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The Effect of Online Interaction via Microsoft Teams Private Chat on Enhancing the Communicative Competence of   Introverted Students

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Abstract
The history of language education has witnessed the emergence of various approaches and methods to circumvent learning difficulties. Some of them were very effective and continue to be popular, whereas others were short-lived and less effective. The latest trend is technology-enhanced language learning, which became necessary during the recent pandemic. As a result, various learning platforms were created and tested to enhance online education. Despite the apparent disadvantages of online learning, it has undoubtedly produced a positive impact on learning styles. A notable change is the possibilities for individualised instruction and self-learning, which can provide additional support to introverted students. The major challenges introverted students face in second language acquisition are low self-esteem, lack of motivation and high anxiety. These negative attitudes often hinder successful language learning. However, one of the latest learning platforms, MS Teams Meeting, offers an additional feature for interaction known as Private Chat, which enables learners to communicate with their teachers and peers without disrupting the regular class. Besides, it helps students regulate the learning process according to their preferred time and pace and get extended one-on-one support from teachers. Moreover, this technology-based interactive tool facilitates asynchronous learning, thus enabling introverted students to overcome learning difficulties that act as affective filters and become independent learners. This small-scale experimental study shows that the use of Microsoft Private Chat for teacher-student interaction significantly contributes to the communicative competence of introverted students as it helps lower anxiety and boosts motivation and self-confidence.

Keywords: communicative competence, introverted students, learning styles, Microsoft Teams Private Chat, online interaction

Introduction

The rapid evolution in information and communication technology offers students ample opportunities for personalised learning mainly because of its interactive and dynamic nature. Students can now access rich multimedia content, vast online resources, social networking tools, or digital games to make their learning more engaging and independent. As the growth and development of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have influenced every field of education, it now plays a significant role in second language acquisition. Students can easily be motivated and involved in many learning activities related to their daily lives using the Internet and other communication technology. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has recently become an area of interest among researchers in ELT to investigate the effectiveness of ICT integration in second language acquisition and learners' Perceived Use (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEU) of various online learning platforms.

The Internet offers unlimited access to vast amounts of authentic materials on any topic and enormous opportunities to interact with anyone across the globe. Students can now search for information and clear their doubts without depending on their teachers. Teeler and Gray (2006) call the Internet "a vast virtual library". It allows learners to interact with people beyond borders, including native speakers. Communicating with native speakers of English will help ESL students improve their fluency and get a lot of native expressions and styles in the English language. Johnson (2001) states that as the Internet facilitates global communication, online resources could be utilised for second language learners to engage in communicative activities in a student-friendly and stimulating environment.

With the advent of smartphones and other sophisticated communication devices, there has been a drastic change in our society's social and cultural scenes. These changes are also reflected in students' attitudes towards learning, classroom behaviour, and learning styles. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in second language education facilitates self-directed and collaborative learning. It can make the teaching process well suited to the learning styles of the so-called digital natives of the 21st century. It extends academic lessons beyond classroom walls, increases student engagement, and facilitates continuous interaction. Students who use social networking tools are often forced to use the English language for communication, and it does not make any demarcation of geographical boundaries for them. As a result, most of them voluntarily engage in fruitful discussions on several topics of their interest and communicate with many people, including native speakers of English.

Dudeney (2000) rightly remarks that the Internet is not merely a source of authentic material in English but also home to comprehensive information about all sorts of topics within the classroom and professional knowledge for teachers. The Internet can be used as a new form of literacy. Students can use it to improve their language skills, communicate, research, and even publish their works online. It also gives students enough opportunities for blended learning. By using the Internet, students can register for online courses for free and get assistance from both the in-class teacher and an online instructor. Some educators argue that using the Internet in class has many educational benefits. It helps teachers use games and simulations in class, which will allow students to picture themselves in career paths they would otherwise not have chosen. Games and simulations offer students a way to connect what they learn in class to real-world situations in a safe and low-cost environment.

