**Research article**

# Using Group Work to Teach Literature inan Online Classroom Environment

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**Abstract.**

This paper aims to look at TESL students' views of the utilisation of group work to teach literature online. A questionnaire was administered to a sample of 64 TESL trainee teachers from Universiti Selangor who were enrolled in an online Literature class in April 2021. There were three sections in the questionnaire which had to be answered using a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaires were distributed through the WhatsApp application to the students. The data were analysed using frequency counts and percentage. The study findings showed that most of the students had positive views about the use of group work for learning literature. The students were also satisfied with their peer collaboration and teacher collaboration throughout the group activities.

**Keywords:** group work, literature, online learning, TESL

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# 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic which struck worldwide in the beginning of 2020 caused several changes to the administrative and education system in Malaysia. The Malaysian government had to implement the Movement Control Order (henceforth MCO) on 18 March 2020 to 31st March 2020 in order to control the Covid situation. A directive was issued by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education on 21st March 2020 for all Malaysian universities to cease operations except for essential services [1].The MCO was extended a few more times with the third phase being referred to as Recovery Movement Control from 10th June 2020 to 31st December 2020. Another directive issued by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education on 9th June 2020 stated that Malaysian university students would resume their studies via online learning until 31st December 2020 [2].

In the first few weeks of the first MCO, Malaysian universities conducted theory-based courses via the e-learning platform without much difficulty. Language-based courses like

the literature subjects were no exception. The usual mode of face-to-face teaching with the physical presence of teachers and students had to be replaced with online or virtual teaching and learning. Some issues were raised regarding this new teaching mode. The class interaction and physical presence are important as the absence of the both the tutor and students would make learners perceive the e-learning process as isolated and apprehensive [3]. Other issues such as technical errors and disturbances between lectures would cause further problems for an untrained or a trained teacher. As this change is unexpected to most teachers, the issue may be magnified in countries where online teaching had not been parallel to the traditional teaching mode [4].

In a literature class, the teacher is responsible for creating an inviting environment for the students to come to class. They should also give the students the opportunity to discuss, question and defend their different views in order to avoid boring classes with passive activities [5]. Additionally, the teacher should play an important role in conducting and supporting both student interaction with the text and interaction with other students [6].

Discussions in the literature classroom provides a space for students to share and test their ideas without fear of being attacked for having different ideas from the rest of the classroom [7]. This is reiterated by [8] who stated that that students in a course on adolescence believed that literature circle discussions increased their understanding of literature by allowing them to hear the perspectives of other students. As such, we cannot deny that discussion technique plays a big role in the teaching of literature.

To encourage the students to participate more in their literature courses, we have decided to implement group work in an online learning environment. Group work has been stated as the perfect method to provide students with the structure and the freedom needed to dive into literature and experience it in a new way [9]. A study has proven that cooperative discussion of reading passages increases the retention of reading content, and cooperative discussion improves problem-solving behavior [10]. The inclusion of well-planned collaborative activities into an online teaching environment not only benefits the teachers but also the students, as they promote the production of higher-order thinking skills [11]. Furthermore, the learning process is also affected by the improvement of socialization skills and critical thinking [12].

The online teaching and learning process can be defined as education that takes place via the internet [13]. These teaching approaches indicate that a certain pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), mainly related to designing and organising for better learning experiences and creating distinctive learning environments, using digital technologies [14]. Previously, internet-based learning had been considered as an option

to face to face teaching [15]. Nonetheless, the current pandemic situation seems to have changed everything, including the teaching and learning process.

Research conducted on students' attitude towards online learning found that the students' skills and experience to work with specific technologies and web applications in an educational context were primary indicators of their attitude towards online learning [16]. Many students have utilised ICT in their everyday life and they would also like to use ICT actively in their education. The findings clearly show the willingness and the positive attitudes of many university students towards the use of technology in education.

The present study aims at investigating the following issues: 1) identification of students' level of response towards group work for teaching literature online, 2) identification of students' level of response towards student-peer collaboration for teaching literature online, and 3) identification of students' level of response towards student-lecturer collaboration for teaching literature online. Accordingly, the data analysis procedure is designed in such a way to answer the questions.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research design

Survey research is defined as the collection of information from a group of individuals via their responses to a set of questions [17]. For this study, the quantitative approach was utilised using a survey as the research design. This type of research used a questionnaire with numerically rated items and the information gathered was analysed to identify whether the research aims could be achieved [18].The questions were adapted from a study by [19]. The questionnaire instrument was constructed using Google Forms and distributed to the respondents via WhatsApp.

