



## RESEARCH LESSON STUDY REPORT

# Developing students' communication in the context of online ESL lessons

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### Abstract

**Background:** The global pandemic introduced considerable challenges to both teachers and students. In the context of online learning students tend to be less enthusiastic and communicate mostly with a teacher only compared to a traditional classroom. Trying to support students' communication, we decided to organise a lesson study project which would shed light on how teachers can encourage students' communication and interaction during online ESL lessons.

**Aims:** We aimed to improve students' communication in online ESL lessons and explore what approaches can support students' communication in their in-class and out-of-class learning.

**Study design or methodology:** We developed a sequence of three research lessons aimed to develop students' communication. A lesson study group planned, observed, and analysed these lessons. The research participants were 9th grade students who learned ESL online. The data were collected through observation, interview, and survey.

**Findings:** The use of group chats, role plays, and project work helped boost students' confidence to communicate more with each other in their in-class and out-of-class learning. Group chats and role plays provided students with the opportunity to practise the target language authentically. Project work sparked students' motivation and promoted active discussions.

**Conclusions and implications:** The current lesson study project made our online ESL lessons more engaging and enjoyable for students, supporting them in overcoming barriers in communicating online. Shy and quiet students claimed that the activities introduced in the lessons helped them to become more confident in their language abilities. Lesson study approach gave us useful insights into the ways we can analyse the effectiveness of our approaches to planning and teaching.

Keywords: teaching online; communication; role plays; ESL

## Context

Context of the study was the Nazarbayev Intellectual School of Physics and Mathematics in Shymkent. The school is situated in the south Kazakhstan region. The research participants were nine 9th grade students who learnt English as a second language in the context of online learning. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 15 years old. Gender distribution was 33% female (n = 3) and 67% male (n = 6). The participants' proficiency level was pre-intermediate.

### Co-researchers

- Teacher 1: an English teacher, LS group leader
- Teacher 2: an English teacher, senior manager, trainer of professional in-service programmes

## Overall aims of lesson study

Developing students' communication in online lessons is a big challenge because students are usually not comfortable talking online. We observed many lessons at which the teacher's questions were followed by long periods of silence. Nagel et al. (2009) illustrated the crucial role of students' contribution to the class or interaction with the facilitator on the successful course completion. Therefore, we were particularly worried about students who demonstrated very little interaction. To solve this problem, we aimed to find ways how students' communication can be improved in the context of online learning.

Swan (2002, p.44) described three factors associated with the student perceptions of satisfaction and learning in online courses. They include interaction with course content, interaction with course instructors, and interaction among course participants. Zacharis (2009, p.32) highlighted the importance of providing students with authentic problems and supporting them with probing questions, worked examples and real world simulations for stimulating students' attention, bringing existing knowledge into their consciousness and motivating them to participate and apply what they have learnt.

Taking into account the aforementioned factors and recommendations, we decided to deploy group chats; role plays and project work to promote students' communication in both in-class and out-of-class practices. From our teaching experiences, we learned that role plays in online English lessons allow students to act as their characters in a situation given by the teacher thus avoiding expressing their opinion directly and fear to be misunderstood. Group chats and project work give students an opportunity to prepare what they are going to say before typing it and communicate freely out-of-class.

To ensure that our approaches are fair and accessible for all students, we decided to check how well students' microphones and cameras work in the very beginning of our lesson study project. Luckily, no technical issues were found. We also decided not to insist on students' use of microphones and cameras if they do not feel comfortable about it.

## Focus and research questions

We guided our study according to the following research questions:

1. How effective is the use of group chats, role plays, and project work in the development of students' communication in online ESL lessons?
2. What are the students' perceptions about the approaches we use in online ESL lessons and what changes they notice?

The study was conducted as a lesson study project, focussing on the development of students' communication in the context of online ESL lessons. In this report, we described our lesson study project which included three collaboratively developed research lessons. We did extensive planning and post-lesson analysis for each research lesson.

