

### 3. Students' perceptions of working in breakout rooms in online EFL classrooms



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#### Resumen

Este estudio investiga cómo los estudiantes adultos del inglés como lengua extranjera perciben su interacción cuando trabajan juntos en las salas virtuales de las clases en línea. Treinta y cuatro alumnos de nivel intermedio y avanzado realizaron diferentes tareas en las salas virtuales de Zoom y participaron en entrevistas semi-estructuradas al finalizar sus cursos. La investigación fue realizada durante un año en dos cursos de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los alumnos fueron asignados aleatoriamente a una de las salas y realizaron diferentes tareas mientras trabajaban en pares o grupos pequeños. Los resultados indican que los estudiantes perciben ventajas y desventajas al utilizar las salas virtuales.

**Palabras clave:** *salas virtuales, interacción en pares, curso de lengua en línea.*

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## Abstract

The study investigates how adult EFL learners perceived their interaction when they were working together in breakout rooms in online language classes. Thirty-four intermediate and advanced EFL learners performed different speaking tasks in Zoom breakout rooms and participated in semi-structured interviews at the end of the course. The research was conducted during an academic year in two EFL courses. Students were randomly assigned to one of the breakout rooms, and they completed different tasks. They worked in pairs or in small groups and were required to video record their interactions. Findings indicate that language learners perceive virtual rooms have both advantages and disadvantages when used in online language classrooms.

**Keywords:** *breakout rooms, peer interaction, online language classroom.*

## Résumé

Cette étude est une recherche sur la manière dont les étudiants adultes en anglais langue étrangère perçoivent leur interaction quand ils travaillent en groupes dans les salles de classe virtuelles. Trente quatre étudiants de niveau intermédiaire et avancé ont réalisé différentes tâches dans les salles de classe virtuelles de Zoom et ont participé à des entretiens semi-structurés à la fin du cours d'anglais. La recherche a été réalisée pendant un an dans deux cours d'anglais langue étrangère. Les étudiants ont été répartis au hasard dans une des classes et ont réalisé différentes tâches tout en travaillant entre pairs ou par petits groupes. Les résultats indiquent qu'utiliser les salles de classe virtuelles en cours de langue en ligne offre tout autant d'avantages que d'inconvénients importants dont il faudra tenir compte au moment de planifier le cours.

**Mots clés:** *salles de classe virtuelles, interaction en couple, cours de langue en ligne.*

## Introduction

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, second language classes all around the world switched from the face-to-face classroom to an online environment. As a result of this, students and teachers were faced with new challenges. One of these included providing learners with enough opportunities to speak and interact with their peers in the online language classroom. Thus, many teachers had to rely on different tools to afford students with chances to communicate during lessons. One available option was to use breakout rooms offered by Zoom. However, teachers did not know whether this platform would enable learners to practice their language skills as they normally do in a face-to-face classroom, because of the unprecedented teaching conditions imposed by the lockdown, teachers and students were left to their own devices in terms of how they were going to work and learn in the online environment. There was a real need for research focusing on the use of breakout rooms in foreign language classes to promote language production and to foster peer interaction (Chandler, 2016; Saltz y Heckman, 2020). Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to explore learners' perceptions of working in breakout rooms to find any benefits or challenges when using this tool in the online EFL classroom. This investigation sheds light on critical issues that teachers should consider when using breakout rooms in their classes. The findings are discussed in relation to prior studies, and the pedagogical implications are also addressed.

## Literature review

### *Peer interaction in the foreign language classroom*

Over the past 30 years, peer interaction and its role in the language learning process have been researched in the field of second language acquisition (Watanabe, 2014). Interactions between learners, native speakers and learners have been widely researched in laboratories and in the context of english as a second language (ESL) and english as a foreign language (EFL) class-

rooms (for a review, see Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Researchers are becoming more interested in investigating the interactions that occur when learners work together in second and foreign language classrooms (see review by Philp et al., 2010). Peer interaction provides a context for learners to communicate in the second language since it allows them to receive input, notice language forms, produce modified output, experiment with the language, and co-construct language knowledge (Philp & Mackey, 2010; Swain et al., 2002).

