Using Written Synchronous Chat to Enhance Student Engagement and Learning in EFL Online Classrooms

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Abstract: *Teaching online has become a widely implemented strategy in different educational institutes, particularly after the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, online learning might render students' role passive unless innovative strategies are implemented. Instructors of online classes need strategies that would enhance students' engagement and interaction. Experimenting with various online learning platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, has opened the door for new learning tools to keep students engaged. One of these tools is the Chat box that exists in most of the applications used to deliver classes online. The purpose of this study was to examine students' perceptions of using the Chat box to write their answers and receive instant feedback in an EFL synchronous online classroom in a university branch in Lebanon. After being asked to use the Chat box for at least two times in their EFL classrooms, fifty-one students filled a questionnaire that was designed to assess their views about its usefulness and importance. Generally, the results revealed that more than half of the participants find it important to write in the Chat box and receive feedback from their instructor. Most of the participating students agreed that the Chat box allows them to go back to check their answers, to copy the links shared in class, and to learn from their friends' ideas and mistakes. Many respondents consider themselves more motivated to write in the Chat box than to speak and more eager to participate in class. Hence, this method could constitute a tool for instructors to identify students' level of engagement and to enhance their interaction levels. Asking students to write their answers in the chat box in an EFL synchronous online classroom, followed by an instant feedback, is likely to improve students' engagement and learning.*

Keywords: *Synchronous online chat, student motivation, student engagement, EFL classroom, online learning*

1. Introduction

Students who attend online classes may be hesitant to voice their ideas orally and might feel it easier to write their answers. Online learning might render students' role passive unless innovative strategies are implemented. Hence, instructors of online classes need strategies that would enhance students' engagement and interaction. Online platforms used in higher education (HR) to deliver virtual classes offer useful features that facilitate the interaction between instructors and learners and among learners themselves. Most of these applications, particularly Microsoft Teams, include a chat box that allows synchronous

communication, a necessary feature in EFL online classes that involve a lot of writing tasks, answers to comprehension questions, and reflections on discussed concepts.

EFL classes might constitute a frustrating environment for students who are required to participate and communicate while they are still in the process of mastering a new language. EFL instructors of online classes can make use of the chat box by asking students to answer questions and give their opinions, and then sharing oral and written feedback with them. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether asking students to write their answers in the chat box in an EFL synchronous online classroom, followed by an instant feedback, improves their engagement and learning.

1.1. Theoretical Approach

Constructivism is based on the premise that coming to knowledge involves a process of "constructing internal mental representations of the world" (Taber, 2019, p. 7). Thus, learning happens through a procedure of knowledge construction that relies on both the 'tools' (mental operations) and 'materials' (existing aspects providing the basis of understanding new concept) that a learner can reach. Constructivism entails that people are involved in constructing their own knowledge, with the reality being determined by the experiences they go through. Consequently, learning is an active process necessitating the existence of a sensory input. In order for students to learn, they should be engaged in doing something, a state that keeps them motivated and active.

A high level of engagement is indispensable for learning to happen. A teacher's role, then, is to adopt strategies that motivate students, providing them the opportunity to engage in active tasks.

"Constructivism emphasizes on learner centered, learner directed and collaborative style of teaching learning process in which learning is supported by teacher scaffolding and authentic tasks" (Dagar & Yadav, 2016, p. 2). This approach of learning can be strengthened through asking students to write their answers and ideas in the chat box, being involved in constructing and synthesizing ideas instead of being mere passive listeners. Their level of engagement would be enhanced by the active participation required of them. This aspect is especially important in EFL classrooms as motivation is an essential factor in the process of acquiring a new language and self-choice is fundamental to have a deeper knowledge and master a language (Attiyat et al., 2022).

1.2. Literature Review

Multiple previous experiences with virtual classroom learning have shown that many university instructors are using virtual learning platforms to deliver course material and not to enhance the interaction level of learners. Nevertheless, most online applications used in higher education offer innovative tools that facilitate learning, such as synchronous chat rooms or boxes. A study conducted by Bowler (2009) aimed at implementing and critically assessing the usage of online synchronous discussion (OSD). The method was reported by students to be effective especially for getting their questions answered instantly, keeping a record of the discussion and raising their understanding level. In addition, the OSD was an efficient means of communication for learners who normally tend not to contribute to class discussions. The study recommends building on previous models of technology use in teaching and learning and emphasize the use of constructivist and 'communal constructivist' principles to deliver future OSD.