The integration of technology in language education has benefitted introverted students too. However, teachers must be aware of how introverted students behave in the second language classroom to support their specific learning needs using technology. Educators should be mindful of how introverted students learn in the classroom setting and determine how best to integrate them in positive ways (Stewart, 2019). Most introverted students like to do individual tasks or work alone and would rarely take any risks

in learning. They are not comfortable working with large groups. However, they do well once placed in pairs or small groups. Introverted students do not like to be the centre of attention; instead, they want to observe things more closely and think twice before speaking about anything. They are always quiet, pensive, and introspective and prefer to listen more than talk (Cain, 2016). Good exposure and active interaction with people make introverted students anxious and stimulated (Martin, 2014). Introverted students always prefer to remain calm, enjoy loneliness, hate conflict, and like thoughtful discussions (Cain, 2012). Introverted students are often shy; they rarely take any academic risk or initiative in classroom discussions, mainly due to the fear of making mistakes. They are often less expressive and do not communicate openly in large groups. Although much research has been done about introverted students, there is still a dearth of reliable data about the use of online interaction to facilitate differentiated instruction. The current research was based on the following three questions:

1. How do introverted students respond when they use the Private Chat in Microsoft Teams Meeting?
2. What are the potential benefits of texts and voice messages in Microsoft Teams Meetings to language development?
3. How does online study create more opportunities for teacher-student interaction?

Literature Review

Electronic communication was integrated into second language teaching in the late 1980s. Since then, there has been much research on the effectiveness of ICT in second language acquisition. Most researchers agree that electronic communication brings equal participation among second language learners. Kelm (1992) discovered that computer-assisted classroom discussions were great equalisers of student participation. Face-to-face discussions are often unbalanced, with some students determining the topic or dominating the scene. However, electronic discussions provide better opportunities for all participants to express themselves. As the Internet is widely used to connect learners, it has led to a new trend in language education called 'online interaction and exchange' (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012).

Students who are passive in face-to-face discussions tend to be more active in computer-mediated communication. Hartman et al. (1991). claim that electronic discussions help slow learners increase their communication with teachers and other students. Sproull and Kiesler (1991) found that electronic communication resulted in equal participation among students, and the low-proficiency learners benefitted most from this increased equality. Roschelle, Pea, Hoadley, Gordin, and Means (2000) believe that technology can enhance student engagement, interaction, collaborative learning, and exposure to real-world situations. Introverts feel relaxed and switched on when they are in quieter, low-key environments (Godsey, 2015). They can perform well when they withdraw from highly stimulating environments and work independently in calm settings.

MS Teams Private Chat is an excellent tool that guarantees a stress-free environment for introverted students to express themselves and maximise their learning opportunities without hesitation, and it also reduces language avoidance. It allows teachers to use reformulation techniques to give continuous feedback on their written language.

The popularity of computer-assisted technology in language education has established virtual exchange as a pedagogical approach (Dooly & Masats, 2020). Warschauer (1996) claims that electronic discussions tend to provide equal participation among students and that these students use more formal and complex language, both lexically and syntactically, in the discussion. Blake (2000) also argues that students who engage in online discussions can negotiate meaning with non-native and native speakers. Furthermore, it enables them to become autonomous learners who can easily find the information they need and interact with others to construct new knowledge. It can be particularly beneficial for low-achieving learners because

they can work cooperatively on projects online. Students who are usually introverted in class can be more engaged on social networking sites. Moreover, this helps them to have extended time for their studies. Hence, language teachers should integrate modern education technology into their lessons to motivate introverts, who are otherwise passive in communication.

Teaching introverted learners considering their personality types and learning needs is crucial for their success in the future. Knowledge and understanding of students' personal, behavioural, and learning problems are vital in enhancing second language acquisition and making them independent learners (Binu, 2021a). In the words of Stewart (2019), "A supportive environment encourages introverted students to participate and take risks beyond their comfort zone" (p.49). When teachers interact with students in an atmosphere of openness, the emotional base of students is honoured and accepted without prejudice (Binu & Nair, 2015). However, differentiated instruction is not always practical in the regular classroom, and the need to integrate technology to support introverted students arises.

