Using breakout rooms in online language teaching: Advantages and disadvantages

Leila Yurievna Mirzoyeva [a][1], International University of Information Technology, Manas Street No:34A, Almaty, Kazakhstan,

Abstract

Under the conditions of the pandemic, language teachers face a variety of challenges on effective ways of teaching. Current literature has purported the effectiveness of breakout rooms being an effective method of teaching language online. The purpose of this study was to identify whether online teaching tools help students to study language and keep them being motivated, or not. To study the impact of breakout rooms application, the following participants were chosen: 3 groups of second-year IT students whose level of English is considered as Pre-Intermediate; the total number of students was 34. The study conducted classes in 2 experimental groups using the breakout rooms option, and in 1 controlling group where breakout rooms were not used. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study show that students' opinion concerning breakout rooms application was rather positive; thus, they focus on the opportunities for brainstorming in breakout rooms.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Leila Yurievna Mirzoyeva, International University of Information Technology, Manas Street No:34A, Almaty, Kazakhstan,
E-mail address: mirzoeva@list.ru

1. Introduction

The situation of the pandemic has changed the language teachers' work. All educators are currently faced with a variety of challenges such as the lack of communication (especially face-to-face one). Lack of our students' motivation under the conditions of online learning is also a challenge. Aside from these, there are several other classroom management problems teachers have to solve while teaching online (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Simamora, 2020).

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, under the pandemic conditions, we use a lot of platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Webex, Zoom among others, to teach English online in our universities, and messengers and other specific Kazakhstani platforms are adapted for primary and secondary schools (Soylu et al., 2021; Chen, 2022). All those platforms provide the teachers with different options to make teaching online more vivid and emotional. Thus, in the case of foreign language teaching in the real classroom, we can use teamwork as a technology that consolidates our students, utilizing interaction in a problem-solving context. The virtual classroom is not equal to the real one. Nevertheless, teachers can simulate teamwork and overcome a variety of motivational problems using breakout rooms/sessions as one of the tools provided by all the aforementioned platforms.

1.1. Literature Review

In research papers dedicated to the problems of online education, a breakout room has been defined as "a virtual space which is separate from the main online tutorial room" (Chandler, 2016). Also, as it is stated, in the MS Teams' manual, the main purpose of breakout rooms use is "to organize participants in smaller groups so they can have discussions in breakout rooms, and then call them back to the main room to give feedback to the larger group". So we can consider the breakout room option as a compensatory one providing the opportunity for teamwork in the case of online education.

As the application of breakout rooms is just one tool appropriate for teaching online, it is necessary to focus on some general traits of online education. Pandemic has disrupted all traditional ways of teaching, especially - language teaching. Thus, without traditional interaction between the teacher and the students, on one hand, and between the students - on the other hand, many learners feel demotivated and even frustrated. Conducting a comparative analysis of online education perception, Butnaru, Niťa, Anichiti, and Brînz̆a, (2021) stated that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, students had to reorganize their daily schedule to adapt to a situation of isolation. Those studying abroad had to go back home, but, at the same time, many of them were blocked due to the closure of airports and borders. The lack of socialization affected students and their socio-emotional balance suffered, especially in young people with pre-existing problems of this nature. Students claimed that main the effects of isolation were anxiety and depression".

On the other hand, it is stated in many research papers that online education has the potential to transform the education system by expanding educational opportunities, transforming student populations, and encouraging the development of new pedagogical methods making the learning process more reliable, more efficient, and less stressful for both instructors and students (Koehler, et al., 2004; Platt, Raile, & Yu, 2014; Butnaru, et al., 2021). Although there are studies suggesting that online and traditional education are comparable in terms of learning outcomes, it is also admitted that online learning is perceived as lacking in interactivity compared with classroom learning (Bali, & Liu, 2018; Ocak, 2020).

Concerning lack of motivation, a collaboration between students, and other drawbacks of online education Chakraborty et al., (2021) who analyzed students' opinions concerning online education stated that empirical studies have found that students feel that they learn

better in physical classrooms than through online education. Aguilera-Hermida, (2020) also found that "students miss the help they receive from their peers in classrooms and laboratories and access to library".

To sum up, both advantages and disadvantages of online education are represented in various research works from different viewpoints; and many scholars point out such shortcomings of the digital educational environment as lack of life communication with the peers and lack of help from their part. In my opinion, students' work in breakout rooms can help them to overcome all those problems.

1.2. Purpose of study

The main aim of this case study is to find out whether breakout rooms as the online version of teamwork motivates students to study English (in our case, it was Business English) and help them to develop their language skills, or not.

