Student-Centered Interactions within an ESL Classroom using Online Breakout Room

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses student-centered strategies within an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom context, more so now that we are still experiencing and yet to recover wholly from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is note-worthy that the use of online breakout rooms within an online web conferencing platforms (such as Zoom, Slack, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Skype), seem to become one of the best tools that are readily available to instructors within their several classes. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the perceptions of some of these students regarding the use of online breakout rooms during class teaching, explicitly in relation to their In-Course Research Proposal project in English language. This study reviews possible empirical studies on the effectiveness of active learning techniques such as breakout rooms within different contexts (e.g., Moorhouse, 2020; Saltz & Heckman, 2020; Martin & Parker, 2014). The methodology employed in this study consists mainly of quantitative analysis, using a handful of survey questionnaires and qualitative analysis, using semi-guided interviews which were collated during some of the Technical Writing online Zoom classes. Interestingly, the data show that most of the students find the use of online breakout room sessions quite exciting, innovative during the class lessons, and as a motivating tool in fostering class attendance and participation. Thus, the paper provides insights into student-centered innovations as well as contributes to the field of e-learning and teaching in Bahrain and the Middle East higher education sectors at large.

KEYWORDS – Classroom, COVID-19 pandemic, English as a Second Language, Online Breakout Room, Student-centered Interactions, Technical writing, Web conferencing tool,

1 Introduction

English projects as the widely spoken foreign language due to its global influences and prestigious position like in the Gulf region. Since Arab nationals speak Arabic as their official and national language, it is crucial for English as a Second Language (ESL) students to communicate effectively within a classroom context, but this can at the same time be very difficult (Al Ghazali 2017).

It is noteworthy that teaching ESL students can be more challenging now even as the world experiences a global pandemic, which in this present time, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Moorhouse, et al., 2021). This pandemic changed the world through the implementation of social distancing, washing and sanitising of hands, and wearing of face masks guidelines to the experience of full or partial lockdown in some countries. As a result, there is an exigent need for ESL teachers to intentionally shift from the traditional, systematic, physical or rather face-to-face style of engaging students in group activities to a more contemporary, active, and safer online grouping platform within the ESL classroom context (Kumar et al., 2020; Cheung, 2021; Moorhouse, 2020).

According to Saltz & Heckman (2020: 227), "breakout room is a form of peer collaborative learning where students synchronously work together in small groups". In other words, the use online web conferencing tools (such as Zoom, Slack, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Skype) are appropriate to support small group activities especially during this period. Hence, the use of online software like the use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams for breakout sessions to promote togetherness amongst students, are readily available to ESL teachers in their several online classrooms (Miller et al., 2021).

The study examines the following research questions: (1) To what extent do ESL students support the use of online breakout rooms during class teaching? And (2) What impact does online breakout rooms depict amongst ESL students? The significance of the study comes from the fact there is paucity of research on online breakout room within an ESL classroom context in Bahrain. More so that, lack of adequate information from ESL students' perspectives on the efficacy of these online breakout rooms in their different course subjects especially during this pandemic era. As such, a total of thirty-five (35) students who were enrolled in the Technical Writing course participated in the study by answering survey questions and responding to interview questions on the use of online breakout rooms. This paper provides insights into student-centered innovations as well as contributes to the field of e-learning and teaching in Bahrain and the Middle East higher education sectors at large.

The study depended mainly on the use of survey questionnaires due to time constraints. The researcher relied on her observations during the Technical Writing Course online breakout room sessions over a three-month Trimester period.

2 Literature Review: Online Breakout Room

This study presents a review of literature on online breakout rooms across multifarious contexts within and outside the Kingdom of Bahrain.

2.1 Empirical Studies across multifarious contexts

Saltz & Heckman (2020: 230) states that the sentient use of online breakout room serves as real-time, learning guide which encourages "learner-learner interactions" and has now become a valuable resource for collaborative learning. Their study focused on the effects of using Structured Paired Activity (SPA) within a breakout room, as it provides structure within breakout rooms and positively modifies student behaviour. It is expected that the use of online breakout room in this study would reflect the impact of student-centered interactions.