Technology and Language Learning Strategies
With the integration of technology in language education, there has been a dramatic change in the way people communicate with others and gather information. The millennial generation students are techno-savvy, and they can quickly adapt to new technologies with a greater level of familiarity and comfort. This new generation's enthusiasm for Internet browsing, instant messaging, video conferencing, gaming, and file-swapping has altered the outlook of learning centres. Technology tools are a great asset to language learning (Diallo, 2014). In addition to school and home, the net generation students have a new space for learning called 'the third space'. It has reduced teacher dependence to a great extent and enhanced learner autonomy because it allows learners to move at their pace and gives opportunities to explore a vast repertoire of resources of their choice.

As most students spend a significant amount of their time in this 'third space', it has developed new language learning strategies. The Internet and digital dictionaries have reduced their habit of asking the teacher for clarification and verification. In vocabulary lessons, most students have ceased to depend on their teachers for spelling, pronunciation, part of speech, synonyms, antonyms, and collocations as they are readily available on their laptops, iPods, and mobile phones. Instead, they tend to depend more on technological learning tools than their teachers.

The emergence of information and communication technology has posed a real challenge to strategy instruction. Educators and researchers need to radically change their approaches to teaching and learning as students have changed the way they gather and store information. Technology makes information widely available and freely accessible. Hence, teachers need to update and equip themselves with modern educational technologies to assist their learners in developing and using appropriate learning strategies. Also, they need to reorganise course materials and develop new instructional strategies to make the learning process autonomous and learner-centred.

Studies indicate that networked technologies can be beneficial in the teaching of composition. It provides more chances for revisions, enhances collaborative learning, and facilitates peer editing. Mabrito (1991) found that students who were more apprehensive about writing benefited most from electronic peer feedback. Students who receive electronic feedback from the teacher or their peers can make multiple revisions to the text. They can also save the comments for future reference. Latest technologies enable teachers to give instant feedback to student writing, extending their guidance beyond academic hours.

The use of modern educational technology has produced promising results in supporting passive students in ESL classrooms. Introverted students who often hesitate to interact with their peers in the classroom are very active in instant messaging and mobile communication. Technology tools enable

language instructors to differentiate instruction and adapt classroom activities and homework assignments, thus enhancing the language learning experience of the heterogeneous group of students (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016). Now, language educators can expand language-learning opportunities to their students, regardless of where they live, their learning backgrounds or needs or the learning resources available. In addition, the various language learning applications in the digital world assist teachers in tailoring the content of their lessons and thus facilitating smooth language acquisition for their students.

Methods

For the current research, a qualitative method was employed to gain insight into the introverts' learning difficulties, learning styles, behaviour patterns, and pathways of language development within the context of a fifteen-week online course. Data for this study were collected mainly from multiple case studies. Besides, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis were the additional tools used by the researcher. Case studies play an important role in second language classroom research. They help to find out the various learning and behavioural problems of a student (Binu, 2021b). An in-depth case study method is widely used by researchers interested in qualitative research (Baskarada, 2014). A case study approach includes a thorough investigation into the matter under investigation by analysing the context, the agents and processes involved in it. It does not form any hypotheses or present the findings with detailed statistics. Instead, it unfolds the qualitative case study of a person or group with a contextualised human profile. The research findings cannot be generalised as the real world constantly changes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Since each interpretation is unique, the question of reliability and generalizability is irrelevant in a case study approach (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000).

Participants

This small-scale experimental study was conducted at the English Language Centre of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Al Mussanah, Oman. The English Language Centre (ELC) offers the General Foundation Programme (GFP), including English, Mathematics and IT courses. It is structured on a four-semester system, each semester comprising approximately 14 weeks and representing a level with associated learning outcomes. The English language course is divided into four levels: Level one, Level two, Level three, and Level four, namely Pre-Elementary, Elementary, Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate.   The average class size is 20-25 students. The main objective of the English language course is to prepare students to use English with ease and confidence for academic purposes and professional needs. The participants of this research were five introverted students enrolled in the Intermediate level of the General Foundation Programme.