Using online chatting can be a tool to increase the language acquisition and interaction of students, providing a suitable context for negotiation of meaning and development of language. Second language

(L2) learners have different knowledge levels, abilities and cultures. As a result, a multimedia environment should be created in a way to accommodate to different learning styles. "Through one-onone

conversations with the instructor, small group work, pairs, individual study of transcripts, and interviews, chat can accommodate difference learning styles" (Cahyani & Hoesny, 2011, p.1). Students had the impression that online chat provided them more opportunities than what they have in regular classes. Hwang et al. (2012) examined the use of STR technology which transforms speech input into text in real-time, synchronous online learning. The experiment showed that students found the mechanism easy and helpful and most of them considered it to be highly motivational. Moreover, the results reflected improvement in students' performance after they become familiar with STR.

Moreover, online communication through chat tends to be more challenging and capable of improving students' language and boosting their confidence (Cahyani & Hoesny, 2011). Eventually, their interaction level would be increasing when they reach positive outcomes from their participation. Many Higher Education institutes in western countries use chatrooms in online platforms to enhance student engagement (Studente et al., 2020). Student engagement and readiness to participate do not rely only on academic abilities, but also on different factors related to self-confidence and atmosphere. Beeman (2022) does not consider the academic ability to be an essential factor that hinders student participation. Quietness is mostly attributed to internal factors like students' views of themselves and external factors comprising insufficient time to think (Townsend & Fu, 1998).

In an attempt to explore pedagogical approaches that can be used in virtual classrooms, Beeman (2022) conducted interviews with quieter girls and their teachers to find out that using chats and nonverbal participation is a beneficial tool in an online classroom. Students felt more at ease to participate in class through nonverbal channels like chat. Some of them listed 'being more comfortable and less nervous' and 'alleviating the pressure caused by participation' as positive factors. "Non-verbal tools provide more time and space for quiet students to think about and revise their answers so they are perfectly formulated before sharing with the class" (Beeman, 2022, p. 8).

Eventually, synchronous chat communication allows students to give their comments on new concepts as they progress in their course content. They appreciate new concepts and are excited to share their views with others. According to Mtshali, Maistry and Govender (2015), interviews with students revealed that synchronous online chat is praised for many features. For instance, one of the advantages that was mentioned is that the chat room provides a long-lasting source where they can retrieve their lecturers' responses. Hence, the conversation can be recorded and saved as a reference that can be accessed after the session, a thing that is not common in a traditional classroom (Hejase, 2000).

Reflecting on the positive outcomes of online chatrooms, some students mentioned being able to ask questions and participate in an environment free of judgment. In fact, online chatrooms were considered safer environments for shy students than fac-to-face classrooms that accommodate for eloquent students only (Mtshali, Maistry & Govender, 2015). Broadbent and Lodge (2021) conducted a study to explore higher-education students' opinions regarding the usage of live chat to seek help in online academic settings. The participating students (246) reported positive outcomes of using the live chat technology in their online sessions. They particularly valued the ability of live chat to offer fast, realtime, and convenient support. Online learners expressed positive opinions about the greater satisfaction and the better care they received from the teaching team. The writers strongly recommended using live chat in higher education as an efficient means of communication between students and teachers.

2. Methodology

The current research is a case study conducted in a private university branch in Shouf, Lebanon, to examine students' perceptions of synchronous chat in online classes to write and receive feedback. The sample comprised students who were taught under similar conditions: EFL learners with Arabic as native

language; students have the same instructor who speaks English as a second language and has already applied at least two times the chat box to ask students to write their answers and ideas and give them feedback in return.

The participating students are in elementary and intermediate English-as-a-foreign language levels. Students should have experienced the usage of the chat box in at least two of their sessions. After they have experimented with using the chat box to write their answers and ideas, they filled a questionnaire designed to examine their attitudes toward this experience. To test the reliability of the data the researcher ran a one sample reliability test using IBM SPSS 20.

