Practice-Oriented Paper

Strategies for Breakout Rooms: Suggestions from Emergency Online Learning at a Japanese Private University

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities suddenly shifted online from the 2020-2021 school year. While the technological tools utilized depended on the situation, many universities turned to Zoom as a viable real-time online learning solution. One particular benefit of the Zoom service compared to others (at the time) was the breakout room functionality, which could serve to simulate classroom group work. However, the breakout rooms also brought about novel challenges. This paper thus presents strategies the authors have found useful in managing breakout rooms, based on student-centered data collected during a year of emergency online learning in English medium content courses. The writers recommend the following practical strategies to improve breakout room classroom practice: (1) make student feedback integral classroom practice, (2) develop strategies to promote English use in breakout rooms, (3) assign roles to allocate responsibility, (4) provide clear instructions for breakout room tasks, (5) build confidence through scaffolding, and (6) allocate groups mindfully.

COVID-19 presented new challenges to teaching and learning as virtual classrooms replaced physical classrooms across Japan. Even in the usual, on-campus setting, teaching group work oriented, mixed level, and mixed year group English Medium Instruction (EMI) classes is challenging. For these classes to be effective, teachers need to consider classroom management, interpersonal dynamics, and English use in addition to the class contents. With the shift to online learning, the use of Zoom breakout rooms added new challenges as

students were unable to be monitored directly by a teacher who could intervene to support when difficulties arose. Students reported difficulties with online group work; the research underpinning this study aimed to better understand students' situations in order to devise strategies to enable them to thrive.

The context of this study is a small private women's liberal arts university in Tokyo that had not used Zoom or Google Classroom prior to the 2020 emergency online learning period. When Zoom and Google Classroom were introduced as tools, the authors prepared the department for online learning and conducted numerous training sessions for students and faculty. This was an emergency situation, with faculty teaching themselves as they went. In this context, the authors decided to gather student experiences to understand online learning from their perspective. This paper reports on the authors' findings for successful online group learning, and details the improvements implemented specifically through the Zoom breakout room functionality. The goal is to provide educators with strategies to enact whenever learning shifts online, and introduce a communicative approach to guide a response to any sudden change.

Our study uses extensive data collected through exit cards in a relatively intimate teaching environment. Many students who provided feedback were in the authors' seminar classes, and took part in the initial online-learning pilot tests in the department. The students' role as our co-learners from the outset created a high-trust, high-communication learning environment. This contributed to the openness in students' comments in the exit cards and the richness of the data has enabled the authors to provide concrete strategies for breakout rooms in the Japanese higher-education context.

Methods

The study draws on methodology outlined by Kleining and Witt (2001), and takes an exploratory approach to understanding students' online learning experience. Research began after both authors noticed students experiencing difficulties in online learning, and was conducted in the second semester of 2020 through weekly reflection surveys (exit cards) distributed via Google Classroom in six EMI courses. Over the course of a fifteen-week semester, from the six classes,

the author-researchers read more than five hundred exit cards each.

On the exit cards, students freely answered two open questions from a list. For example, "What went well in today's class?" and "What would you like to improve for next time?" Exit cards also included an optional "free talk" section. The cards were assigned as participation work to be completed after class, and submitted three to four days after class. Exit cards provided a regular opportunity for students, who were isolated during the online period, to communicate directly with a full-time teacher, and enabled the authors to identify problems and work with students to implement interventions. Solutions took the form of both personalized advice and changes to teaching practice.

Problems & Interventions

The authors responded to every exit card. Comments provided validation, affirmation, encouragement, reinforcement, confirmation, advice, and assistance with problem-solving. Feedback motivated students to put effort into writing their exit cards. This section outlines student comments, feedback, and interventions that were made to improve the effectiveness of breakout sessions. The categories used for analysis—classroom management, interpersonal issues, and English level—were determined heuristically in response to issues that were raised with high frequency in the exit cards.

Classroom Management: Problems

There are fundamental differences in classroom management online with breakout rooms compared to face-to-face classrooms. Once students enter a breakout room, the teacher no longer has the same capacity to monitor the dynamics of the class as a whole, or determine whether students are on-task or struggling. Exit cards provided a window into the breakout rooms. Some students reported difficulty with time management in breakout groups: "My group was slow. So, we couldn't finish to discuss." In other cases students struggled to understand instructions: "I and my classmates didn't understand the problem sentence of the assignment and answered it differently."