Research Procedures

The introverts were identified based on their classroom participation during the first three weeks of their online course. When the mode of instruction was shifted to online during the pandemic, classes were conducted on MS Teams Meetings. The class comprised 25 students who were placed in five breakout rooms for the sake of group work activities. All the five introverts identified in the class were placed in one group. The criterion for dividing the class into small groups was not shared with the students as the researcher thought it would badly affect their self-esteem. Initially, students in the target group were hesitant to initiate a chat. Hence, the researcher adopted an initiation-response-feedback (IRF) method to manage group interaction. The interaction was usually centred around the activities done in class each day. For giving feedback on writing, the researcher used the option of individual chat. At the end of the experimental study, samples of chat history and recorded audio files were examined to re-confirm the research findings.

Findings

All students registered for the online course were encouraged to use MS Teams Private Chat to freely interact with their English language instructor using text and voice messages whenever they felt the need for language advice outside class hours, including weekends and holidays. Although it was against the general guidelines issued by the institution for online studies, the research had to slightly deviate from the policy for this experimental study. The researcher could notice gradual progress in the language used by introverts. In the initial days, the introverted students either hesitated to use this tool or relied only on words and short phrases for communication, but with time, they became more comfortable with using this platform, and it witnessed a significice increase in their Perceived Ease of Use (PEU). The experiment continued for about three months. When the treatment was over, students' scores in the productive skills of Speaking and Writing in the mid-semester and final exams were examined. The results indicated that the students achieved a significant improvement in formal exams as well as in classroom interaction. Furthermore, as the researcher used MS Teams Private Chat to give direct feedback on writing, students could immediately respond to teacher comments and revise their drafts.

Discussion

Most researchers believe that direct feedback is more effective for error correction. For example, Chandler (2003) found that students who received direct feedback showed a significant amount of grammatical accuracy in the immediate revision of texts. Reformulation as an error correction technique was also very useful in transforming students' casual responses to formal language. As most students tended to use informal language (SMS language), the common abbreviations of words and phrases used for instant chatting on social media sites, it was a strenuous task for the researcher to encourage them to use formal language for communication. At times, the researcher had to remind them to respond to the questions in complete sentences as it is the standard expected from intermediate students, especially in speaking exams.

MS Teams Private Chat creates ample opportunities for discourse analysis, and it also enables teachers to give direct feedback instantly. Reformulation, interactional recast, and editing were the main techniques employed by the researcher for corrective feedback on writing. When the teacher instantly re-constructed students' inaccurate phrases and short sentences to make them idiomatic without losing their content, students were able to understand their grammatical errors, which was evident from the self-repair some students made during the oral presentation and the final speaking exam.

It was observed that group chat often created affordances for language learning. When students used language in a new context outside the regular classroom, they got optimal opportunities for interaction, feedback, and recycling. Moreover, when students freely interacted in the group, the teacher often got a good chance to exploit learners' emergent language'. However, this spontaneous language that learners produce in real-time interaction required some modification. A discussion on some aspects of this emergent language often led to the natural development of language, which indicates that language instructors can make use of the learners' contribution to language learning by sharing some valuable aspects of such emergent language with the rest of the class.

As most students are active users of various social media applications, the specific features of MS Teams Private Chat have enhanced the Perceived Ease of Use (PEU) of this latest education tool. Another positive effect is how students receive feedback on their work, especially essays and assignments. Text and voice messages on MS Teams look very similar to the interaction modes on any social media platform. Hence, they are more appealing to young learners. Furthermore, the interactive session that starts with comments in the Chatbox often leads to an extended conversation allowing teachers to give detailed feedback and instant correction of learners' grammatical and lexical mistakes that may occur during the interaction. This personalised feedback session, which includes text, voice messages and emojis, lowers the affective filter in learners and increases their motivation. Also, the instructions and reminders given on MS

Team Private Chat seem to have more personal appeal than the general instructions given to the whole class in a physical setting. When students receive a reminder in the Chatbox, they feel obligated to follow the teacher's instructions. Moreover, these online learning tools have liberated the traditional learning process, confined to the four walls of the designated classroom within specific time limits, to the outer world with extended time, multiple opportunities and endless possibilities for fruitful interaction in the target language.