### **Pedagogical reasons for peer interaction in the language classroom**

A language classroom that includes peer interaction allows the learners to participate and to get involved in the lessons, as opposed to the traditional teacher fronted classroom where the instructor is usually the one in charge of transmitting the knowledge, and the learners are just the recipients (e.g., the grammar translation method). Researchers who have investigated teachers' talking time and students' talking time in the classroom have found that teachers tend to dominate most of the interaction (e.g., Antón, 1999; Inceçay, 2010; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Zare-Behtash & Azarnia, 2015). Nunan pointed out that teachers produce from 50 to 80% of the classroom talk. Teachers have control of the class, and they decide who will participate most of the time. Consequently, not all the learners have an opportunity to speak, and their talking time is limited. One way of affording learners more L2 speaking time in the second/foreign language classrooms is to include group and pair work (Long & Porter, 1985). By using language tasks where students work together, teachers increase learners' chances of speaking in class.

Another reason for using peer interaction in the ESL/EFL classroom is that it provides a context where students may feel less anxious when using the L2 (see Mackey & Philp, 1985). Philp et al. (2010) explain that when adult learners work together and recognize each other as equals, they may feel more willing to seek assistance and experiment with the L2, and they may be less concerned about making mistakes. Long and Porter (1985) also explain that group work offers learners a less stressful atmosphere and it "provides a relatively intimate setting, and usually a more supportive envi-

ronment” (p. 211). In a study conducted to compare the feedback provided between native speaker-learner and learner-learner, Sato & Lyster (2016) found that peers felt more comfortable, less stressed, and more willing to talk about the language when they interacted with a peer than with a native speaker.

### **Including breakout rooms in the online english as a foreign language classroom**

According to Chandler (2016), “a breakout room is a virtual space separate from the main online tutorial room” (p. 16). In an online language class, the teacher can group students into smaller rooms during the same video-call. Breakout rooms provide an opportunity for students to work together more privately, since within each room, only those included in the team can hear their peers speaking and read the messages in the chat box and the information presented on the screen. This virtual room function can be used to recreate pair and group work, which occurs face-to-face in the language classroom. Breakout rooms increase the learners’ speaking time as they interact with each other. According to Blackstone and Oldmixon (2016) “breakout sessions provide opportunities to implement active learning techniques and create a less intimidating instructional environment” (p. 117), and they also explain that large classes can negatively affect student learning. Therefore, breakout rooms offer an option to avoid this detrimental effect.

In an online class that includes breakout rooms, the teacher can monitor every room to help students when needed, answer questions, and check that they are working with the assigned activities. This is similar to what teachers do in the physical classroom when they circulate around the classroom to supervise learners’ performance. Thies (2011), explains that “students learn more and have a more satisfactory college experience when they actively participate in rigorous learning environments, embedded in strong communities, characterized by high levels of interpersonal interaction with their peers and faculty members” (p. 129).

Prior to covid-19 restrictions, online classes were not as commonly offered by schools. Consequently, there was less research focusing on this top-

ic. Some researchers in the area of L2 teaching were interested in how technology could be used to provide learners with opportunities to practice speaking and writing with people from other parts of the world. This was known as telecollaboration in L2 learning (see Can & Silman-Karanfi, 2021), which is a broad term referring to online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2007). Telecollaboration was not only restricted to breakout rooms. Instead, it included any type of interactions by L2 learners on social media such as Twitter, Whatsapp, Skype, and others.

The restrictions caused by the pandemic triggered serious and sudden changes in the education field worldwide. Telecollaboration was no longer just an additional tool. The situation forced teachers to learn how to use synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication to teach their lessons. This posed a great challenge for teacher trainers as well. The technology necessary to teach online classes already existed, but there was little certainty of how effective it was going to be. In addition, educators were not sure whether students would respond well to this new teaching modality. Specifically, teachers were unaware of all the limitations that they and their students would face during this new stage, and more importantly, they did not know how they would overcome these shortcomings. Thus, a new line of research was born. During the two years of covid restrictions, research focusing on online teaching grew, and new research topics relevant to SLA emerged. Some of these new themes are: L2 teachers' classroom experiences and teachers' relationships with their students (see Can and Silman-Karanfi, 2021), strategies that L2 teachers can use to plan and manage online classes (see Abdel Latif, 2021), boredom in online L2 classes (Dera-khshan, 2021), among others.