To clarify the opportunities provided by breakout rooms in the process of teaching English online, the following research questions were focused on:

- What are the main advantages of breakout rooms used in the study of Business English by Pre-Intermediate level students?

- What are the disadvantages of breakout rooms used in studying Business English by Pre-Intermediate level students?

Firstly, those research questions allow us to summarize a wide range of opinions represented in both scientific papers and practical resources; secondly, they presuppose the study of students' opinions concerning strong and weak points of breakout rooms use in the process of the certain subject study.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Model

This research was carried out as experimental research. Two groups were considered in the study. One is the control group, and the other is the experimental group.

2.2. Participants

To study the impact of breakout rooms application, this study chose the following research participants: 3 groups of second-year IT students whose level of English is considered as Pre-Intermediate; the total number of students was 34 (see below the detailed description of students' language skills). The research conducted classes in two experimental groups using the breakout rooms option, and in one controlling group where breakout rooms were not used.

2.3. Data Collections tool and Procedure

In this study, a semi-structured interview form was used. The validity study was carried out according to the opinion of the expert group. It was evaluated by an expert who has at least 3 Ph.D. diplomas in the relevant expertise. Reliability and usefulness tests were conducted on a group of 5 students. Before the conducting experiment, the Pre-Experimental test showed the level of students in two experimental groups and one Control group. The main aim of this test was to assess all the students' language skills: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing, to see the progress after the experiment through the Post-experimental test.

3. Results and Discussions

Thus, the first Experimental group and the Control group demonstrated similar average results (64 and 68 points for Speaking, 68 and 67 points for Listening, 65 and 64 points for Reading, and, finally, 63 and 65 points for Writing correspondingly), whereas the second Experimental group seemed to be much weaker than the previous two groups (the average points were 60 for Speaking, 63 for Listening, 60 for Reading and 61 - for Writing).

Figure 1
*students' Results of Pre-Experimental Test*
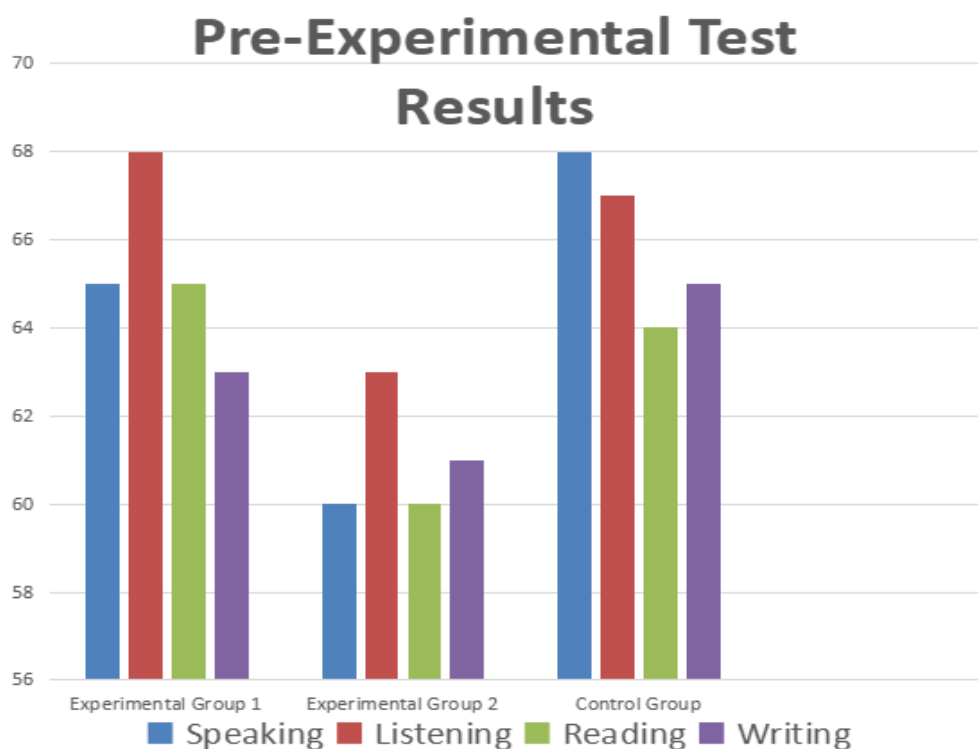
After the experiment, we can observe the progress in both Control and Experimental groups as a result of their work and use of the appropriate materials; otherwise, in both experimental groups, the stronger and the weaker ones, it is much more visible. Thus, Figure 2 shows the remarkable progress concerning Speaking and Listening skills in Experimental Group 1: in both cases, the average students' mark is 73 (comparing to the previous satisfactory marks, it seems to be a substantial advance); also, the weaker Experimental group made good progress in Speaking (the average mark is 70 comparing to 60 at the Pre-experimental stage), while the Control group showed a slight positive change (thus, concerning Speaking skills, average mark at the Post-experimental stage is 70 compared to 68 at the Pre-experimental stage). So, the results represented on those diagrams prove the hypothesis about the positive effect of breakout room use.

