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A Scoping Review: Developing a Collaborative Learning Culture for ESL Learners

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Abstract. This review investigates recent studies from the years 2005-2020 with empirical data on how online communication tools have been used to develop a collaborative learning culture for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in various countries. Some online communication tools that fall under the categories of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Ning, blogging sites such as Blogger and WordPress and, instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Skype and Yahoo! Messenger have been identified as the most commonly used tools in promoting collaborative e-learning among language learners. Based on the thematic analysis conducted on the articles, collaborative e-learning activities that are properly planned and executed are found to be able to increase learner autonomy, improve student engagement among one another, boost confidence and lower anxiety among students and promote optimization of synchronous and asynchronous combination tools in learning. Directions for further inquiry have been outlined in terms of teacher readiness to shift role into a facilitator or moderator and, proper planning of online assessment and evaluation methods.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020, is still continuing to shake up the world in unimaginable ways, affecting almost every industry and sector. One of the many sectors that has been greatly affected by Restricted Movement Orders (RMO), lockdowns and emergency states imposed worldwide, is the education sector. In Malaysia, students, teachers and school staff were given off compulsory emergency off-days and Work-From-Home (WFH) option up to a year, some institutions even longer [1], [2]. As for the higher education sector, a majority of university students had their lessons and assessments including final year projects and exams, converted into e-learning and e-assessment respectively. University students managed to scrape through the hard time with e-learning tools and techniques such as Microsoft Team, Google Hangout and other platforms that had allowed them to not only learn online from their lecturers and tutors, but also by sharing knowledge and information amongst themselves that promoted all the wonderful benefits of collaborative learning.

School students, on the other hand, were badly affected by school shut-down as school students and teachers have not been adequately trained for high dependency on the alternate platform of online communication for teaching-learning purposes. Although blended learning is rapidly gaining popularity among school level of teaching-learning, due to the lack of exposure to e-learning that is independent of classroom teaching, many reports state that syllabus

for many courses were shortened by simplifying or skipping certain topics on various subjects. This situation has also brought an important issue into the light; that online communication is perhaps still an untapped area in teaching-learning for Malaysian school students, which can otherwise prove to be unbelievably useful for teaching-learning in unprecedented situations [2], [3]. Many countries around the world have capitalised on collaborative learning on alternate platforms and have managed to sustain students' learning experience despite a health crisis. Sadly, Malaysian teaching-learning practices during Covid-19 pandemic have been found to have negatively affected students' interest to learn subject content as teachers have been reported to still impose theory-based and practice-based learning even on e-learning platforms.

The purpose of this review is to look into a few case studies to reveal the e-learning tools that can be used to promote collaborative e-learning (CeL) in Malaysian school environments as an alternate teaching-learning approach to engage students better with the subject content taught. This study aims to make appropriate recommendations and suggestions for more informed teaching-learning methods.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INTERNET AND LEARNING

The internet and learning generally, share a close relationship that has only grown stronger over the years. As mentioned earlier, online communication has started to influence how blended learning can be conducted for optimal benefits, especially in times of dire need such as a global pandemic. Blended learning, in this context, is not just a student undergoing e-learning by himself; it has wonderfully evolved into reaping the positive outcomes of learning with one another [4], [5]. When students are not able to reach their lecturers or tutors due to various reasons, they help each other to teach and learn while being at the comfort – or discomfort - of their own homes. Collaborative learning on online platforms became the way of studying, by choice, as students as learners themselves decide that it is the way to go [6]. Some Malaysian teachers who are dependent on teacher-centred pedagogies such as theory-based or practice-based learning, have not been able to cope well in switching to full-time e-learning during Covid-19. Students, who also developed heavy dependency on teachers due to extended exposure to the aforementioned learning approaches, have been found to struggle with learning and performing tests fully online. On that note, since Malaysia is recovering from this health crisis that has affected the education sector as well, it is now time to train teachers and expose students early to learner-centred pedagogies so that both stakeholders can adapt to various learning environments and platforms with ease. While it is undeniable that collaborative e-learning has got a lot to offer for both teachers and students, one problem remains unanswered; how can we bring this culture into the education system of school students that has been deeply rooted to remain largely dependent on classroom teaching?