The British Council conducted a study in April 2020 comprising three surveys to educators in more than 150 countries. Their students' ages ranged from 3 to 18 years or older. The aim was to find teachers' and teacher educators' needs during covid restrictions, to know their challenges related to online teaching and to discover which resources teachers required to do their job successfully during the pandemic. The study revealed that teachers needed to learn more about online games and short activities. Teachers also wanted to attend webinars about online teaching techniques, and they commonly responded that they wanted to learn new approaches that would enable

group work among their students; they also wished they could learn new ideas on how to design and implement enjoyable and meaningful tasks during their online classes.

Even though there have been abundant recent studies aiming at online teaching during the covid crisis, only a few have focused on the use of breakout rooms for pedagogical purposes. Moreover, there is only a limited number of studies focusing on learners' perspectives of working in breakout rooms (see Nisa, Prameswari & Alawiyah, 2021; Vergara-Mendoza, Paccha-Soto & Carabajo-Romero 2022; Bamidele, 2021; Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020). Generally, these studies have sought to discover how learners feel about working in breakout rooms during an L2 class.

Nisa, Prameswari and Alawiyah (2021) investigated learners' perspectives about their willingness to speak. According to their findings, learners felt that their interest in participating increased once they had been working in a breakout room session. In total, participants worked in four breakout sessions, so no conclusion was made about how learners perceive working in breakout rooms over longer periods.

Another similar study was conducted by Vergara-Mendoza, Paccha-Soto and Carabajo-Romero (2022) in Ecuador with 100 baccalaureate english learners. Using a questionnaire, the aim was to explore learners' perceptions on how breakout rooms can boost oral english production. Their findings revealed that overall, learners perceived that breakout rooms allowed them to feel more comfortable when speaking, and they felt that this also helped them to talk about a variety of topics in english. Interestingly, most students preferred to work in teams of four students.

Bamidele (2021) used a mixed methods approach to explore ESL learners' perceptions of the use of break-out rooms in an english class research project. Their surveys and semi-structured interviews revealed that students had very positive perceptions about the use of breakout rooms, as they felt that it made the class more exciting, and it increased their motivation.

On the same vein, Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar (2020) conducted a study in Colombia investigating how sixth grade elementary L2 learners perceive the way in which foreign language learning and culture relate during telecollaboration sessions with partners from France and Sweden. Data was collected through questionnaires, teachers' field notes, focus groups

and video recordings. Their findings revealed that learners were able to reflect spontaneously on the topics discussed. In addition, telecollaboration gave participants opportunities to speak and think thoroughly about their culture and about foreign cultures.

Thus far, most of these studies have relied on learners' responses to questionnaires and interviews after they have worked in a few breakout room sessions. As a result, they have focused on students' perspectives over a short period, but few studies have explored how learners perceive the use of breakout rooms over an entire semester of instruction. In addition, even though these studies have revealed that the use of breakout rooms can motivate students in an L2 class and increase their chances of speaking, further studies are needed to shed light on students' perception on the kinds of interaction that occur when working in breakout rooms in foreign language classes over longer periods. The current study attempts to address these shortcomings by answering the following research question:

What are EFL students' perspectives about working in Zoom breakout rooms during an entire semester in an online course?

## Methodology

### Design

Qualitative research often involves a process of exploring, describing, and explaining how individuals construct their social world in their natural setting. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) describe qualitative research as "effective ways to investigate language acquisition in the classroom" (p. 119). This exploratory study relied on a qualitative research approach to identify learners' perspectives about working within breakout rooms in the online English classroom. Creswell (2007) explains that qualitative research allows participants to share their stories and make their voices heard, and it helps researchers understand the context in which individuals experience the phenomenon under study. Therefore, following a qualitative approach allowed us to explore the learners' experiences when joining the virtual space away from the main session.