Also, the progress in Reading and Writing in both Experimental groups is not so remarkable as in Speaking and Listening; and this fact can be explained if we take into account the peculiarities of students' work in breakout rooms. There is no doubt that most of the activities in breakout rooms are related to speaking and listening comprehension development as students discuss a variety of opportunities, explain their choices, etc. They do it orally, so they have to express their opinions as well as understand what their groupmates

say. In the first case, students improve their speaking skills, both intentionally and unintentionally, there as in the second case their listening skills are in the making.

Figure 2
Students' Results of Post-Experimental Test
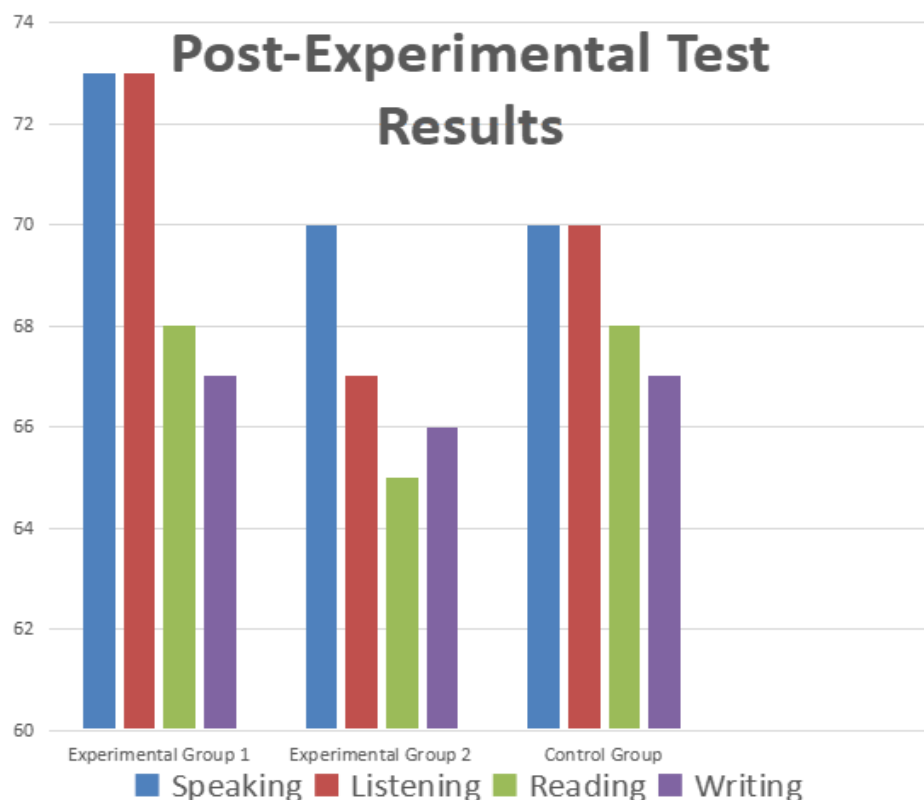
3.1. *Grouping Students in Breakout Rooms*

There are some steps to use in breakout rooms. First of all, if a teacher is going to use this option provided by an online platform, **Step 1** consists of creating the appropriate task to complete in the breakout room together with the groupmates. Thus, it might be a matching exercise, an information gap assignment, discussion questions, etc. Marcotte (2020), highlights that the teacher should "consider activities in which students need to question multiple others to formulate a response or solution" .

Step 2 consists of grouping students in breakout rooms, and it is necessary to point out that teachers can regroup them as they need and "decide how many times they meet with people and for how long"(Marcotte, 2020).

At the end of work in breakout rooms (**Step 3**) as it was stated by Marcotte (2020), a teacher "can have everyone come back to the group and share their work. Depending on the task that students were completing, this might take more or less time. It is always a good idea to ask students to reflect on their experience in the assignment as well" (Marcotte, 2020). It was also highlighted in this ELT blog that "if you are grouping students specifically, you might have students change their name within the online video platform. For example (First & Last Name, Group A). This way, you can see who is in each group in the participant's view of the meeting. In video conferencing software, typically, you can choose whether you want it to automatically group students or if you want to manually do this. Take time to consider what is best for your specific task and class" (Marcotte, 2020). This study used mixed groups to

make stronger and weaker students work together; also, we regroup them and change partners to involve all of them in classroom interaction.