3. Findings and Analysis

The results revealed that students often face difficulties staying engaged in online classrooms with more than half of them (51%) confirming this statement. Hence, the need for motivational strategies to keep students engaged in online EFL classes was reinforced by the results. The factors that were mostly listed by students as preventing them from totally being engaged comprised 'The connection makes it hard to stay focused' (77.8%), 'I feel bored' (42.2%), and 'I get distracted by my phone and other things' (33.3%). It seems that a large number of students go through boredom and distractions in their online sessions, the thing that may hinder their learning process. In addition, about nine percent of the students said that they 'feel hesitant to speak online,' emphasizing the previous observation that some students may feel reluctant to speak (Beeman, 2022) and are in need for safe environments to enhance their participation.
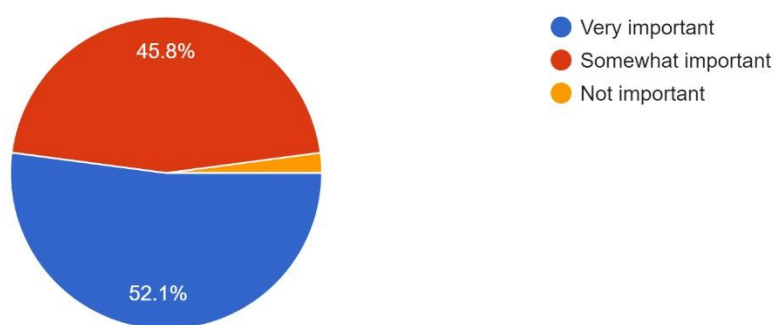

Fig. 1: Importance of using the chat box in a classroom

As figure 1 shows, the greatest majority of students consider it important to use the chat box and receive feedback from their instructor in their online EFL class with 52.1% saying it is very important and 45.8% percent saying that it is somehow important. Likewise, students' answers revealed that they recommend that the chat box be used to write their questions and answers and that the instructor gives his/her feedback directly after reading them. 51.1% answered that they definitely recommend using the chat box and 48.8 % answered that they recommend using it sometimes. Similarly, Broadbent and Lodge (2021) reported positive students' perceptions and they highly recommended using live chat in higher education online environments to improve communication between students and instructors.

Regarding the specific features that the participating students found useful in the chat box, as Table 1 shows, 'I can go back to my answer and check what I wrote' received a high percentage of agreement with 55.3 answering by Agree and 42.6 answering by Strongly Agree. Similar results were reported by Mtshali, Maistry and Govender (2015) whose study revealed that one of the advantages the chat room offers, as was mentioned by learners, is that it provides a long-term resource where data can be stored. Hejase (2000) emphasized the capability of recording the conversation and accessing it after the session has ended.

Moreover, 87.3% (Table 1) of the students agree that they can 'take instant feedback from their instructor and avoid similar mistakes.' This demonstrates the efficiency of the chat box in terms of receiving satisfactory feedback from instructors. Broadbent and Lodge (2021) emphasized the convenient support that online chat provides, stating that online learners had positive views about the great support provided by the teaching team.

In response to the statement 'The chat box encourages me to participate in class,' 80.8% agreed, a result that reinforces previous research emphasizing that chat communication is a booster for student participation and engagement. Bowler (2019) emphasizes the 'communal constructivist' value of building on technology models to foster online synchronous discussion in second language classrooms. Online chatting can provide a means of enhancing student interaction, meaning negotiation, and language development.

TABLE I: Useful features in a chat box

Choose the answer that mostly reflects your level of agreement on the listed features of a chat box in a TFL online classroom.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Answer
I can go back to my answer and check what I wrote	2.0%	0.0%	51.0%	39.2%	7.8%
The chat box allows me to copy the text and links shared in the classroom	0.0%	3.9%	49.0%	37.3%	9.8%
The chat box encourages me to participate in class	9.8%	7.8%	51.0%	23.5%	7.8%
I feel more motivated to write in the chat box than to speak	9.8%	17.6%	41.2%	23.5%	7.8%
I can see my friends' mistakes and learn from them	3.9%	3.9%	54.9%	29.4%	7.8%
I can take an instant feedback from my instructor and avoid similar mistakes next time	2.0%	3.9%	45.1%	41.2%	7.8%
The chat box helps me to organize my ideas	5.9%	3.9%	52.9%	29.4%	7.8%