## Participants

The participants were 34 university students from a public institution in Mexico studying English as a foreign language in two online courses. There were 24 females and 10 males, whose ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old. One of the courses was categorized as an advanced EFL class, and there were in total 19 students. The other class was an intermediate course with 15 students.

## Data collection procedure and instruments for data collection

### *The online classroom*

The study was conducted during an academic year divided into two semesters. The videoconferencing lessons occurred daily via Zoom, and they were video recorded. Each lesson was structured in the following way: The class content (e.g., writing process, grammar, vocabulary, TOEFL listening, etc.) was presented in the main session with the whole class, and some grammar exercises were answered individually. Then the students were randomly assigned to one of the breakout, and they worked with different tasks and activities. Once students finished the tasks and exercises, they returned to the main session to share the information discussed in the virtual room.

Tasks were designed following Ellis and Shintani (2013) and Skehan (1996) criteria which establish that there should be a focus on meaning, some sort of gap (e.g., learners express their opinion, convey information, etc.), learners' reliance on their own resources, a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language, and some sort of relationship to mirror real world activities. Typical breakout room tasks included picture description, decision-making, problem-solving and sequencing/narrative tasks, and collaborative essay writing. The activities used were handouts of grammar exercises and textbook exercises. Board games and online games were also part of the sessions.

Students worked in pairs or in small groups, and they were required to video record their interactions. To get attendance for the day, they had to upload the video recording to Microsoft TEAMS. The teacher joined each room for a couple of minutes and took notes of pair or group work. Due to time restrictions, the instructor could not enter every breakout room in each lesson but took detailed field notes of the video recordings of students' interactions. Finally, once the breakout room time was over, the learners returned to the main session, and they shared their answers with the rest of the class.

Instruments used for data collection

### ***Online classroom observations and video recording of lessons***

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), "observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors and artifacts in the social setting" (p. 143). The social setting of this study was the online English as a foreign language classroom at a Mexican university. Once the breakout rooms were created and the students were assigned to one of them, the course instructor entered each session and observed the learners' interaction for a few minutes. Moreover, students recorded their team and pair work to be later analyzed. Every class was also video recorded and detailed field notes were taken to complement the information.

### ***Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were used at the end of the language course to have a full understanding of the learners' perceptions and views of working with their peers and to know more about what happened during their interactions in the breakout rooms. At the end of the course, each student was interviewed individually using Zoom, and the interviews were conducted both in English and Spanish depending on the learners' preferred language. All the interviews were transcribed for data analysis. The analysis of the interviews was concurrent and ongoing with data collection.

## **Data analysis**

Saldaña (2013) explains that the process of analyzing data in qualitative research is cyclical, and it involves a method of *recoding* the information. The data obtained through the different research instruments was analyzed individually and the information was then triangulated. The main source of data was obtained from the learners' interviews. Saldaña's *first cycle coding* and *second cycle pattern codes* were used to analyze the data.

Following *first cycle coding* (Saldaña, 2013), a *preliminary exploratory analysis* (see Creswell, 2007) was conducted to identify and initially assign codes to data units. *Descriptive coding*, *in vivo coding*, and *emotion coding* were implemented to categorize codes in this first cycle, and ATLAS.ti software was used to label the information. These approaches helped us get an insight into the students' perspectives about breakout rooms, online english classes, and their peers. Once the initial coding was conducted, *pattern coding* was used to group the codes into categories and themes. To do this, the preliminary set of codes was restructured to form a list of categories through three rounds of *iterations of analysis* (Brown, 1999; Saldaña, 2013) to label the central themes that best answer the research questions of the study.

## **Findings and discussions**

The study's research question is concerned with the students' perspectives of breakout rooms in an online EFL class. The data emerged mainly from the semi-structured interviews, and the learners' responses were divided into three main categories: benefits of breakout rooms, drawbacks of breakout rooms and activities implemented in breakout rooms. Each category was further divided into subcategories. This section discusses the results and provides excerpts from the participants' interviews to illustrate the learners' views about their experience in the virtual rooms.