### 2.2. Study population

The population of this study was obtained from the TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) Department, Faculty of Education and Social Sciences. 64 TESL undergraduates were involved in the study. The students were taking the course Literary Appreciation via online learning for the April 2021 semester. Questionnaires were distributed to the trainees in July 2021. After one week, the researchers managed to gather the completed questionnaires from 64 respondents.

## 2.3. Study instrument

The researchers utilised an online questionnaire to the respondents to ascertain the students' views towards group work to teach literature online. The questionnaire comprises four parts. Part A focuses on the respondents' demographics, Part B focuses on the students' view of group work for teaching literature online, Part C focuses on the students' views of peer-student collaboration for teaching literature online and Part D focuses on the students' views of student-lecturer collaboration for teaching literature online. There are 9 items in Part B, 9 items in Part C and 8 items in Part D.

The students were involved in group work for most of their 14 week study period. They had to work in groups for the presentations of poems and short stories, close reading of a play involving one act per group, structured group discussions of reader response for the short story and novella. The texts chosen for this class included - 'The Lesson' by Toni Cade Bambara, 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' by RL Stevenson, 'Miss Brill' by Katherine Mansfield and 'The Glass Menagerie' by Tennessee Williams.

## 2.4. Descriptive analysis

In order to answer the research questions, the researchers employed descriptive analysis. The data was summarised using percentage and mean. The interpretation of the mean score used in this study refers to the one [20] shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Interpretation of mean scores (Norasmah & Sabariah, 2011)

| Mean score | Interpretation of mean score |
|---|---|
| 1.00–2.00 | Low |
| 2.01–3.00 | Moderately low |
| 3.01–4.00 | Moderately high |
| 4.01–5.00 | High |

## 2.5. Data collection procedures

The survey method via questionnaires was utilised to gather information to achieve the purpose of the study. This method is appropriate as it has been used to describe and explore human behaviour [21]. In order to measure attitudes or opinions with any number of variables in a natural condition, questionnaire was utilised [22].

The following procedures were performed before and during the data collection. First of all, the purpose of the study was made known to the participants. Their consent to participate in this study was also obtained. Additionally, they were also informed that they could withdraw from the study anytime they wanted. After they agreed to participate, the questionnaires were distributed via WhatsApp link.

## 2.6. Data analysis procedures

The researchers utilised Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22 to analyse the quantitative data. The data was then summarized using percentage and mean. The mean accounts for all the scores in data sets, and the most accurate values represent a set of data [23]. The mean score level of each variable (trainees' knowledge, attitude and readiness) was then measured according to the interpretation chart of mean scores as stated by [20].

# 3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the data analysis results and the interpretation. While the data analysis results are presented following the stated aim of the research questions and objectives, the interpretation is presented in accordance to the situation of the teaching and learning.

In terms of demographic analysis of respondents, the following information is obtained from the data. Table 2 indicates that 64 students took part in the study. From the total, 19 respondents (30%) are male trainee teachers while 45 (70%) are female trainee teachers.

TABLE 2: Gender of respondents and percentage

| Gender | No of respondents | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Male | 19 | 30 |
| Female | 45 | 70 |
| TOTAL | 64 | 100 |

From the data, we found that the respondents' age ranged from 20 to 38 years old. 20 % of the respondents were 20 years old, 40% of the respondents were 21 years old, 18 % of them were 22 years old and 16% of them were 23 years old. The majority of respondents (95.4%) were in the age range of 20 to 23 years old while only 3 of them (4.6%) were in the age range of 31 to 38 years old.

The survey via the questionnaires shows students' views of group work to teach literature online. Nine items were used to determine the answer for research question 1 in Section A, i.e. what is the students' level of response towards the use of group work for teaching literature online? The answer to this question is summarised in Table 3 where the mean values for each construct to establish the students' views of group work for teaching literature online. The study findings indicated that the highest mean was acquired from the construct 'I have gained new knowledge' with a mean of 4.67. Overall, the students' views of the use of group work for teaching literature online was at a high level with an average value of mean = 4.52.

TABLE 3: Mean for the respondents' view of the use of group work for teaching literature online.

| No | Sub construct | N | Mean | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | The learning was effective in developing my literature knowledge. | 64 | 4.48 | High |
| 2 | The learning was enjoyable | 64 | 4.64 | High |
| 3. | This type of learning is suitable for me | 64 | 4.35 | High |
| 4 | I learnt with ease | 64 | 4.54 | High |
| 5 | I was satisfied with the learning | 64 | 4.64 | High |
| 6. | I could understand the learning materials | 64 | 4.57 | High |
| 7 | I have gained new knowledge | 64 | 4.67 | High |
| 8. | I could identify the literary elements. | 64 | 4.43 | High |
| 9 | I am more confident to learn literature through group work activity | 64 | 4.42 | High |
| | **Overall mean** | 64 | 4.52 | High |

The second research question i.e. what is the students' level of response towards student-peer collaboration for teaching literature online? is unfolded in the next data analysis, involving nine items. Table 4 shows the mean values for each construct which exhibit the students' level of response towards student-peer collaboration. The findings of the study revealed that the mean for the construct 'I had a chance to cooperate with other students' was at the highest level at 4.67. Generally, the students' level response towards student-peer collaboration for teaching literature online was at a high level with an average value of mean = 4.39.