Chandler (2016) notes that a breakout room is a virtual space which is separate from the main online meeting room or a synchronous virtual classroom (Martin & Parker, 2014). Similarly, Beirch (2015) notes that the use of breakout room applied in the live virtual environment is as effective as in the physical classroom. Chandler's study identified the benefits of using breakout rooms to enable small group work, in terms of facilitating collaborative learning, peer-to-peer support, empowering students and giving the tutor a break from presenting in the session. It is expected that this study will reflect similar benefits in terms of collaborative learning especially within an ESL classroom context.

Some other scholars have explored the use of online breakout room either through manual or random groupings within different classroom contexts such as computer programming (e.g., Miller et al., 2021), medical clinical examination (Hannan et al., 2021; Franklin et al., 2014), science / pharmacy practice (Badreldin et al., 2020; Wright, 2021), engineering programme (Barr et al., 2020), and nutrition class (Lougheed et al., 2012).

2.2 Empirical Studies within the Arab world

In Ahmed et al. (2020)'s study on teaching medical education online in Egypt, they highlighted the use of breakout room function during group work were teachers, as participants could use the share white board function and to design their work as they would do on a flip chart. However, these breakout rooms were timed according to the designated time for the activity and participants were given a countdown of two minutes at the end of the activity to comment on their work when they returned back to the main room. It would be quite fascinating to find out in this present study if similar collaborative learning using online breakout room to promote student engagement, not necessarily teachers, plays out here in Bahrain.

Similarly, Kumar et al. (2020) explored the use of recorded Zoom classes and MOODLE for evaluation using faculty and student's feedback on curricular adaptations implemented at the College of Medicine and Medical Sciences, Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain (CMMS-AGU) during the COVID 19 pandemic. Their study revealed the effectiveness of these platforms for conducting online Objective Structured Clinical Examination OSCE sessions. However, the use of breakout rooms were used to introduce team based learning (TBL) and for clinical faculty development workshops on conducting virtual OSCE examinations. There seems to be noticeable differences in terms of context and purpose of the use of breakout rooms from this present study. Also, these studies in the Arab world (Egypt and Bahrain) depict no possible linkages of online breakout rooms in relation to what might be culturally applicable in Bahrain and the Arab world at large. Nevertheless, the fact that online breakout rooms were employed at some point during these faculty trainings are worth noting.

2.3 Benefits and Setbacks: Online Breakout Room

Kohnke & Moorhouse (2020) in their study highlighted the fact that in terms of student-centered interactions, Zoom's online breakout room platform, students can use language productively, produce meaning-focused output and engage in student-student interaction. Within a session, students can be divided into small groups or pairs to engage in spoken language practices, discussions, role-plays, complete group tasks and request the teacher to join (González-Lloret, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). This seems to reflect on the study as teachers can create opportunities for their students to develop peer interactions without fear of making grammatical errors in their language use thus, improving their second language acquisition skills.

Nevertheless, there may be challenges which could make online breakout rooms less appealing as Beirch (2015) states that breakout sessions and small group activities require more pre-work and organization in a virtual setting for both the teachers and students. This implies that, there may be time constrains in grouping, assigning and letting students join their various rooms. Some of these setbacks include: lack of technical support, inability to manipulate tools, group discussions require more time, difficult to monitor; students might not be interested to self-nominate themselves; respond to questions or provide opinions in the main room due to the lack of paralinguistic cues (e.g. Peachey, 2017; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020).

3 Methodology

The data adopted the sequential mixed methods approach in collecting and analysing the data (Alhammad, 2017). Quantitatively, the data relied mainly on survey questionnaires which had six (6) multiple choice questions and was distributed online among a handful of about fifty (50) students enrolled in Technical Writing course in two of the course sections which the researcher was the class teacher. However, only thirty-two (32) students completed the survey questions. Qualitatively, the use of semi-guided follow-up interview to solicit the students' personal views on online breakout rooms, with three (3) students as participants. The questionnaires focused on mainly the use of online breakout room for example, class participation and discussion, assistance and clarity in the class lessons, applicable in other subjects, and an avenue for creating friendships within the classroom. For ease of interpretation, Microsoft Excel pie chart was selected to analyze the data due to the ease of use and its capability to produce the necessary output.