## **Benefits of breakout rooms**

In line with previous studies (e.g. Bamidele 2021; Nisa, Prameswari & Alawiyah 2021; Vergara-Mendoza, Paccha-Soto & Carabajo-Romero, 2022), most students perceived that working within the breakout rooms in the online EFL classroom was a positive experience. Learners explained that the main advantage of breakout rooms was having more opportunities to participate and to use the foreign language; the participants also mentioned other important benefits such as boosting their confidence, making effective use of breakout room features, and working with their classmates.

### **Having opportunities to participate and to use the foreign language**

Eighteen students claimed that the breakout room sessions afforded them opportunities to use the L2, and nine students said that it helped them to interact with their peers. For example, Lily and Rachel, in excerpts 1 and 2, explained that they were more willing to participate in the session when they joined the breakout rooms.

#### ***Excerpt 1: Lily***

I would say that an advantage was that it helped us participate, well at least in my perception, when I was in a general class with all my classmates, some of us felt very shy and we didn't want to participate, but when we went to the breakout rooms, well I felt a little more comfortable because it was just us, a smaller group. I participated and there was more interaction.

#### ***Excerpt 2: Raquel***

You are more willing to participate and speak. In my other classes, I hadn't had the chance to interact, it was only grammar, but through speaking is the only way you can learn more. I felt fine trying to speak.

According to both Lily and Rachel, they were more willing to speak in the virtual rooms since they felt more comfortable. This finding is similar to those found by Nisa, Prameswari and Alawiyah (2021), who discovered their participants were more willing to speak and participate when they joined the breakout rooms.

Other students mentioned that breakout rooms were particularly useful in the EFL class because they could actually use the language and practice speaking and pronunciation. They perceived that in the main session not all learners had a chance to participate and produce the foreign language, but the virtual rooms offered them an opportunity to speak. This finding resembles one of the discoveries by Vergara Mendoza, Paccha Soto and Carabajo Romero (2022), who found that most of their participants perceived that their pronunciation had improved a lot as a result of the use of breakout rooms.

### ***Excerpt 3: Madeline***

In classes like the english class, it is necessary to use the breakout rooms because the most important part to learn a language is to be able to practice it. If we don't use the breakout rooms, there are fewer opportunities to practice english, or no opportunities at all. For classes like this one, it is important to use the breakout rooms more often.

### ***Excerpt 4: Linda***

These (breakout rooms) help you like with pronunciation and to keep on speaking because in the main session, we cannot all participate. Then this space is to practice it; it is the space where we can speak the language the most.

### **Boosting learner's confidence by working in small groups**

Mackey and Philp (1998) explain that peer interaction may offer a context where students feel more confident and less anxious when using the L2. The interviews revealed that sixteen students perceived that breakout rooms hel-

ped them to boost their confidence since they were working in smaller groups. Learners mentioned that they felt safer about sharing their ideas and using the foreign language as illustrated in excerpts 6 and 7.

#### ***Excerpt 5: Violet***

I liked that I didn't have the whole class listening to me what I was saying. It is really uncomfortable because when you talk, Zoom puts you in the front. When you talk, you are the first person; everyone is on the phone. For example, you are the protagonist. It's like everyone is looking at you and by force because they cannot look anywhere else because it's the computer. So, the breakout rooms saved me from those situations. And it is way easier to share opinions.

#### ***Excerpt 6: Posey***

We are ashamed to speak in another language that is not ours, and to be able to speak with a smaller group of the class, you felt a little more secure. I am a completely different person in a large class.

Both, Violet and Posey, explained that they felt more at ease when participating in the breakout rooms since they were participating with a smaller group of students. This finding is similar to the one reported in the study by Vergara Mendoza, Paccha Soto and Carabajo Romero (2022) where participants perceived breakout rooms allowed them to feel more comfortable when using the foreign language.

