

An Evaluation of Teacher-Student Interaction During Online Lessons

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Abstract

The current evaluation study aims to describe the interaction between teachers and their students during online EFL lessons at tertiary level and examine the relationship between such interaction and student engagement. To this end, 5 EFL teacher-student pairs were chosen through purposeful sampling as well as snowballing method, and by employing a qualitative approach, they were interviewed twice. First interview was aimed to obtain the accounts of the participating teachers and students' experiences, and the second interview was aimed to corroborate the findings with the participants. The results suggest that (i) the interaction between the teachers and students during online lessons were limited due mostly to technological challenges and lack of knowledge regarding the instructional use of technology, and (ii) the participants perceived this low-level interaction as one of the possible factors affecting student engagement negatively.

Keywords: teacher-student interaction, online instruction, student engagement

1. Introduction

In 2019, a novel virus, later called COVID19, caused a global pandemic plunging the world into a state of political and socio-economic turmoil. In an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus, a variety of measures were put in place by the governments across the world; however, in a short span of time, the virus started circulating in every single corner of the globe. As a response to the increasing number of people who were being hospitalised and losing their lives, some radical steps had to be taken to slow down this gloomy trend. One of such steps was the closure of schools and the mandatory switch to online education.

In general, online education is, in this case *used to be*, considered as an alternative to traditional education (Abou et al., 2014). However, it became a necessity to be able to sustain education at schools and universities during the pandemic. With the mandatory switch to online education, many components of a typical lesson carried out in a traditional classroom setting changed, as well. One of these changes was the interaction between teachers and their students. Teacher-student interaction is often accepted as one of the crucial elements contributing the quality of lessons and helping students both academically and socially (Pianta et al., 2008). Positive interaction between teachers and their students, therefore, is usually attributed to higher student achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; McCormick et al., 2013) as well as greater emotional involvement, engagement, and content with learning environment (Klem & Connell, 2004). However, in a lesson conducted online, teachers and

students are not able to interact in the same way they do face to face, which could deprive them of the benefits of such interactions.

In a context where the schools have been closed since early 2020s, and the traditional face-to-face education has been mandatorily moved to online platforms, the current evaluation study aims to describe how teachers and students interact during tertiary level EFL lessons and examine the relationship between such interaction and student engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Education

Online education can be identified as an educational process that is carried out over the internet using various online platforms including blogs, forums and videotelephony proprietary software programs. In general, online education is a form of distance education that allows students who live in remote locations or who cannot attend face-to-face education for various reasons such as full-time employment. However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became indispensably common for almost every student as of early 2020.

Students can experience online education either through asynchronous or synchronous lessons. The former allows students to decide when to participate in learning process. Such lessons offer a variety of tools for students to engage including emails or discussion boards. The latter, in contrast, include lessons being presented via live, typically video and sometimes audio only, conferences, granting opportunity for instantaneous feedback (Hrastinski, 2008).

Online education offers many benefits by both handling the problems regarding the geographical distance and for many other reasons that could hamper physical attendance to lessons (Singh & Thurman, 2019; Watts, 2016). Since it does not require physical attendance, participation rates can be expected to be high when especially considering the opportunity it provides for full-time employed adult learners (Fedynich, 2014). Thanks to online education, people can both study and work simultaneously. On top of these benefits, students also do not have to spend any time or money by commuting to the physical learning environment. They can join the lessons whenever and wherever suits their everyday lives.

On the other hand, online education has also some shortcomings depending mostly on participants' technological skills as well as their opportunities to access to the required equipment. Although lack of technological skills is usually viewed as a disadvantage especially for young learners (Wedenoja, 2020), there are many adults who find it challenging to utilise technology for their learning. As opposed to such challenges that make learning a difficult experience, online education gives rise to a situation that makes the process unethically easier: plagiarism. It is a term that is used to describe a situation in which a person takes the intellectual property of another person and presents it as his/her own (Bowyer & Hall, 2001). Due to the various software that allows an easy copy-paste action, the level of plagiarism is on the increase. Lastly, online education falls short of allowing the extra-curricular activities that a traditional on-campus education typically offers (Resnick et al., 1997). Such activities are of great importance in that they help students develop socially in every step of their age groups and prepare themselves for future life including their career. Students who only participate in online education may not have the chance to benefit from such benefits.