4   Results / Findings
4.1 Questionnaire Analysis
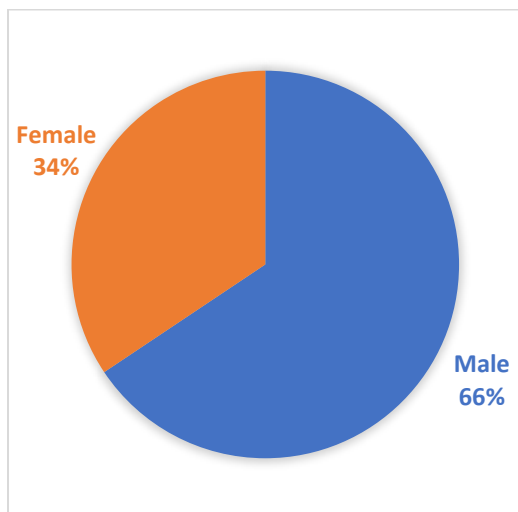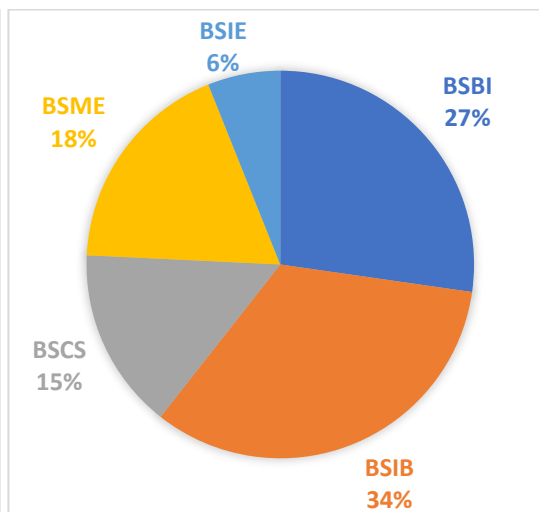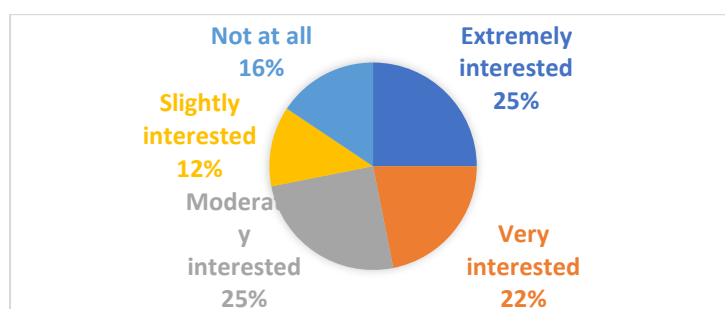
Figure 1

Gender

Figure 2

Degree Programme

As mentioned in the earlier section, the demographic profile included 32 respondents from each gender, who took a course on Technical Writing. *66%* were male and *34%*, female students taking up different Bachelor degree programmes at AMA International University-Bahrain. The data shows the distribution of these students across their multifarious Bachelor of Science degree programmes which include; *27%* studying BSBI (Business Informatics), *34%*, BSIB (International Business), *15%*, BSCS (Computer Science), *18%*, BSME (Mechatronics Engineering), and *6%*, BSIE (Informatics Engineering) as shown in *Figures 1* and *2* respectively. The findings in terms of distribution of students reflect the samples from the researcher's section in the aforementioned university here in Bahrain. Hence, it might be difficult to generalise the findings in this present study as similar to what transpires in other institutions except through further research or participant observations.

Figure 3

Were you interested in participating and discussing topics on Technical Writing using online breakout rooms?

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In terms of the students' interest in the use of breakout room during class lessons, *Figure 3* indicates that although this was the first time that they have been exposed to this type of classroom activity. As shown in the data, most of them about *84%* of found it quite an interesting new development.