According to students' responses, some of them felt that when working in the virtual rooms, they shared similar feelings and views about learning English in an online environment. For instance, in excerpt 7 Jose explained that he perceived he was in the same path as his peers when learning the foreign language with the same concerns and uncertainties. This finding goes hand in hand with Philp and Mackey (2010), who state that adult learners tend to ask for help more and to be less worried about their mistakes when they work in a group where they feel like equals. In this study, ten participants perceived that they created a more supportive environment in the breakout rooms.

***Excerpt 7: José***

We were all in the same situation. No one was presumptuous. We were at the same level, and we had the same doubts and fears in the online environment. We had empathy for each other.

**Making effective use of breakout room features**

Interestingly, learners explained that a benefit of the breakout rooms involved the use of technological features, which facilitated their task performance. Four participants liked that they could share screen or work on the same documents at the same time. Violet explains the experiences of using different tools in excerpt 8.

***Excerpt 8: Violet***

I liked that we could share the screen and stuff, and we could do it together in Google documents because you can actually see them (classmates) typing something in the document instead of having to write on the same paper and having an issue of who writes what and making a mess out of it. You can edit, you can move, you can add, you can delete, and you can change something.

Another feature that students found beneficial was the recording tool. Surprisingly, seven students explained that they liked being recorded because it helped assess their own performance and how they interacted with their peers.

***Excerpt 9: Anna***

I also liked that we could record our interaction, to look at myself and my classmates. To be able to see the interaction, and you learn about yourself. Because normally, in a class you cannot rewind it to see how you act and what you did. With the recordings I could learn about myself, and how I work with my team.

***Excerpt 10: Alina***

I practice english alone with songs, but the advantage of asking us to record the interaction is that it makes you practice english more.

**Working with classmates**

Fourteen students perceived that breakout rooms allowed them to talk to their classmates and get to know them in the online class. Learners explained that the virtual rooms offered them the opportunity to meet and to work with people who they normally do not talk to in the face-to-face (F2F) classroom; thus, they created a sense of community (Baralt et al., 2016, Palloff y Pratt, 1999, Solares, 2014, Thies, 2011, Leaver y Wills, 2005). In *excerpts 11* and *12*, both Karen and Claudia mentioned that the breakout rooms had gotten them out of their usual routine in the F2F classroom where they worked with their same friends all the time.

***Excerpt 11: Karen***

You get to work with everyone, you don't get to work with just... I have one friend, you get out of your comfort zone, and you get along with other people and you get to know more people in your class.

***Excerpt 12: Claudia***

We wouldn't get together with people like we got in the breakout room because we are used to one specific group of friends. In person normally when the teacher said get together, we got with the same, and now it made us get together with people with whom we never had gotten together.

As explained in excerpts 11 and 12, breakout rooms allowed learners to interact with people who they usually never talked to in the F2F classroom. In some cases, participants mentioned that in the courses where teachers did not use breakout rooms, they did not even have the opportunity to meet their classmates as Edgard and Melina explain in excerpts 13 and 14.

***Excerpt 13: Edgard***

In my classes where we didn't use breakout rooms, I didn't even get to know my classmates, and now in this class you get to talk to people, and you get to know them a little. And, well is much better.

***Excerpt 14: Melina***

It allowed us to interact with our classmates and you got the chance to get to know them because in other courses we didn't have that chance, and sometimes we just went to classes. We finished the semester, and that was it. We didn't even know who (1998) was in class. We just read the names on the screen, and that's how we know our other classmates existed.

Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) explain that the longer learners stay together, and the more time they spend with each other, the more likely they are to bond and become friends. Kos studied mix-aged EFL secondary classrooms and found that a pair of students who worked collaboratively on tasks may have created this type of collaboration because they had established a friendship. Similarly, in the current study, some learners mentioned that breakout rooms helped them to get to know their peers better and to develop friendships (Excerpt 15). This was important considering that during the pandemic, these students had not already met each other and lacked chances of socializing face to face with their peers.