2.2 Teacher-Student Interaction & Student Engagement

All human beings are fundamentally inclined to have connections with others. This desire to socially bond with each other is one of the most powerful motivational forces for

humans (Baumeister & Lery, 1995). People often participate in activities that are normally not appealing to them just because they want to experience togetherness with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The same force exists in educational context, as well. When the needs of students, particularly their need of being connected to others, are satisfied, it has been reported that they become more adept and willing to meet the cognitive and affective demands of learning process (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

One of the most prominent ways of feeling connected for a student in an educational context is the relationship s/he has with his/her teacher. Past research suggests that positive relationship between teachers and students yields many desirable results in terms of students' learning through engagement (Wubbels et al., 2016). Also, many studies reports that positive teacher-students relationship has a positive impact on students' academic achievement (Valiente et al., 2008), which stimulates positive attitudes towards learning (Roorda, Koomen, & Spilt, 2011). Such a relationship creates a safe and comfortable learning environment for the students.

Establishing a positive relationship between teachers and their students depends on the interaction between them. Teacher-student interaction is the most basic and natural type of relationship in an education setting. Bernstein and Noam (2013) suggest that such interaction is pivotal for student improvement as it offers students a variety of learning opportunities. In addition, Rutter and Maughan (2002) reports that in a learning environment, interaction between teachers and their students is a key factor for students to engage in the lessons and develop themselves academically, socially, and emotionally. However, online education may fall short of satisfying teachers and their students' need to interact with each other, which could impede students' development in the aforementioned areas.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of the current evaluation study is (i) to describe the nature of teacher-student interaction during tertiary level EFL lessons conducted online and (ii) to examine the relationship between such interaction and student engagement.

Informed by the literature, the current study aims to answer the following questions:

- i. How do teachers and students interact during tertiary level EFL lessons conducted online?
- ii. What is the perceived relationship between such interaction and student engagement?

3.2 Significance of the Evaluation

The results of this evaluation study are significant to understand the nature of teacher-student interaction during online lessons. Such interactions are among key factors affecting students' development during their learning process by increasing student engagement and leading to a higher academic performance (Downer et al. 2010; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Thus, both teachers and curriculum designers in tertiary level EFL contexts can take into consideration the findings of this evaluation study and design their programs in a way that allows teacher-student interaction more during online lessons.

3.3 Evaluation Design

The current evaluation draws on social constructivism, which underlines the constructed knowledge by means of individual values and personal experiences (Creswell, 1998). To further this approach, the study was developed from a qualitative perspective, which is required to understand the complex nature of relationships and to obtain a rich account of the experiences of individuals (Bell 2002; Benson 2011). By problematising the experiences of its participants, the study evaluates the interaction between the participating teachers and their students and examines the relationship between this interaction and student engagement through participants' reported accounts.

3.3.1 Participants & Settings

The teacher-participants of the study were 5 EFL teachers all of whom had been teaching EFL at different universities at the time of the evaluation, and the student-participants were B1 level students all of whom had been in their English preparatory year at different universities at the time of the evaluation. In the end, there was a teacher-student pair from each university, and they were all given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Through purposeful sampling, first, one teacher was chosen based on researcher's own decision. By this choice, the researcher made sure that the participant had experienced the mandatory shift to online teaching and was relevant to the focus of the study. Then, via snowballing method, the other participants were recruited through referrals of the existing participants again carefully making sure they also experienced the same phenomenon. In the end, there were 5 teacher-student pair from various private and state universities as participants.

The first teacher-student pair was from a state university. They had 20-hour EFL lessons a week lasting 8 weeks in total. The lessons were being conducted on Zoom platform. The second teacher-student pair was from a state university. They had 22-hour EFL lessons a week lasting 7 weeks in total. The lessons were being conducted on Microsoft Teams platform. The third teacher-student pair was also from a state university. They had 18-hour EFL lessons a week lasting 8 weeks. The lessons were being conducted on Microsoft Teams platform. The fourth teacher-student pair was from a private university. They had 20-hour EFL lessons a week lasting 7 weeks. The lessons were being conducted on Zoom platform. The fifth and last teacher-student pair was also from a private university. They had 18-hour EFL lessons a week lasting 8 weeks. The lessons were being conducted on Zoom platform. In addition to weekly lessons, all participating students had access to asynchronous EFL content through a Moodle based platform that their institutions provided.

The participating teacher-student pairs, their universities, number of weekly lesson-hours and the online platforms they used are illustrated in the table below (Figure 1).

Teachers	Students	University	Weekly Hour	Online Platform
T1	S1	A (State)	20-hour	Zoom

T2	S2	B (State)	22-hour	Microsoft Teams
T3	S3	C (State)	18-hour	Microsoft Teams
T4	S4	D (Private)	20-hour	Zoom
T5	S5	E (Private)	18-hour	Zoom

Figure 1: Information of participants and settings.