Figure 4

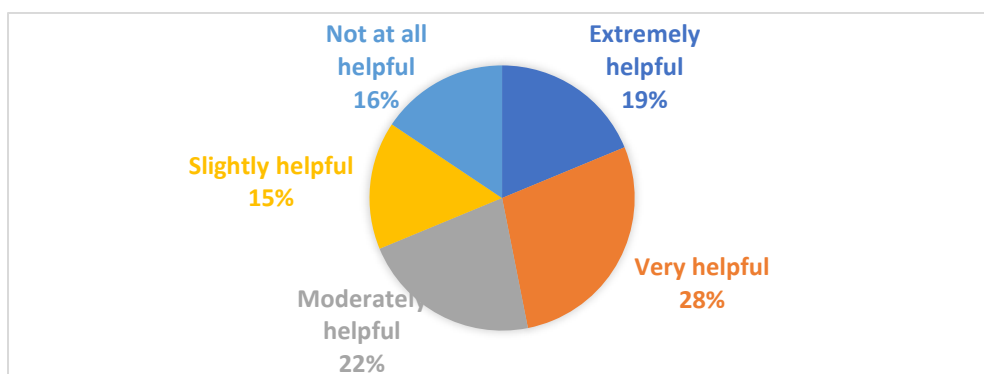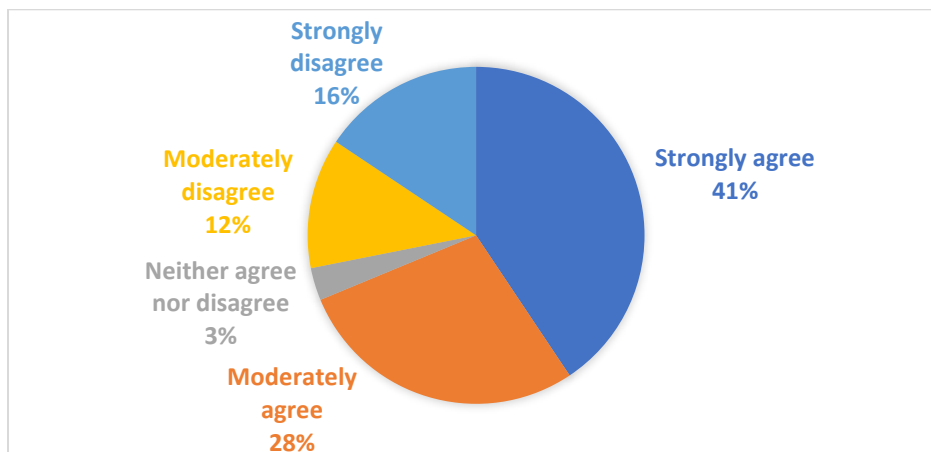*How helpful was the online breakout rooms for your course project?*

Figure 5

Do you agree to the use of breakout rooms during other classes or subjects?

Figures 4 and *5* with an approximate of *84%* and *70%* respectively, affirm that most of the students found the online breakout room helpful in discussing and sharing ideas with their course mates. Also, they could request the course teacher to join them in their various rooms whenever they require further clarity on their tasks (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). Thus, the students' affirmative responses to the use of breakout rooms during other classes or subjects, likely indicate that they would be able to work independently, increase their motivation, share ideas among themselves, and perform better in their different subjects.