LATEST TRENDS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The TESOL International Association predicted that e-learning and strategic learning would be two of the main drivers of ESL/EFL learning in the 21st century. As for e-learning specifically, Boraie (2018) expressed: "...because of the proliferation of tablets and smart phones, I believe that textbooks will disappear in a few years. Furthermore, the access to knowledge in terms of flexibility and mobility has changed drastically." [7, p. 16]. E-learning on its own can be defined and understood as learning method that utilizes electronic technologies to access educational curriculum outside of a traditional classroom. Researchers claimed that ESL and EFL students struggle to acquire the language in classroom because they lack the opportunities to practice in real contexts without the interference of their native languages. Online communication tools for this purpose, have always been a part of language learning due to reasons such as attractiveness, convenience and inclusiveness [8]. In fact, language courses are becoming more marketable as online programs given the stated reasons and more. Portals such as Babbel, LingQ, Udemy and many more provide different language courses with their own syllabus, catering to the needs of their learners depending on their purpose of learning; whether for academic, career advancement or personal development purposes [4]. It is notable that in 2020, Udemy alone had an impressive student enrolment rate of 40 million worldwide.

While many subjects offer programs that can be fully conducted online, e-learning for language acquisition is more commonly combined with face-to-face learning with a tutor or a teacher that results in blended learning, mainly because real-time discussion is considered as a key factor in learning [5]. There are also few more reasons for why blended learning is still the preferred way of language acquisition for many. Firstly, online language courses may be funded based on their own syllabus that may or may not have been developed based on learner needs. In this case, learners looking for a suitable online language course might find difficulty in finding a good resource out of so many

websites available. It is undeniable that many online programs now come with audio/visual companion materials and even live teaching. The nature of communication may sound or look personalized; however, to what extent it puts a learner to practice in real context for best results, is still a question. An environment that is not mediated by collaborative tasks results in uninspiring feedback from learners who reportedly prefer collaborative pair dynamics, high level of student engagement [9] and interactions with high proficiency speakers [10].

This is why, the current review is built on the premise that, online learning is best paired with collaborative learning where learners need not depend only on e-learning tools and/or teachers/. Learners may instead turn to one another to learn through online communication that promotes learning in authentic environment such as chatting, blogging and social networking.

THE SHIFT TOWARDS COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning (CL) is an educational approach where students attempt to learn something together by capitalizing on one another's knowledge, skills and resources [6]. This may involve student-student or students-teacher interactions where a social environment is created for the purpose of teaching and learning. Eaton (2010) claimed that the instructional format is a thing of the past; students want to be involved directly and actively in the learning process so that they can learn more and remember longer. It is to be noted that in a CL environment, a teacher's role does not disappear entirely; instead, it shifts to fit into the shoes of a moderator or a facilitator where students become the drivers of their own learning process. This way, CL establishes a comfortable and low-threat language learning environment in an ESL or EFL classroom where learning mainly occurs through *talking* [12].

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Ning and Twitter, instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Skype and Yahoo! Messenger, and blogging sites such as Blogger and WordPress have gained popularity as platforms to promote a learner community that strives through inquiry and discussion among peers for academic achievement. [13]. Thus, this review analyses the empirical data of some relevant recent studies published based on CeL approaches conducted in university and school settings to discuss the implications of implementation of CeL for learners and language learning.

METHODOLOGY

Articles selected for the review must be produced fully in English, peer-reviewed and published only in scholarly journals (trade journals, magazines, and newspapers are excluded) with student participants and empirical data between the years 2005 and 2020. Due to the limited literature available on school students, the review allows study participants to be from school and university background since the focus of the study is directed towards the tools and techniques of CeL rather than the students themselves. The range 2005-2020 was set so that the tools and techniques used in e-learning methods are relevant to the latest trends of teaching-learning. The selected studies also needed to address at least one of the review's research objectives.