## Ethical considerations

- The participants were well-familiar with the LS group leader, who had been teaching them English for two years prior to the study.
- All participants were informed of the study, and all volunteered to participate. The participants could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.
- Parental permission for children participation in the study was collected for each participant.
- The study complied with the school's safeguarding policies.
- No students' names were shared publicly to safeguard their privacy.

## Choice of and rationale case students

- Case Student 1:  
Student A – is shy and diligent, whose learning progress is above average. Even though he knows answers to teacher's questions during the lesson, he prefers to keep silent in both traditional and online classes.
- Case Student 2:  
Student B – is making average progress in English. Is friendly, open, and talkative in traditional classroom but more quiet in online classes.
- Case Student 3:  
Student C – requires language support but always willing to talk and confident about his ideas. Is active and enthusiastic in traditional and online classes but does not like using a camera.

## Research Lesson 1 (RL 1)

### Aims of RL1

We wanted students to start talking to each other more and overcome a barrier of expressing their ideas online. As we expected that most students would not want to talk using a microphone due to their shyness, we decided to use a group chat at which all students could communicate with each other during the lesson. We also wanted them to practise the target language of the lesson when typing their ideas in the group chat.

### **Post lesson discussion:**

When we discussed the lesson, we found out that all case students took an active part in the whole class discussion in the group chat. They particularly liked the lesson reflection stage when they were asked to express their impressions through emoticons. However, students required different time to type their answers which is why Student B was less active in the group chat than Student A and Student C.

### **Observations of case students**

- Student A: was reluctant to write his ideas first but became more active and enthusiastic when he read his classmates' ideas. Actively used the target language in his sentences.
- Student B: was less active in the group chat than her classmates but quite positive in her lesson reflection.
- Student C: was the quickest to communicate through the group chat and eager to use new vocabulary. Despite some minor language mistakes, he managed to chat to his classmates during all stages of the lesson.

### **Student Interview Feedback on RL1**

Quotes from the post-lesson interviews with the focal students that illustrate the lesson findings:

Student B: 'I love talking to my classmates through chat because I don't feel comfortable using my microphone. I didn't have enough time to type what I wanted to say to be honest, but I liked it very much anyway.'

In our next lesson we will:

- keep using the group chat to encourage students' communication.
- provide students more time to type their answers in the group chat.
- try to encourage students to start using their microphones more.

## **Research Lesson 2 (RL 2)**

### **Aims of RL2**

In this lesson we aimed to encourage students to overcome their fear of talking using microphones. From our experience we know that many students do not like how their voice sounds through a microphone and when they do not see their classmates' faces, they tend to think that they may make fun of them if they make a mistake. To address this problem, we decided to use a role play which would promote students talking loudly without the fear of being misunderstood. We planned to play a game called 'Experts'. According to the game, some students were given a task to investigate the lesson topic before the lesson. During the lesson, these students had to turn on their cameras and microphones and reply to their classmates' questions about the lesson topic.

### **Post lesson discussion:**

The lesson analysis revealed that students were more willing to talk using microphones than in previous lessons. Each student asked 'experts' a minimum one question. Case students acted as

'experts' and were given differentiated tasks for pre-lesson investigation. We noted that all case students enjoyed playing their roles and were very enthusiastic about it. They were well-prepared and active during the lesson. As for the group chat, which we used for the warm-up and reflection stages of the lesson, it worked very well with all students typing their ideas. This time we set a timer to ensure that all students have enough time to prepare what they would want to type in the chat. It helped all students to finish typing on time so no one felt disappointed about typing slower than their classmates.

### **Observations of case students**

- Student A: managed to overcome his shyness and was very sociable and ready to answer any question he was asked.
- Student B: was eager to respond to her classmates' questions and confident during the game.
- Student C: was well-prepared for the game and answered all questions. Did not want to use his camera first but changed his mind after seeing his classmates playing their roles.