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Figure 6

Do you think online breakout room is effective for interacting in small groups, making new friends, and meeting your colleagues?
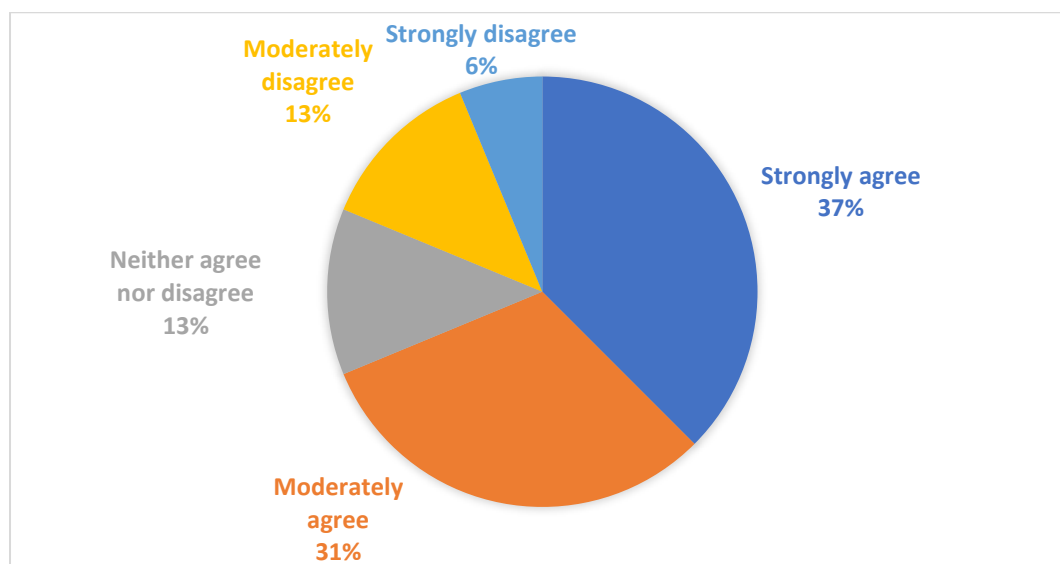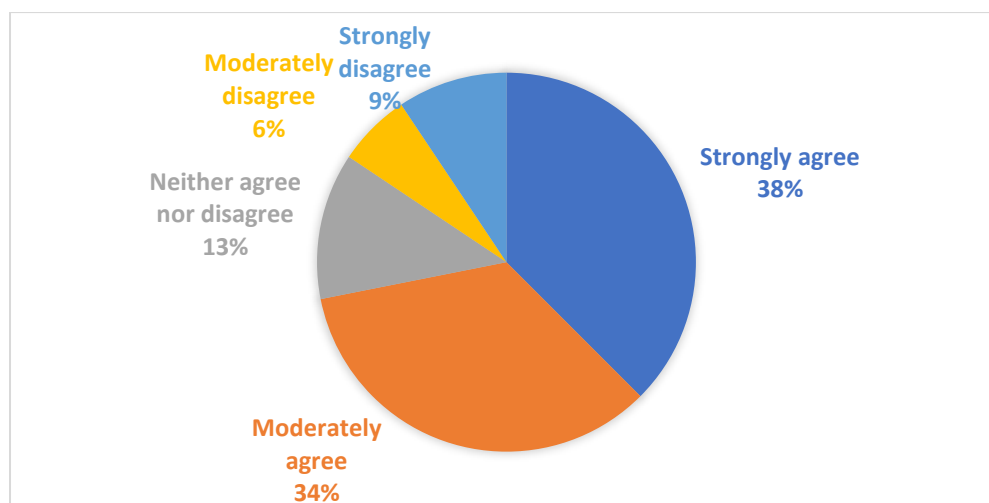

Figure 7

Do you think online breakout room is effective for explaining of topics, class discussions, and for speaking in your native language other than in English?


Interestingly, in *Figures 6* and *7,* with over *70%* and *80%* respectively, students develop friendship, have the opportunity during the time they spend in their online breakout rooms. These interactions help them to interact in their mother tongue (mainly in Arabic) as they are free to express themselves and speak freely to one another. Sometimes, these informal interactions within the online breakout rooms transcends to real friendship outside of the classroom context. Thus, online breakout room promotes collaborative learning and interaction, which allows students despite the distance between them a rare opportunity for peer-to-peer contact, which can be invaluable in building relationships and confidence (Chandler, 2021).