It was observed that as students received notification each time the teacher wrote a feedback comment in the Chatbox, they could immediately respond to it and ask for further clarification. This sort of written feedback often led to prolonged interactions that ultimately led to higher fluency in writing and an increased level of confidence in language use. The introverts who often hesitated to speak in class were found quite willing to share the audio file of their recorded speech. It could lower their anxiety level and increase their confidence to participate in group discussions and speak to the whole class on successive days. Also, it was noticed that after several weeks of interaction with the teacher and peers in breakout rooms, the introverted students slowly began to build their self-esteem and behave almost similar to their peers.

Conclusion

The present study investigated how technology-integrated personal interaction can contribute to second language acquisition in introverted students. The multiple features offered by Microsoft Teams Meetings enhance smooth language interaction. The most significant benefit of MS Teams Private Chat is that it helps learners develop a sense of intimacy with their teacher, which can lower the affective filter. Most introverts suffer from non-linguistic affective variables such as fear, nervousness, low self-esteem, lack of motivation, etc. Hence, Private Chat could be utilised as an excellent tool for differentiated instruction and language advice. In addition, as this platform allows the addition of more members to Private Chat, teachers can group all the students who require extra support. Interacting in a small group can lower anxiety, build self-confidence, and thus contribute to language development.

Recommendations

There is no doubt that technology enhances second language learning. However, unlimited access to online educational platforms also creates challenges for teachers and parents. Although there is much ongoing research on educational technologies and their effects on teaching and learning, most of them are based on small-scale data. Therefore, teachers must be cautious in making the right choices for their students because giving young students free access to online tools can be counterproductive.

One of the drawbacks of using Private Chat as a channel for interaction is that some students tend to depend heavily on it, ignoring the activities of the regular classroom. Such students were inconsistent in joining the class on time as they considered Private Chat an alternative to the regular class. They often missed their class and contacted the tutor at their convenience, usually in later hours, to clear doubts about the lessons they missed. Therefore, teachers should establish a monitoring mechanism and issue a code of conduct for using the Private Chat. In other words, there should be some restrictions and clear guidelines for instant messages using the Private Chat to make the interaction pattern more disciplined academic and purposeful.

The techniques used for corrective feedback, such as reformulation, interactional feedback or editing, should be chosen tactfully in order not to cause any embarrassment to learners. The fear of making mistakes or too many language errors highlighted by the teacher may force them to adopt an avoidance strategy for future interactions, especially when they are not very confident about the choice of lexical items or do not have adequate knowledge of the grammatical structures to complete the task. Therefore, error correction should be limited to those items which could impede communication.

Limitations

This small-scale research, as indicated previously, is an initial exploratory work and needs extensive follow-up. No formal research has been undertaken on the effects of MS Teams Private Chat on enhancing the communicative competence of introverted students. Hence this study could be considered pioneer research in this area. Limitations of time and the small sample size are the main drawbacks of this study. Not only that, but the researcher does also not present any quantitative data to validate the findings. However, as the purpose of qualitative research is to interpret the results and not generalise them, the absence of statistics does not invalidate the outcome of this research. What matters in qualitative research is the authenticity of internal validity ((Merriam, 2002). In short, MS Teams Private Chat could be used as an alternative tool for student-teacher interaction, differentiated instruction and language advice even when the mode of teaching is shifted back to the in-person mode. Finally, there is scope for further research in this area as an increased dependence on various online learning platforms by students and teachers will be the new normal.

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