***Excerpt 15: Madeline***

Another advantage of the breakout rooms because we are just starting, and we haven't had the opportunity to go to F2F classes. You don't know anyone, so the breakout rooms helped me to meet my classmates and to be able to talk to them and make friends.

## **Drawbacks of breakout rooms**

Learners perceived that working within the breakout rooms in the online english class also posed some disadvantages like a lack of collaboration from some students, a sense of boredom if used repeatedly, a need of teacher's presence within the rooms, and a limited amount of time to finish the activities. Moreover, the students also described some disadvantages that were not directly related to the breakout rooms but to their online classes experiences and affected their interaction in the virtual rooms. These included problems with technology and distractors at home.

### **Lack of collaboration**

The most recurrent disadvantage perceived by learners involved the absence of collaboration in some virtual rooms. Six students explained that few classmates muted their microphones when they entered the room, and they did not participate in the activities. Consequently, this affected their task performance, and some students had to complete the activity on their own. In excerpts 16 and 17, Anna and Yvette share their experience when they worked in groups where students did not want to work in the breakout rooms.

#### ***Excerpt 16: Anna***

A lack of participation... if I didn't do it, no one did anything. I was the one who started the breakout room, and everything was in silence. I was like hi, we have to do this. I had to open the document and say, I am going to share my screen, or I am going to start recording. You want to motivate the other person and the other person hardly says hi or something, and I end up doing everything by myself.

#### ***Excerpt 17: Yvette***

I noticed that some of my classmates do not participate in the breakout rooms. They turn off their cameras and microphones. They don't speak, and

they don't participate. I just stayed there talking on my own and I asked them "hey I am here, do you want to say something?" Then nobody communicated. Nobody turned on their microphones or their cameras.

These examples of lack of participation by some of the students in a team have been observed in previous studies focusing on breakout rooms. For example, Chandler (2016) explained that breakout rooms can make it quite easy for one or two participants to take entire control of a task while the rest of the team does not get involved at all. According to Chandler (2016), this seems to happen more in large classes, so breakout rooms may encourage more student participation when they are implemented with groups that have fewer than fifteen students. This may enable the teacher to monitor each team better.

### **Routinary lessons**

A disadvantage mentioned by only four students was that they thought breakout rooms could become a routine when used frequently. This resembles one of the findings reported by Kruk and Zawodniak (2020). In their study, learners felt bored in their practical English classes when "teachers conduct the classes in the same way" (Kruk and Zawodniak, 2020 p. 184). Their study shows that learners become uninterested when the english class becomes monotonous, and predictable. Even though their study did not focus on the use of break out rooms, it revealed that learners need and want a certain level of unpredictability in their classes. Future research could investigate how to avoid predictability and monotony when using breakout rooms.

### ***Excerpt 18: Alice***

At the beginning it was a novelty, wow, the breakout rooms, but if it was something used daily, it was like the excitement was taken away, and if you are in a breakout room where a classmate doesn't participate, you have no motivation. If we used them sporadically, the students ask: when are we going to use them again?

## **A need for the teacher in the breakout room**

The teacher joined each breakout room for a couple of minutes, so students spent most of the time working on their own with the assigned activities. In the interviews, four participants expressed that, in their opinion, a disadvantage of the breakout room was that the teacher could not monitor them all the time.

### ***Excerpt 19: Jane***

This can also be a disadvantage because the teacher can't be in all of the breakout rooms at the same time, and sometimes when the teacher wasn't in the breakout rooms, some of the classmates weren't doing what we were supposed to do, or we got distracted or... I think that was one of the biggest disadvantages... that the teacher couldn't be there to make sure everyone was doing what they were supposed to do.

## **Limited amount of time**

Six students explained that a disadvantage of working within breakout rooms was the time restrictions. Each activity was assigned a time limit, and students had to go back to the main session to share their answers with the rest of the class. There were some lessons where learners were not able to finish the tasks and were required to complete the assignments at home. In the interviews, the participants declared that when there was not enough time, they had to do the activities individually.

### ***Excerpt 20: Edgar***

More exercises could be individual because sometimes I could not finish because we were all concentrated in one answer that we couldn't finish, so we ended up doing the activities individually. The time to finish was limited.