### **Student Interview Feedback on RL2**

Quotes from the post-lesson interviews with the focal students that illustrate the lesson findings:

- Student A: 'I was stressed about this task first because I didn't want to use my camera. However, I liked it during the lesson. It was cool to be an expert.'
- Student B: 'This lesson I liked using my camera and acting like an expert. Also, it was very nice to see my classmates through cameras because it is much more interesting to communicate with people if you see their faces.'
- Student C: 'I never feel bad about talking and I think that an expert role was very suitable for me because I know a lot of facts. I liked seeing and hearing my classmates.'

### **In our next lesson we will:**

Focus on exploring how students' online communication can be encouraged in-class and out-of-class and provide opportunities for more students to communicate with their classmates using microphones and cameras.

## **Research Lesson 3 (RL 3)**

### **Aims of RL3**

We wanted to ensure that all students have time and opportunity to talk during the online lesson. We decided to use some project work activities that would require students to prepare four slides in pairs before the lesson. We planned to let students choose their pairs on their own and present their slides during the lesson using their cameras and microphones.

### **Post lesson discussion:**

When we discussed the lesson, we noted that this lesson was the most effective in terms of how much students communicated to each other in speaking though using microphones and writing in the group chat. All students could present their slides and discuss them. The case students were more

confident about using microphones and cameras, especially Student A. Some unexpected technical problems with the microphone of Student B made us worry about her confidence during the presentation but she did a great job. Even though she was stressed a little in the beginning, she eagerly responded to all her classmates' questions.

### Observations of case students

- Student A: gave a well-prepared PowerPoint presentation, demonstrating confidence to talk openly and enthusiastically in front of the camera. He maintained good eye contact with peers and was relaxed for the first time during the lesson study project period.
- Student B: was eager to reply to her classmates' questions about the slides she presented. Experienced some technical problems with her microphone in the beginning of her presentation which caused her to present last in the class. It caused some anxiety in her speech but her communicating with classmates after the presentation was effective and natural.
- Student C: made a good presentation, was much more comfortable using a camera compared to previous lessons. Struggled with one question due to misunderstanding some words but his partner helped him to answer the question.

### Student Interview Feedback on RL3

- Student A: 'I think everything in my presentation was perfect. Sometimes I feel disappointed if I prepare a lot but fail to present my work well. However, today, I was very confident and liked my performance.'
- Student B: 'I thought my microphone would not work at all and I would not be able to present. Luckily, I managed to turn it on and presented all my slides. I liked them very much and enjoyed answering questions about them.'
- Student C: 'Presenting my slides was interesting because I prepared very well. I forgot one word and didn't understand a question. I was a little disappointed but my classmates and teacher praised my work, so I felt better about it.'

## Findings

The results illustrate that the approaches we used were effective for developing students' communication. Group chats work well if students are asked simple questions that require short specific answers. They proved to be particularly useful for warm-ups and lesson reflection stages. Role plays are particularly helpful for shy and quiet students who do not feel comfortable about expressing their personal opinions. Interviewing students revealed that students noticed changes in their attitude toward English language lessons – as they built confidence, their motivation to study increased.

## Changes to practice

In future we will:

- Ensure that all online ESL lessons have activities that promote students' communication.
- Allow sufficient time for students to type their answers.
- Encourage students to use their microphones and cameras if they feel comfortable doing so.
- Develop new ways how role plays can be incorporated in online lessons.
- Continue exploring how to improve students' communication through the lesson study approach.

## Reflective evaluation

Overall, this lesson study project was challenging for the lesson study group as we planned, observed, and analysed lessons in the online mode. As we were unable to observe all students at the same time, we were particularly attentive to their voices, enthusiasm to lessons and how they communicated in the group chat. This experience was very useful for us as we had an extremely good opportunity to revise our teaching in the context of online learning. It also helped us understand the needs and motives of our students better and improved the class rapport.

## Next steps

For future study, we still need to explore more about the characteristics of the approaches we used in the current study in the context of online lessons. While we know that these approaches have a positive impact on students' communication online, the factors, which influence their successful use, remain relatively unknown. Therefore, we plan to continue to run some new lesson study cycles focusing on each of the approaches separately.

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