To answer research question 3, i.e. What is the students' level of response towards student-lecturer collaboration for teaching literature online?, eight items were assigned in the questionnaires. Table 5 conveys the mean values for each construct for the level of response towards student-lecturer collaboration for teaching literature online. The findings of the study indicated that the mean for the constructs number 20, 23 and 24 all obtained at 4.78. Overall, the students' level of response towards student-lecturer

TABLE 4: Mean for Students' responses on student-peer collaboration.

| No | Sub construct | N | Mean | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | Interacting with other students helped me greatly in my learning | 64 | 3.75 | Moderately high |
| 11. | Learning by interacting with other students enhanced my confidence | 64 | 4.37 | High |
| 12 | The interaction enhanced my communication skills | 64 | 4.31 | High |
| 13. | The interaction enhanced my confidence to raise my own ideas | 64 | 4.32 | High |
| 14 | The interaction enabled me to value the opinion of other students | 64 | 4.51 | High |
| 15 | I had a chance to share knowledge with other students | 64 | 4.54 | High |
| 16 | I had a chance to cooperate with other students | 64 | 4.67 | High |
| 17 | I experienced quality interaction with the other students in terms of learning | 64 | 4.51 | High |
| 18 | I managed to link up the different ideas raised in the interaction | 64 | 4.56 | High |
| | **Overall mean** | 64 | 4.39 | High |

TABLE 5: Mean for the Students' responses on student-lecturer collaboration.

| No | Sub construct | N | Mean | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19 | Interaction with the lecturer established effective learning | 64 | 4.73 | High |
| 20 | It was easier to learn with the help of the lecturer | 64 | 4.78 | High |
| 21 | It was easy to contact the lecturer | 64 | 4.73 | High |
| 22 | The lecturer encouraged my participation | 64 | 4.73 | High |
| 23 | The lecturer helped in my learning | 64 | 4.78 | High |
| 24 | The lecturer responded promptly on my query | 64 | 4.78 | High |
| 25 | The lecturer provided guidance to the construction of new knowledge | 64 | 4.75 | High |
| 26 | I experienced quality interaction with the lecturer in terms of learning | 64 | 4.75 | High |
| | **Overall mean** | 64 | 4.75 | High |

collaboration for teaching literature online was at a high level with an average mean value of 4.75.

Upon the data analysis, the results can be interpreted in relation to students' level of response towards the use of group work for teaching literature online. The overall results showed that the students' level of response towards the use of group work for teaching literature online was at a high level with an average value of mean of 4.52.This is hardly surprising as the TESL students, like many young adults, are part of the new IT-literate community called 'digital natives'. This particular term was coined in 2001 [24]

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and refers to students who were born after 1980 and are native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. These young adults are very much in tune with technology and would feel out of place without it. This has been put to good use in the education field as shown in a study which stated that Malaysian university students' reception towards the use of technology was very positive [25].

In terms of students' level of response on student-peer collaboration, the study findings revealed that the students' responses on student-peer collaboration was at a high level with an average value of mean = 4.39. This indicates that the TESL students were keen on student-peer collaboration. This is similar to the findings in [26] which found that almost 60 per cent of the respondents had positive views of group work and collaborative activities in an English language classroom.

Finally, in understanding the students' level of response towards student-lecturer collaboration for teaching literature online, the study findings showed that the students' level of response towards student-lecturer collaboration was at a high level with an average value of mean = 4.75. This indicates that the students had a positive view of student-lecturer collaboration in the teaching of literature online. The findings are similar to the study [26] which showed that the majority of the students (89%, n = 49) strongly agreed that it was easier to learn with the help of the teacher. The guidance given in the construction of new knowledge showed that students acknowledged the importance of the role of the teacher facilitating their learning.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, we can conclude that the TESL students' perception of group work for teaching literature in an online environment were at high levels. This is due to their background, ability and confidence as digital natives who are able to adapt to changes and make the best of technology. Furthermore, human beings are social creatures who see themselves as a part of a group [27] and also worry about the opinions of others [28]. All these present opportunities to university lecturers and teachers as they try to find the best solution for online teaching and learning.

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