Articles have been mined from electronic search databases such as Google Scholar, Science Direct, and ResearchGate, concerning the areas of *e-Learning*, *collaborative learning*, *online communication* and *language learning*. The exact keywords used to search for articles are "student" AND "e-learning OR collaborative learning OR online communication" AND "language learning". Search limiters were used to sort and screen articles. The last search conducted was on February, 2021. The content of the articles is analysed for patterns and reported using thematic analysis. Themes such as *e-learning*, *collaborative learning* and *language learning* that are relevant to the focus and objectives of this review are selected and discussed critically in the upcoming sections of this review. This review follows the conventions of thematic analysis [14] upon the completion of screening process of articles. The initial search hits more than 5000 articles. Then, the potential studies suitable for the study were identified (200 articles). Next the study excluded 150 articles, retaining 50 articles which were very relevant for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The macro level themes pertaining to the use of CeL tools and techniques for language learning were identified. It was found that the use of CeL tools and techniques involve several themes: a) promoting interaction, intimacy and trust; b) providing quick and easy access to learning materials; c) lowering dependency of students on teachers for direction and approval d) providing feedbacks that increase learners' awareness; e) promoting student autonomy; f)

promoting confidence among students; g) lowering anxiety and fear in learning among students; h) creating sense of community and dialogue in classrooms

Synchronous communication on the web happens where two (or more) participants share information in real time while participants in asynchronous online communication need not respond to data exchanges immediately [15]. A majority of the studies presented in this review were found to have utilized the online platforms that exhibited both modes of synchronous and asynchronous modes of web-based communication. Examples of common online platforms are Blog, Ning, Facebook, Skype and other private e-learning platforms at schools or universities. By utilizing platforms that are both real-time and not, students are given the opportunity to work on their assignments and participate in peer-assisted learning in their own time and convenience. A good example of a combination platform is social media where users can communicate in real-time and also in offline setting or delayed response instances. The *fluid environment* [16] has not only improved the relationships the learners may share with one another, it has also allowed the inclusion of out-of-class content, instructors that are not their own teachers, the computer (or any gadget) and also other digital objects. Since social media has a strong influence in students' out-of-school lives [17], teachers and content designers need not focus on providing training for students to familiarize with the resource; in fact, students may only need the slightest briefing on the task and they can take off on their own with better ways of executing the given tasks with the knowledge they already have on how social media works. A non-linear way of learning is promoted when students get to *not perform* the tasks immediately in real time; instead, they make examples out of what their peers have communicated in real time and understand ideas and concepts at their own pace to be shared at a later time, with a better output.

Secondly, Sotillo (2006) proved that corrective feedbacks were more effectively delivered through Yahoo! Messenger than classroom sharing sessions. Using the audio feature in Yahoo! Messenger, peers and tutors delivered indirect and/or implicit corrections in terms of grammatical explanations and linguistic forms where a successful uptake of 75% was recorded among the learners. In this instance, the students were able to incorporate feedback on their work into their revision because it was instant, clear and resourceful with useful links and examples embedded to the corrective feedbacks sent on the IM platform [19] rather than just red-ink scribbles of teachers on the students' notebooks. Collaboration and interactivity in this way is enhanced with the usage of social media sites that are currently already a part of the students' personal lives. However, it is to be noted that some students expressed their concerns of the usage of social media sites for learning because naturally the sites "are a little too social" [20] and irrelevant content can be distracting and addicting during learning. Some students preferred to keep their personal and academic worlds separate, in that sense.

