram application. The advancement of smartphones has encouraged researchers to explore mobile assisted language learning including using cooperative learning methods. The researcher divides the sample into two groups, the first group will go through face to face cooperative learning and the second group using group chat on the telegram platform. The findings of the research show that post-test of the writing score from both groups does not show any big significant difference. However, it is worth noting that even though it was using an online platform the researcher claims that the students were actively engaged and improved their social skills. Nevertheless, the researcher did discard one of the cooperative learning element which is face to face, hence there is no analysis being done towards students’ body language and voice intonation.

Online cooperative learning shows better outcomes than learning online individually (korkmaz 2012). In a study titled a validity and reliability study of online cooperative learning attitude scale (OCLAS) by Ozgen Korkmaz (2012) it is shown that students prefer to work in groups rather than individuals. In this study the researchers were using google documents as the platform to conduct cooperative learning where the students may chat and edit each other’s work simultaneously. The outcome shows a
positive attitude towards online cooperative learning. The researcher did note that the face to face interaction element is missing in online cooperative learning.

In the early 2000s, online cooperative learning was being done in university forum platforms such as the study being done by Hutchison (2007) and Chen et al. (2006). Similarities of these two studies are the students can edit each other's work however the discussion did not happen simultaneously. From this, we can see that the improvement of online cooperative learning as a method that is able to be done in more interactive manner. However, face to face interaction elements of cooperative learning remain missing in this study which in this study hope to include and contribute in this field.

Methodology

This study was designed to be a qualitative study which aims to understand learners’ perception in having writing activity through online cooperative learning in breakout rooms via Zoom application. Schlimmer and Fisher (1986) stated that the intention of a case study is to dive deep in understanding the situation of those who are involved. Hence this study chose to have a case study format. 18 students at the age of 19 years old from a secondary school have been chosen to be involved in this study. Purposive sampling methods have been chosen to ensure it is aligned with the objective of the study for example their literacy towards technology are adequate to use the platform smoothly.

Two experts with 32 years of experience in their expertise field were being referred for this research to validate the instruments which are the lesson plan and individual interviewed questions. The students were preparing to take Malaysian University English Test (MUET) hence the lesson plan prepared for them is aligned with the MUET writing examination. The students were briefed and gone through six sessions of online cooperative learning. The students were required to write a journal at the end of every session. During the last session students’ journals were analysed and classified thematically. The researcher will look for keywords and separate the information through coding. Guest et al. (2011) suggested that field notes and participants’ journals should be analyse through keywords and coding to extract the data needed.

Open-ended questionnaires were given and individual interviews were also conducted after the last session of online cooperative learning and participants’ journal and individual interview where thematically analyse using Braun and Clarke (2012) six phases approach of thematic analysis. To ensure the reliability of the data Participants’ journals were being triangulate with the outcome of the open ended questionnaires and individual interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Participants’ Information on Source of Internet and Types of Gadget Used to Access Zoom Application

In this study, all of the participants were able to get internet access at home via a variety of sources. Figure 1 shows the participants’ source of internet used to access Zoom applications. Due to pandemic online learning is the new norm and since the participants coming from various backgrounds there were only 33% of the participants that have home Wi-Fi, 55% participants use mobile data as a source of internet and 11% participants actually depend on parent mobile hotspot to get internet access. Apart from that, only 39% have a personal laptop to attend the Zoom session while 61% are using the mobile to attend the session. Due to various sources of internet and different types of gadgets being used by the participants some of them did face technical problems such as poor internet connection.
Apart from that, in figure 2 shows the gadget used by the participants to access the zoom session, only 39% have a personal laptop to attend the Zoom session while 61% are using the mobile to attend the session. Due to various sources of internet and different types of gadgets being used by the participants some of them did face technical problems such as poor internet connection.

**Figure 2: Gadget used by the participants to access the Zoom session.**

The Perception of the Students Towards the Usage of Breakout Room via Zoom Application in Writing Skills

This section aims to discuss the objective mentioned above that leads towards answering the research question (RQ) which is what are the students' perception towards the usage of breakout room via Zoom application in writing skills. Three types of research instruments were being used and analysed in order to answer the RQ which were participants’ journals, open-ended questionnaires and individual interviews. All 18 participants’ journals were collected and each of them were being interviewed individually. The RQ were being answered through four themes which are teamwork to encourage brainstorming and boost ideas, team roles and interaction, socializing skills and face to face interaction. In this discussion themes found from participants’ journals will be indicated as PJ, opened-ended questionnaires as OQ and individuals interviews as IV.
Teamwork encourages brainstorming and boosts ideas

It is common for cooperative learning activities to be conducted in a group. The findings show that the majority of the students prefer to work in groups. This was concluded through a number of positive statements collected from participants’ journals and open-ended questions. The outcome proved that by having team members to discuss, they have more ideas to complete the task given to them. As P14 stated in her PJ “I feel nervous because my grammar is very bad but never mind because there were group members in group to help” and choose to have group tasks in her OQ. This is aligned with Johnson and Johnson (2009) who believe positive interdependence is one of the keys to a successful cooperative learning.