Figure 8

Overall, how would you rate the use of online breakout rooms during the class?
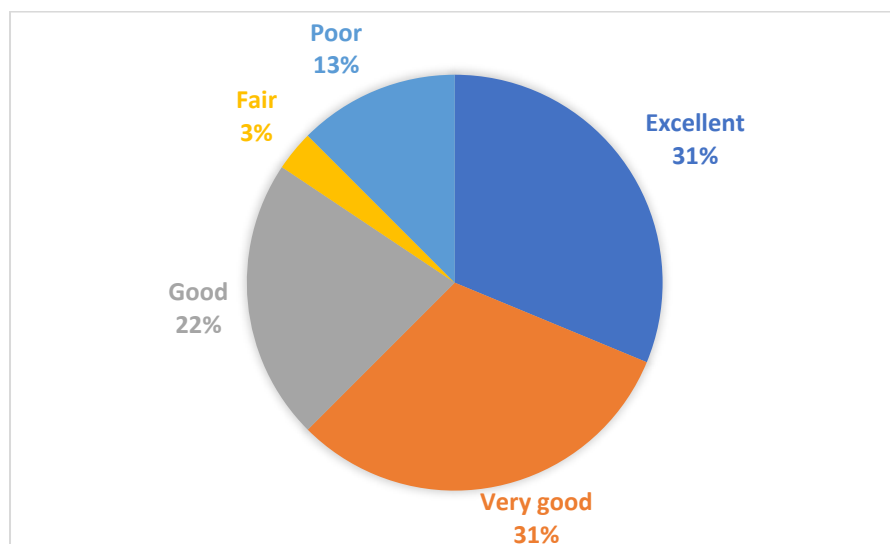
Thus, most of the students found the online breakout rooms very useful as shown in ***Figure 8,*** with over ***80%***. Also, as revealed in the data, using online breakout rooms enable students to be more relaxed, excited to interact with each other, and provide peer-to-peer support both during and after time in breakout rooms.

4.2 Interview Analysis

As indicated earlier, three (3) students commented on their overall evaluation in support of the implementations of online breakout sessions:

> *"It's teamwork, so it's more helpful for us, not all the work is on us, we are doing it together".*

> *"It's a very sure innovative idea, but for shy students it's better to group them together with those they know, than random selection".*

> *"The breakout room is a very good method, but the implementation should be modified to allow students to sometimes choose their rooms with their friends or make new friends since we are always at home doing zoom classes".*

These comments reveal that online breakout rooms serve as a safe haven for shy students, provides them an opportunity to socialise with other students, and encourages students to work together.

5   Discussions, Conclusion, and Recommendation

It is noteworthy that the use of online breakout room is not only beneficial to the students, but also to the teachers who are able to observe the progress of their students, sort out their concerns and queries within the class as they can join the groups during the class lesson as affirmed by González-Lloret (2020) and Moorhouse (2020). Although using online breakout room within an ESL classroom might be sometimes difficult to implement, but with constant use during online classes have become an essential platform for collaborative learning. More so, for classes that exceed an hour time frame, using online breakout rooms would cover up for technical issues, grouping of students, assigning rooms, and allowing them to join the breakout rooms as Beirch (2015) notes in her study. Also, some teachers might not be able to adjust their lesson plans to support the use of breakout room during class

timing, but this could be explored during formative assessments as a means of engaging the students as active participants within an ESL classroom.

Howbeit, this study reflects the experiences and perceptions of some students in the researcher's section. Therefore, it should be interpreted with caution and the ideas shared here, may not be generalised to a wider ESL classroom population. Nevertheless, this study has investigated the effectiveness of online breakout room from the perspective of the students as well as the impact it has on the students. The data relied on survey questionnaires and follow up interviews from the students. Thus, it can be inferred that the findings revealed the effectiveness of online breakout room within an ESL classroom.

To sum up for best practices, the study recommends that teachers intentionally review their course lesson plans by intentionally implementing formative assessments that are suitable for online breakout rooms. In addition, they should allow students work in small groups within breakout rooms in order to develop their social skills within a hybrid or virtual classroom context. However, this would require skill, confidence, practice, creativity, and time management, but both teachers and students need to adjust to this new norm during this pandemic. Also, teachers should thrive to indulge their students by being deliberately proactive with all web conferencing tools that are currently provided by their academic institutions to support student-centered learning in this new norm. Thus, the effective use of online breakout room contributes to learning, increases student engagement, and makes ESL classroom sessions more interactive.

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