Learner autonomy comes from students' tendencies of learning to learn, collaboration among learners and critical thinking [21]. It largely inspires and is inspired from the learner-centred approach in teaching-learning where almost all aspects of 21st century learning skills are cultivated. Although self-learning plays a huge role in giving learners the opportunity to own their learning and content, it does not mean that teachers are completely absent in the process of learning. In fact, the pressure on teachers intensifies as they take on the role of facilitators, moderators or supervisors and let go of their traditional responsibility of feeding the right knowledge and information to students [22]. However, from the students' perspective, being able to do more than just sit back and listen to their teachers apparently changes their learning style and this directly affects their motivation in learning. All the studies under this review showed empirical data supporting the notion that students are more excited to learn and participate actively in learning when they are not exactly being told what to do and how to do everything only for the correct results. Students of this era are risk takers; they feel challenged by the complexities of content that allows them to learn from mistakes and errors as well. When a learning activity is fully student-centred, students may face trouble with finding the right and reliable support; and more often, peers are not qualified to provide the right and reliable feedback or criticism as well. In this instance, learner autonomy that depends heavily on *invisible assistance* [5] may affect the students' learning negatively in ways that may result in wrong or extremely delayed understanding of a topic. This study is a good example to show how intercultural online activities can be used to bridge and engage students from different cultural backgrounds while putting them to learn in authentic environment to practice the language. Almost in all the chatrooms designed by the researchers, the students ended their conversations on positive notes and eventually learned how to chat more efficiently while considering others' opinion and cultural differences. As a group, the students also became better at resolving confusions and arriving at a *joint conclusion* [23].

However, an interesting finding from Lee (2013) showed that not all students believed that they were "devoted enough to the project" as they could not manage their time and energy for e-journal writing and sharing. Student engagement failed in this context because the CeL activity was developed as an addition to their language syllabus instead of a complimentary activity. Hence, they were only able to participate in the activity at a basic level and the research could not explore the maximum benefits of CeL to the EFL students. It has proved that e-learning may fully

engage all students only if it complements the main syllabus and does not end up being an extra workload for them. CeL has been proven to create a supportive learning environment where students feel safe and comfortable to share their thoughts, ideas and knowledge with their peers. Small-group learning has especially been a boon for this case. Students can constantly encourage each other to publish and share online [16] and this boosts their confidence level. Furthermore, the concept of real content in authentic environment is reinforced through practicing language in online platforms. Writing to and for their friends and commenting and replying their posts were perceived to be “cool”, “interesting” and “good” [27]. These examples show that students generally enjoy practicing language in real contexts where learning does not seem *forced*, and this may help to increase their motivation as their peers can observe everyone’s work and progress at the same time.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, e-learning methods should embrace collaborative learning so that the learner-centred approaches in learning can be optimally beneficial for students. Based on the studies presented in this review, the positive impacts of a well-planned and well-executed CeL program includes 4 factors: i) Increases Learner Autonomy, ii) Improves Student Engagement, iii) Boosts Confidence and Lowers Anxiety among Students iv) Promotes Asynchronous and Synchronous Combination Learning. While addressing the good things that may come out of proper implementation of CeL, it is also equally important to address the issues that lies with it. Firstly, a teaching-learning method that promotes learner autonomy also potentially produces student-generated content that may contain inaccuracies and spread misinformation among the students. This requires increased amount of responsibility and attention from the teacher’s side as a facilitator and moderator during learning where the teachers need to constantly check the content for quality. Learning may be delayed or postponed for this purpose and since it takes the excitement and fun of practicing in authentic environment away, students may end up preferring traditional guided teaching at the end of the day. Secondly, assessment and evaluation methods may require revamping because collaborative learning involves multiple students at once and it may be unfair in the long run to keep evaluating based on group performances. It may also be challenging to keep track of each student’s progress when they are put to practice language in authentic environments such as chatting, blogging and social networking. In classroom teaching, teachers can monitor and control the content generated by students. However, for sites that are public such as social media and blogging sites, students may put up sensitive or personal content that may reach millions in a click of a button. Teachers and school authorities may also face severe repercussions due to this. Hence, tracking and monitoring the students’ works for assessment and evaluation may be tricky and require a lot of manpower and resources.

Based on the pros and cons highlighted, more studies should be conducted to not only test the recent trends in CeL, but also to resolve the issues that comes with popularization of the e-learning method. Research needs to come up with feasible and smart ways of tracking the progress of students involved in CeL in real time that will help the teachers to assess the students quickly and correctly. Secondly, computational linguistic researchers need to extend their expertise to help school programs to filter out sensitive and personal contents in CeL. Awareness programs may be developed to be included in e-learning orientation programs for students to be more responsible towards their content and interactions online and understand the consequences for them and their schools in case of a mishap.

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