Classroom Management: Interventions

In a breakout room, students do not have ready access to a teacher, so it was important that students went into breakout rooms confident that they knew what to do. Stanford University's Teaching Commons also found a need for clear explanation and goal setting for successful breakout room practice (Stanford University Teaching Commons, n.d.). Strategies to improve the flow of class included reinforcing instructions in writing, such as in welcome screens displayed at the beginning of class (see Appendix) and the chat box. Clear time frames for tasks also enabled students to manage time more effectively. Similar to a face-to-face classroom, numbering and having students repeat back instructions before going into the breakout room helped to keep students on task. Using a single shared Jamboard or Google document in Google Classroom helped students to work on the same tasks simultaneously, see how others were progressing while in the breakout room, and present ideas to the class after returning to the main room.

Interpersonal Issues: Problems

Interpersonal issues in breakout rooms were an issue for many students. Students expressed a wish to have opportunities to socialize:

> "I would like to make a good environment to study with group members. In addition, when we meet for the first time, I would like to talk about not only class assignments but also hobbies etc."

McMurtrie has similarly found a need for connection between students for successful breakout room sessions (McMurtrie, 2020). Students also expressed concern about difficulties with communicating with unfamiliar people, particularly seniors, in breakout rooms:

> "In normal compulsory classes, almost all classmates are students in the same year-group but, in this class, there are a lot of senpai. I'm not good at communicating with older people. So, I didn't talk actively when compared to compulsory classes."

Because breakout groups require students to exchange ideas and cooperate in isolation, students need to have confidence in expressing themselves and

managing group dynamics. This could be challenging, even when students were working with classmates in the same year group:

> "Today there were no senpai. So someone or everyone has to cohere group members. But no one was likely to cohere the room members. So, I did. If there is senpai in the breakout room, always the senpai cohere group. I don't like obtrusiveness. So that was difficult."

Difficulties in breakout room group work were also connected to language ability and effort. Sometimes students were frustrated by their own lack of language: "I have a lack of explaining correctly. I want to express simply and easily, but I don't have enough vocabulary..." Students also sometimes expressed frustration with the lack of effort of other students in their breakout room; exit cards showed that being in a group with unprepared members causes frustration and demotivation.

Interpersonal Issues: Interventions

Awareness of students' frustrations was used to better allocate groups, implement improvement strategies, and adjust assignments. It should be noted the authors have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, and strongly emphasize cooperation in classes. We did not judge students who criticized classmates' actions, nor penalize students on the basis of content written by others. Honest communication in exit cards was essential in order to improve the learning environment. In response to students' comments about lacking opportunities to get to know classmates, the instructors allocated time at the beginning of group work for students to introduce themselves. In the absence of normal campus life, this enabled students to make connections with each other. Students were informed that allocating time for introductions was a response to their comments. Students were also encouraged to spend free time, e.g. after completing tasks, practicing English conversation with assigned conversation prompts.

A number of interventions were introduced to address interpersonal issues within groups, including scaffolding more effective group work and discussion strategies. Steps taken included giving reassurance and advice when students raised issues in exit cards, having students submit homework before class, and

allocating groups mindfully. These strategies helped to address the mixed levels in the classes, which usually included a range of students with levels from CEFR A2 to B2. When students complained that classmates were unprepared and could not participate well, the teacher's written response on the exit card validated their frustration but encouraged them to be patient and use it as an opportunity for leadership. The teacher also encouraged students to recognize that there were four people in the breakout group and to persevere even if one member could not fully participate. In terms of classroom intervention, students with lower English placement test scores were allocated to groups with more members. Students who had not done their homework were put together to work through the homework. This approach benefited both groups of students. Those who prepared could exchange perspectives on the content and remain motivated; those who had not could work on the material together, and were integrated back into the class for new tasks. Grouping unprepared students also provided an opportunity for teachers to talk individually to students who may have been struggling.