When all team members have the same goals, the interdependence between the group members becomes positive (Johnson & Johnson, 2005) As P16 indicate in her PJ “This time my class was so much fun because I was able to help friend to get an idea compared to the first day when i was still fuzzy” and P2 also in her PJ “I was able to do well with the help of my team members who help me to be able to present well” which show that interdependence between individual with their teams to help each other not only benefit the individual that receive help but the one that giving help. P2 indicated in her OQ that “I choose to do it in a group, because this helps me to give ideas for writing.” which indicated that after 6 sessions of cooperative learning she did receive benefits in having group activity.

Besides, when the participants have goals it encourages them toward constructivist and critical thinking (Hall, 2007). Johnson and Johnson (2005) stated that it takes more than one person to create social interdependence and positive contribution with each other. This can be seen in PJ P13 when she said “I feel happy with my team members as I have shared a lot of points on this topic as much as I can. My group members also gave us cooperation. They didn't say that they cannot do it. They just give answers.” which indicated a positive impact when a group has a goal and gives positive contribution. P13 also agrees in her OQ that having groups has benefits “Yes. Because they can help me in giving ideas” in generating ideas. Hence, by having goals that promote participants’ critical thinking, being in a group pushes them to gain more ideas to achieve their target.

However, positive interdependence does not occur with all participants as the minority of the participants did face negative interdependence. This is due to their team members' attitude that refuses to carry the fair share of workload and causes demotivation to others. It can be seen from P11 PJ which stated “I prefer doing individual tasks because if it is in group work I will end up being taken advantage of and do all the work. I can conclude teamwork is so important in completing group work.” and P4 PJ “I felt so disappointed with my groupmate attitude because they would leave it all to me in completing the task even if it is group work.”. This justify Johnson and Johnson (2005) statement which imply that negative interdependence can occur when a group member who refuses to have the same goals with others.

In this study, the researcher discovered that as teachers were able to access each and every breakout room from time to time, negative interdependence can be reduced as the participants do feel the obligation to be involved in the discussion when being monitored. This indicate another important element of cooperative learning which is individual accountabilities should be taken seriously as according to del Barco et al. (2017) if cooperative learning was not being executed properly there will be freeloader in the group.

Team Roles and Interactions

Nor and Samad (2006) emphasise that to ensure the efficiency of a group, it should have roles to be taken by each member. By understanding their roles, goals that were given on the participants will be achieved faster and smoother. It was important to ensure all participants in a group were functioning and contributing as it helps all participants to enhance their critical and creative thinking (Nair &
Sanai, 2018). Therefore, being able to divide the task and work in a group with different types of responsibility was important to ensure the cooperative learning process was successful.

When the participants were divided into groups the teacher does not assign team leader or any roles for each and every team member. From the journal it is shown that the participants were able to step up and take certain roles to ensure the group work was done systematically. As P15 wrote in her PJ “We all divide our own tasks to do and this week I am in charge to sending the complete essay to teacher Putri”. In order for cooperative learning activities to be done successfully each team member should be aware and understand their role in the activity (Canabate et al., 2019). It is clear in the findings that the students do take roles in dividing tasks and checking on their team members.

Individual accountability happens when the students do not only depend on the teacher but their own initiative to learn and improve (Astuti & Lammers, 2017; Randall, 1999). As in this study the teacher does not assign any roles, the initiative to divide tasks came from participants’ desire to learn and improve. This is highlighted in P11 PJ “I’ve chatted with all of my groupmates personally and I’ve asked them what they want to do or not. I’m a bit strict with them this time because I don’t want the last week’s things to happen anymore. For this session my group is better than last week” which shows her sense of individual accountability to step up and ensure her learning process occurs smoothly. In P11 IV she said “English language is my favourite subject so this class is my opportunity to improve. I have no choice but to be strict with my group members. I think this is also because I am the students’ representative”.