3.3.2 Data Collection & Analysis

The data were collected through semi-structured online interviews with each individual separately following the oral and written consent of every participant. The participants were free to speak either in their native language or in English. In cases where the participants preferred speaking in their native language, the researcher later translated the interview transcript into English. The interviews were voice-recorded while the researcher was also jotting down some notes to be later analysed along with the transcripts.

Following the interview, the recordings were first transcribed and translated into English where necessary. At this stage, and also during the following stages, pseudonyms for participants and the universities were used to ensure privacy. Then, following multiple readings of the transcripts, the researcher identified common themes and patterns regarding the teacher-student interaction and its relationship with student engagement. From these identified themes and patterns along with the field notes taken during the interviews, the researcher developed some interpretive meanings leading to an exhaustive description of the nature of teacher-student interaction and student engagement during online EFL lessons. Before finalising the study, the researcher met with the participants once more for member checking purposes to share and corroborate the findings obtained from the first interview to make sure the ideas, emotions, and experiences of the participants were reflected correctly and appropriately.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 The Inevitable Comparison

Although the participants were never asked to compare their current experiences with the past when they used to have face-to-face education, it is not surprising that they all nonetheless did. When the teachers were asked about the nature of interaction they had with the students and whether they had any challenges keeping the students engaged, all five of them referred to their past experiences. T2 said: “Before the pandemic, uh, you know, when we were in the classroom, I... I didn’t have any problems with my students. I used to ask questions, err, some guiding questions, and they would answer it. That’s how easy, uh, to, you know, interact with them and keep them engaged.” T4 also referred to face-to-face

education as easier times by saying: “Everything was perfect. Well... Maybe not perfect (laughing) but you know it was something, uh, I could handle easily. I created fun activities in the past to keep everyone, err, engaged, but now I cannot use the same activities online. It doesn’t work like that.”

Students frequently referred to their past experiences, as well, but since it was their first year at tertiary level, they mentioned their lessons, specifically English lessons, in high school. S3 said: “Before the pandemic, when I was in high school, as you know, we used to go to everyday. We used to see all our teachers and friends face-to-face. Back then I liked English lessons more because it was fun. Now all I do is sitting and staring at the screen.” (Translated).

When the participants compared their lessons during the pandemic and pre-pandemic, they all had a wave of nostalgia for the face-to-face education even though it had just been a year and a half since the schools were closed. The most common words uttered were easy and fun. Normally, as Watts (2016) explained, online education is the one that is referred as more convenient as students do not need to travel and be present in the classroom. However, it appears that when the teachers and the students are forced to switch to online, they felt they were taken out of their comfort zone; hence, they had some emotional reaction.

4.2 Technology-Related Issues

When the teachers were asked about how they interacted with their students online, the most common answer was that using technology was challenging for them for various reasons, which also makes it difficult to establish a rapport and interact with the students. T1 and T5 stated that the computer their institutions provided were too old and slow to handle a videotelephony proprietary software on top of other applications such as an Internet browser and a word processor. That is why, it had been difficult for them to have a stable videoconference, which often forced them to switch to audio-only during the lessons. T5 said: “When you, err, you don’t even see your students’ faces, how can you, err, how can you possibly interact with them properly?” In addition, T2 reported that she had never been good with technology, so she had been having many issues despite the two consecutive training sessions she attended. She said: “I don’t like technology (laughing), and, err, I only used it in my classroom, you know, when it was necessary. You know... while doing a PowerPoint presentation or watching a video. Now everything, err, everything I do is based on, err, on technology. You know, it just takes too much time to deal with the problems. Sometimes students also have problems, but I, err, cannot help them. Among all this chaos, our interaction is just, you know, err, all about solving technology problems.” T3 and T4 also reported that it had been challenging to interact with the student, yet their reasons were different. T3 said: “When you, err, have a lesson, you normally, err, you need to share your screen, you know, so the students can follow the lesson, but when you do that, err, you suddenly lose the videos of the students and, err, all you see, you know, is the content that you share. And, the students, err, also cannot see you or other students. When I ask a question, I don’t see who is answering. Sometimes we all talk at the same time (laughing). Err, turn taking, you know, is difficult, really difficult because, err, so interacting with students is challenging.”

When students were asked the same question, they also complain about the use of technology and how it negatively affected their interaction with their teachers during the lessons. S1 reported that her computer broke down a couple of months ago, so she had been trying to join live lessons using her mobile phone. She said: “I follow the lesson from the small screen of my phone. With one hand I hold the phone, with the other I try to take notes. I never turn on my video, and I rarely speak. It was already difficult with a computer. Now with a phone, I lost my interest.” (Translated). S2 and S3 reported that they did not have a stable cable or WIFI connection for a videoconference, so they had been using their cellular data via their mobile phones. Because of this reason, they preferred not to turn on their cameras in order to lower the cost of their data plans. S3 said: “We often have power cuts where I live, so I often lose my connection during the lessons. Also, the Internet speed isn’t normally fast enough, anyway. That’s why, I started using my phone’s cellular data to connect to the Internet over my laptop, but it’s become very expensive, so I never turn on my camera, and I turn off video-feeds of my teacher and friends.” (Translated).