Another intervention was the assignment of group "captains," or "leaders," each responsible for particular tasks. This followed principles outlined by Smith (1996) of including individual accountability within the group. For each class, group members would be assigned a role which put them in charge of one aspect of the group: "English captain," who encouraged using English; "Technology captain," who shared their screen, navigated Google Classroom, etc.; "Question/ Participation captain," who made sure that everyone shared ideas; potentially, "Reporting captain," who reported back to the main session; and "Dictionary captain," who looked up new vocabulary. The authors enacted strategic allocation of tasks among members to facilitate productive and positive group dynamics. Students responded to this intervention enthusiastically:

"I thought it was good everyone had a role!"

"I thought the captain system was so good, because it's equality."

Many also began to frame their success specifically in terms of their "captain" role:

"Today, I could use and speak English more than last week because I had to

play each role. English leader was especially difficult for me, but it was a good time to communicate with classmates well."

"...something that went well in today's class is playing a role as an English captain."

This was not always perfectly successful—students were overheard in breakout room observation asking group mates what captain they had been assigned, for example. However, instituting this type of responsibility assignment system has great potential for solving many problems with group work both in breakout rooms and, potentially, in face-to-face classrooms.

English Use & Level: Problems

All classes included students with mixed English levels, with ranges that spanned from CEFR A2-B2 (elementary to upper intermediate). Students expressed concern about differences in English levels and attitudes towards using English positively. For example: "I couldn't tell my opinion in English" and "I don't have enough vocabulary." Some students requested that teachers be strict about English usage: "I think it would be better if you emphasize using strong words such as 'Use only English'". Additionally, sometimes students devised their own solutions to problems and difficulties that they were facing: "So today I tried to say, "Good morning!" earlier than anybody. And it worked well for everyone to use English actively! I want to keep continuing that." Where students reported success, we adopted their strategies for the class.

English Use & Level: Interventions

There were three main interventions to help students overcome inadequate English and differences in English level. One was to emphasize and be strict about students preparing well for the class so that they could exchange ideas on complex topics, regardless of on-the-spot English ability. Students who do not prepare demotivate other students, and can be put in their own group to do the work with others and catch up. This policy resulted in most students preparing well. In addition, based on students' advice, the teachers established a custom of assigning a student to begin the breakout session with an English greeting. Once the conversation began in English, it helped to keep the conversation in English.

The third was to provide useful English vocabulary and phrases in an online English vocabulary list. In addition to usual group work/discussion phrases like "What do you think?" and "I agree with your opinion, but ....", the authors provided students with vocabulary and expressions specifically pertaining to online learning to facilitate breakout room communication, such as "Could I share my screen?" (see Appendix).

Student Successes

As the semester progressed, students reported gaining confidence in their ability to learn well in class, and the exit cards provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their success in the breakout rooms. This was true for almost every student. Opportunities to engage in reflection and dialogue seem to have contributed to their success in online learning and in breakout rooms specifically. This correlates with Brown's emphasis on the importance of reflection time for learners, particularly in an online setting (Brown, 2020). Comments reflected students' awareness of improvement in language, knowledge, and understanding, as well as in group work and social skills. For example, in week 9, one student commented on improvement in her ability to use English in the breakout room:

> "I'm able to give some comments when other people finish speaking now. Before, I could only say like "I think so" or "I agree with you", but these days I'm able to give some feedback like "So you think \~ right?" "I'm not sure that \~, so could you tell me more, please?" even when the members are the seniors."

Students understood that good preparation leads to a better discussion in breakout rooms:

> "I realized it's important to do prep work because in the past class some students said that 'I couldn't understand this question well, so I can't answer.' However, this week seems everyone did great."

Moreover, the greater ability to exchange ideas led to deeper learning: "Thanks to everyone's many opinions, I learned a lot. I think that many people can learn more if everyone can speak without fear of their own opinions." Students reported success with using English, even though there was no teacher

monitoring: "Thanks to you making one student watch if the students were using English, there was a good atmosphere to use English in our breakout room." The environment in breakout rooms stimulated students' learning and increased both confidence and motivation: "My group shared a screen and it was easier to talk and discuss today's topic. Even though it took time to do the tasks, my group could finish most questions. We were really striving to solve each question."