3.2. Types of Exercises used in Breakout Rooms

While experimenting with utilizing Business English teaching, the study used different types of exercises to work in breakout rooms. Thus, such exercises as Matching; Jigsaw Skits; Problem Solving Exercises, and so on were used to motivate students and avoid monotony and boring atmosphere in the classroom. Thus, matching exercises are quite appropriate to work with Business English terms and their definitions (e.g., students were provided with the list of terms concerning marketing such as *consumer, endorse, niche,* etc., and their definitions - *'a specialized segment of the market for a particular kind of product or service'; 'recommend a product in an advertisement; 'a person who acquires goods and services for his or her personal needs*). At the next stage, students discuss terms and definitions in breakout rooms before they match them. And the last stage can be considered as the competition between the teams who have done their work separately in breakout rooms.

Jigsaw Skits may be used while working with the halves of the sentences and also predetermine the discussion between team members before making a decision. The next two stages can be the same or a little bit different from those we have in the case of matching exercises.

The most difficult type of students' work in breakout rooms is Problem Solving exercises. As an example, some exercises from Business Results Students' Book (2nd edition) can be used: *You are interviewing candidates for a similar job to yours. First, think of the skills and the experience that are necessary for your job. Then make a list of questions to ask the candidates* (p. 41). While doing those exercises students have to discuss the problems spontaneously, and the role of the instructor consists of unobtrusive monitoring and giving tips if necessary.

As it is stated above, all those exercises help students mostly in speaking and listening skills development, and the results of the Post-experimental test prove the statement about the progress of Speaking and Listening skills.

3.3. Students' Opinion

After the experiment, as was highlighted before, this study conducted a semi-structured interview with the students of two experimental groups. Firstly, they were asked about problems they faced while participating in online classes. Among those problems, they mentioned:

- lack of motivation (72% of participants);

- lack of live communication (including communication between students and teachers) - 51% of participants;

- lack of interaction between students (46% of participants)

- problems of sharing information and discussing it / brainstorming (46% of participants)

The second question in our semi-structured interview was dedicated to the advantages of Breakout Rooms Use. The most frequent answers were the following:

- relaxing atmosphere (all the 23 students from 2 experimental groups, or 100% of participants, mentioned that positive trait of breakout rooms);

- good opportunities for communication with the groupmates (20 of 23 students, i.e., 86,8% said that it is one of the most important characteristics of this online education

technique; also, they specified the groupmates help as a considerable advantage of work in breakout rooms);

- opportunities for brainstorming (18 of 23 students polled, i.e., 78% of them emphasized it as the motivating factor in the process on study English online);

The third question of the interview was related to the disadvantages of Breakout Rooms Use. It is necessary to point out that the students in both experimental groups find fewer disadvantages than advantages of this teaching technique. Thus, as the main drawback of breakout room use, a decrease in the teacher's control was mentioned, so, just the well-motivated students, do all the activities whereas others are passive (8 students of 23, i.e., 32%).

Also, such problem as lack of explanation arises in cases of breakout room use; so, it is difficult for the students whose language skills are not so good, to understand the details (4 of 23, i.e. 16%).

To summarize, the interview conducted at the last stage of the experiment showed that (a) students focused rather on the positive effect of breakout rooms use than on the shortcomings of this teaching technique; (b) most of the participants highlighted motivating potential and specific conditions for brainstorming in breakout rooms.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that concerning breakout rooms application was rather positive; thus, students focus on the opportunities for interaction and especially brainstorming in breakout rooms. In our opinion, such options as breakout sessions/breakout rooms provided by various platforms for online learning i.e., Microsoft Teams, Webex, Zoom can help language teachers to spark students' interest. A variety of exercises (matching; jigsaw skits; problem-solving exercises), as well as different types of grouping, were used to work in breakout rooms, and all those materials and techniques were applied to bridge the gap between online and real classroom conditions.

Online education can be better personalized because of the smaller class size and homogeneous background of the students. Online education has been on the fringe for a long time. The COVID- 19 pandemic made it the main method of education. Based on this research, it is also possible to say that all the above mentioned is quite true concerning breakout rooms use. So even if we are unable to replace the real communication and interaction between our students under the conditions of the pandemic, the breakout rooms option can be used as an appropriate tool to motivate our students and involve them in a variety of activities in a virtual classroom.

The number of students (34) should be considered as a limitation of our work as well as experimenting with the students with one level of language competence. Moreover, 23 students only participated in the interview as they were able to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of breakout rooms as a tool for online classroom management. 11 students from the Control group were not involved in this stage of our work.

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