The finding indicated a few roles have been created by the participant either intentionally or unintentionally such as in P8 PJ “As the teacher gives us title before class this week, I decide to divide the task even before the class begins”. From the findings it is shown, a few roles that according to Nor and Samad (2006) should exist in cooperative learning dynamics are task master that divides tasks between group members, checker who ensures all work is completed and gatekeeper who makes sure everyone participates. Communication with peers does increase students’ individual accountability performance (Astuti and Lammers, 2017).

**Socialising Skills**

It is known for cooperative learning to not only improve the targeted learning skills but also enhance the involved participant social skills (Chandra, 2015). From the participants’ journals we can observe that the majority of the students learn to understand other people’s character and learn how to handle the obstacles given as they go through the Zoom sessions. P14 stated in her PJ “Hence, from the class I have learned something new that we must cooperate when working in a group because from that we can help each other.”. P14 OQ she believed that group work can help each other's performance.

The findings showed that the participants are able to adapt and improve their social skills through cooperative learning activities. P6 PJ stated that “My favorite activity was when the teacher divided us into small groups. This was because I can cooperate with my classmates that I am not close to.”. P6 added in her IV that she is not a social butterfly so group work is a good challenge for her to socialise. This skill is important as Korkmaz and Yesil (2011) states that failure of socializing with the group member in cooperative learning may cause the motivation of the group member to decrease and task could not be completed.

The findings did indicate that some of the participants take time to develop social skills such as P8 PJ “At first we don't know how to communicate well actually but after that we get used to it.” and P5 PJ “When in the group, I was very awkward and did not know how to communicate with them but with the task given we had a topic to discuss and became closer”. This indicated that the participants socialised with their team members and developed diplomatic skills. Good social skills allow students to develop ways of handling confrontations, taking points and rejecting points of other team members (Buchs & Butera, 2015).
Face to Face Interaction

Even though online cooperative learning was being explored in the early 2000s, it is not as the traditional method as the participants involved were not able to communicate face to face. Breakout rooms provide opportunities for the participants to have face to face interaction despite the fact that they were in different locations. The participants were interviewed if the breakout room feature helped to ease their group discussion. All of the participants agreed that it is so much easier than discussing in a text group chat. P9 IV stated that “I prefer a traditional classroom but if the choice is between chat group and breakout room, I will choose breakout room” and P12 IV “Being able to see my team member face definitely help compared to discussion in WhatsApp group as I have to wait for their respond and sometime they just went missing”.

This breakout room feature emphasizes Johnson and Johnson (1994) key element of cooperative learning which is face to face interaction. The researchers added that face to face allow the group member to learn not only words but body language. This theme is important as face to face is the element that has been missing in online cooperative learning for years. In the early 2000s, Chent et al. (2006) and Hutchison did conduct an online cooperative learning by having students edit each other's work but it did not happen simultaneously. In 2012, Korkmaz did an online cooperative learning via google doc which students can edit and chat but still can't interact face to face the same with study conducted by Aghajani & Adloo (2018) as there was no feature face to face interaction but simultaneous chat in telegram platform. The past researchers did admit that the existence of all key elements in cooperative learning is important to ensure the effectiveness of the learning and improve the targeted skills as numbers of research has proven with the existence of cooperative learning key elements bring successful outcomes (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018; Bilen & Tavil, 2015; Davidson & Major, 2014; Nair & Sanai, 2018). Therefore, the findings did prove that breakout rooms did ease online cooperative learning.

Conclusion

This study was conducted with an objective to explore students’ experience and perspective after undergoing writing activities via online cooperative learning using breakout room feature in Zoom application. Data were collected from two instruments which were participants’ journals and individual interviews. After analysis of data, the study can conclude that using breakout room in Zoom application to conduct online cooperative learning in order to improve writing skills does give positive impact. Mainly having students divided into breakout rooms does help them to help each other and come up with ideas in completing their writing task. The students also find that discussions in breakout rooms are a bit more effective compared to having discussion through text. They have gained a number of benefits such as improvement in using technology, skills in generating ideas in writing activities and handling conflict in order to achieve targeted goals. In the breakout room it is not hidden from the teacher or facilitator, hence the activity still can be monitored and educational. Since the pandemic, online learning is unavoidable, this feature allows small group discussion without ‘waiting time’ that would require if discussion were being done via text or email. However, as technology evolves there is more room to explore and improve. Apart from online cooperative learning to improve students’ writing, future researchers and teachers can consider exploring breakout rooms to have gamified activities and collaborative activities. Additional features such as filters and emoticons in the Zoom application does help the students enjoy and engage towards their discussion even more. Thus this additional feature can be considered in future research too. As we are heading towards the MEB goal of having a student centered learning environment, this method is recommended to encourage students to have a higher level of thinking while the teacher exists as a facilitator.
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