Recommendations

The 2020 teaching environment had exceptional challenges. Although collecting data and providing feedback was time-consuming, exit cards were invaluable for engaging students as learning partners and as prompts for informing teaching practices. They were particularly suitable for devising effective breakout sessions. Based on this research, the authors propose the following strategies for breakout rooms. These strategies can be combined and adjusted as necessary depending on the needs of the classroom, and may also be applied to regular classrooms utilizing group work and discussion.

1. Make student feedback an integral part of classroom practice
   - Provide students with regular chances to communicate directly with and get feedback from a teacher, such as through exit cards
     - Exit cards need not be after every class, nor compulsory
     - Provide prompts and choices so students can choose relevant questions
     - Include a "free talk" section on exit cards so students can communicate more generally
       - Particularly appropriate for classes where the teacher is the students' advisor
   - Provide end-of-semester opportunities for students to reflect on difficulties, achievements, and goals
2. Provide feedback to students
   - Feedback can take many forms, including validation, encouragement, advice, further information, and questions.
   - Where appropriate, follow up on problems that students raise in exit cards during class time with changes in classroom processes and practices.

- For example, telling students that "because people have reported X in their exit cards, let's try Y today and see how it goes."

- Engage students as co-learners when implementing interventions.
- Establish routines for students to get to know each other.
  - Allocate time for introductions at the start of breakout room sessions
  - Vary group members each week
  - Encourage students to use free time to engage with one another, e.g., using conversation questions

3. Devise strategies that help students use English in breakout rooms

- Examples include:
  - Assigning students to start with English greetings and introductions
  - Providing online learning classroom language sheets to enable students to communicate effectively in English online
    - Examples include:
      a. My Wi-Fi connection is having trouble.
      b. Would you like me to share my screen?
      c. You're muted.
    - See Appendix for an example created by one of the authors.

4. Facilitate group work by assigning roles

- - Roles can be adjusted based on the number of students.
  - Example roles:
    - English captain
    - Question captain
    - Technology captain
    - Reporting captain
    - Dictionary captain

5. Provide Clear Instructions and Explanation

- Utilize “Welcome Screens” to reinforce instructions textually, give an outline of the flow of the class, and time allotted for each task
  - Share "Welcome Screens" within the LMS, so students can double-check after joining breakout rooms
  - "Welcome Screens" can also contain technological support, Zoom

usage guidelines, etc. (See Appendix)

- Number instructions
- Confirm understanding of instructions by getting the students to repeat them
- Use a shared medium (e.g. Jamboard or Google Docs) where all students can write in the same document while in breakout rooms

6. Build confidence through scaffolded tasks in breakout rooms
- Give time to prepare answers, including assigning homework tasks
- Check answers in breakout groups
- Provide opportunities to give answers prepared in breakout rooms in the main session

7. Allocate groups mindfully
- Take note of difficulties and adjust group allocation accordingly
- Discuss the need for cooperation with older, responsible students
- Group students who did not complete homework together and reemphasize reasoning beforehand
    - Check in with students who did not complete homework

Conclusion

While many challenges are involved in real-time online learning through Zoom, utilizing the above breakout room strategies can help alleviate problems with classroom management, interpersonal issues, and English, while helping students to maintain high levels of learning efficacy.

The volume of data collected in this research was invaluable during emergency online learning; however, it has also been unsustainably time consuming. Future research is needed to determine more time and energy efficient methods of feedback that maintain both intimacy and functionality for students and teachers. Presently, the authors are experimenting with a Google Forms replacement for the exit card feedback system, which shifts the emphasis from qualitative analysis to quantitative self-reporting on achieving outcomes. In doing so, the authors hope to remain informed about student perception in a more sustainable way.

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Appendix

"English Skills" Playlist -- Created by Adrienne Johnson to help students practice common English phrases outside of class. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7cTvIcwIHkPpoAvOkSi0m8ryIHHVsTMi

Example Welcome Screen — From Adrienne Johnson's Introductory Seminar Class. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MxEZhzxZRDX9SErjVwW7XN1-Y1afIQqJ/view?usp=sharing