Switching to fully online surely necessitated a lot of adapting in terms of getting used to technology. Although technology has been an indispensable part of the classrooms for quite a while, most teachers never had to deliver their lessons over the Internet before. This involuntary, sudden and rather pushy shift to online caught many teachers off guard without any time for preparation or adaptation. With all the technology-related problems, there do not seem to be any time left for any meaningful interaction during the lessons. In addition, access to technology is another problem. Depending on the geographical location individuals reside, the required internet speed for a stable videoconference may not be available. Also, depending on the data plan, the cost of cellular data could easily skyrocket especially if there are multiple internet users in the same household. Such issues and concerns may prevent students from turning on their video-feeds, which inevitable lowers the level of their interaction with their teachers.

4.3 Not Feeling Accountable

Three teachers reported they were worried that most of their students did not feel accountable for their own learning. T3 said: “I think my students... well... most of them... (laughing) don’t, err, feel, you know, responsible anymore. They don’t do their homework. Sometimes, err, they don’t come, err, attend the lessons. When I ask a question, they don’t turn on their microphones. They just pretend they are not there (laughing). Of course, there are students who regularly participate in the lessons, but I don’t feel, err, how can I say, err, I don’t feel connected to, err, most of them.”

Two students also reported that they did not take the lessons as seriously as they would have if they had been in a physical classroom. Therefore, they did not feel it was necessary to interact with their teachers. S4 said: “I usually join the live sessions. It’s like watching a video. I turn off my camera and microphone. I just listen to my teacher going over some pages. Then, I lose my interest and start checking my social media accounts. I wouldn’t do that if I were in a real classroom, though.” (Translated).

It seems that when they are not in a physical classroom environment, students who have never experienced online education tend to feel less responsible. Live lessons may feel like a random video that could easily be dismissed. If students do not feel any responsibility

for their own learning, it is only natural that they do not interacting with their teachers, and they do not engage with the lessons.

5. Conclusions

In learning process, communication plays an important role. It is through communication that the education is implemented (Assilkhanova et al., 2014), and the knowledge is shared (Suciu, 2014). As Steenbeek et al. (2012) suggest, teacher-student interaction occurs as a result of past interactions and provides a basis for the upcoming interactions. Therefore, it has been put forward that it should be of utmost priority to enhance the quality of teacher-student interaction (Barber & Mourshed 2007). However, due to the sudden switch to the online education, the teachers and the students participating in the current study did not have the chance to meet face-to-face at all. For this reason, as it could be inferred from the interviews, they could not establish a close rapport with each other, and it is highly possible that this was the case for many teachers and students elsewhere.

The most commonly referred hindrance to an enhanced interaction between the teachers and the students seems to be the initial emotional discomfort of being forced to change the way education had taken place for a long time. With this sudden and a rather pushy change came the problems pertaining to technology use. Although there were some efforts to familiarise the teachers with the online platforms and tools to help carry out their lessons, many teachers seem to have had challenging times adapting to the new way of teaching. The mismatch between the traditional materials used and the digital platforms also made things even more challenging. Additionally, it is clear from the interviews that the students tended not to participate in the lessons. The participants claimed that the online lessons were uninteresting and not interactive. While the teachers were wobbling over the new platforms, it is possible that the students, who were already disappointed for not being in a campus environment, could not maintain their interest in the lessons. Although it is not possible to conclude a direct causal relationship, it can still be inferred from the interviews that the participants perceived the low-level teacher-student interaction as one of the factors that had a negative effect on student engagement.

Considering the results, the current study has important implications for all individuals involved in the education system. The immediate action; however, can actually be taken by teachers, curriculum designers, and program managers. Although the findings painted a rather gloomy picture, they should not mask the benefits of online education and the integration of technology into lessons. Instead, it should be noted that the reason why the teachers and the students who participated in this study had so many problems is due part to the forced and unexpected change and due part to being inexperienced with online education tools and platforms. If the current situation is to continue, it is of utmost priority that first the teachers should be well-trained as to how to conduct an interactive lesson over the internet, and second the curriculum and the materials should be changed or adapted to allow teachers and students interact in a more meaningful way, which as the current study suggests, is perceived to be affecting student engagement, as well.

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