Another useful feature that was praised by students is the chat box motivational capacity. As Table 1 shows, 64.7% of the participants agreed that they 'feel more motivated to write in the chat box than to speak.' According to Mtshali, Maistry and Govender (2015) a number of students consider online chat a free-of-judgement environment where they are able to ask questions and express themselves even if they are somehow shy and not highly eloquent. Other features that were found to be useful by students comprised 'The chat box helps me to organize my ideas (82.3%) and 'I can see my friends' mistakes and learn from them' (84.3).

TABLE II: Important criteria in using a chat box in online sessions

How important is each of the following criteria in choosing whether to use chat box in online sessions?	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	No Answer
Being engaged in the classroom	3.9%	31.4%	52.9%	11.8%
Being motivated to participate	2.0%	29.4%	58.8%	9.8%
Not being distracted by my phone and other things	5.9%	31.4%	52.9%	9.8%
Learning about the spelling of new words	5.9%	31.4%	52.9%	9.8%
Learning about mistakes in sentence structure	2.0%	27.5%	60.8%	9.8%
Grasping the content delivered in the session	0.0%	47.1%	41.2%	11.8%
Avoiding speaking and write my answer	13.7%	39.2%	33.3%	13.7%
Identifying my points of weakness in grammar	2.0%	27.5%	60.8%	9.8%

In terms of the criteria that students find important in using the chat box in their online sessions,

'Leaning about mistakes in sentence structure' was perceived as the most important (60.8%), followed by 'Identifying my points of weakness in grammar' and 'Being motivated to participate' (58.8%). It seems that students appreciate technological tools that foster their language learning processes, particularly in terms of improving their writing skills though enhanced participation. Cahyani and Hoesn (2011) maintained that online chat challenges students and improves thier language skills and confidence.   In answer to the open-ended question 'What strategies has your instructor used to keep you engaged in your online sessions?' students mostly mentioned 'asking frequent questions' as one of the most important strategies. One student wrote, "Asking questions in a continuous form to make Students permanently participate with them, in addition to taking answers on the chat box and marking them." Another student said, "Communicate with the instructor and using the chat box to solve the questions." In addition, some students mentioned being divided in groups in different chat rooms to work on a given task. This shows that instructors can use online chat to keep students motivated by asking them questions and providing needed feedback. Studente et al. (2020) affirm the usage of chatrooms in multiple higher education in online platforms with the aim of enhancing student engagement. Also, students find it helpful to be able to think about their answers and share their ideas with their peers before responding. As Beeman agrees (2022), non-verbal technology tools provide students the time needed to formulate and revise their responses before sharing them.

4. Conclusions

Using technological and innovative tools in education is helpful and important provided that they are simple and motivational, such as the Synchronous Chat-box tool. The vast majority of the students subjects of this research confirm this finding with statistical significance. The specific features that seem to be useful with using the chat box for written answers followed by instructors' feedback comprise enhanced participation and motivation, better interaction and language learning, and increased capacity of thinking and formulating ideas. Chen and Wang (2008) highlighted the important and different ways that text chatting can offer to increase interaction during synchronous teaching and learning. In fact, text chat can provide a supplementary and complementary resource when verbal communication fails. It can also be used by students and teachers to summarize and review key points of previous verbal exchange. In addition, this tool is helpful for students to develop organizational skills, being a durable resource to retrieve needed feedback and information. Using such a tool is efficient, effective, simple, and gives the students the time needed to provide accurate and well formulated answers without the pressure of the traditional ways of communication.

The Synchronous Chat-box tool can be perceived as an example and as an indication for similar simple and innovative tools that can be developed without complicating the educational experience and without consuming the attention of the students with methods and tools on the expense of their engagement in the content of their study. One factor that needs to present for achieving positive outcomes from the use of such innovative tools in online learning is the faculty attitudes and willingness to explore them (Ezzedine, 2018).

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