## **Problems with technology and distractors at home**

Some learners explained that they also had technological issues such as bad internet connection, hardware malfunctions (e.g., the microphone was not working), and problems with Zoom's platform (e.g., not being able to access the session). For instance, in excerpt 22 Lily explained that when a peer's microphone failed, they could not practice speaking or participate in the interaction.

### ***Excerpt 21: Madeline***

About the breakout rooms, there were some disadvantages or problems that we couldn't control like bad internet connectivity.

### ***Excerpt 22: Lily***

Some classmates' microphones did not work, so we couldn't have a conversation because they had to write what they wanted to say, and they couldn't speak.

Other learners said that there were many distractors both at home and online. They declared that they could not concentrate in the breakout room activities because they were busy playing video games, listening to music, or surfing the Internet.

### ***Excerpt 23: Daniel***

I have games and music on my computer. It is easier to do other things while you are in class in the breakout rooms. It is easier to get distracted.

Home distractions were also quite common when students worked together in the virtual rooms. They mentioned that since they lived with other family members, there was a lot of background noise which engrossed them from their task. In excerpt 24, Diana explains that some peers could not fully participate in the tasks because of the many distractions at home. In the same vein, Gerardo declared that it was difficult for him to concentrate with so much happening in his house.

***Excerpt 24: Diana***

I sometimes worked with classmates that wanted to participate in the breakout room, but they had to mute their microphones every five minutes because they were cooking, or because there were many people in their house.

***Excerpt 25: Gerardo***

It is easier to lose attention. I get distracted with everything. My family walks by, and I turn around. I hear the TV all day long, and also some people knock on the door while I am in class.

**Activities implemented in the breakout rooms**

A recurrent topic in the interviews was learners' perceptions about the activities and tasks they used in the breakout rooms. Twenty five students agreed that they preferred tasks over grammar exercises and textbook activities.

***Excerpt 26: Lily***

I really liked the activities where you had to make a decision. I also liked the activities where we had to agree on something to present a topic. The role-plays were really cool too. Almost every activity that focused on interaction helped us a lot to learn and to improve our language knowledge.

Students also expressed they enjoyed doing the collaborative writing task where they had to produce an argumentative essay. They believed this activity helped them increase their vocabulary knowledge and practice their critical thinking skills.

***Excerpt 27: Violet***

In the argumentative essay we actually had to speak and say what we wanted to be... we investigated, and I found this... we should put this. It was the

first time I used words that I didn't even know they existed. And that we had to well, not fight but talk about what we actually wanted to add.

***Excerpt 28: Oliver***

The writing of an essay. I liked it a lot because we did get to discuss. I liked that part because we both had to get into an agreement on the topic and we chose a difficult topic.

In the interviews, students declared that they preferred working with tasks than with grammar worksheets or the textbook since they felt that the tasks enabled them to use the language more productively. Twelve learners found the grammar exercises boring or difficult because they were not sure about their knowledge, and they would rather solve the activities in the main session with the teacher's guidance.

***Excerpt 29: Alina***

The ones that I didn't like a lot were the grammar activities because when I got to work with my classmates, we were all insecure about our answers. We were doubtful about what we were doing, if we were doing it right or wrong, so we just did something because we knew we were going to check the activities in the main room.

Collaborative tasks can help students increase their speaking time in the online language classroom. They can also facilitate peer interaction, and learners may create a sense of belonging to a community by increasing their social and affective engagement which are necessary in virtual classes (see Baralt et al., 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). González (2020) recommends the use of collaborative technology-mediated tasks to promote interaction and to foster the production of both spoken and written output. The learners in this study expressed that they preferred working with collaborative tasks that boosted group interaction and motivated them to participate in the virtual rooms.

## Conclusions

The overarching goal of this investigation was to lay the foundations for future research on using breakout rooms in online language classrooms. This action research study explored the students' perspectives on their experience working within breakout rooms in online lessons. The findings were consistent with previous research (e.g. Bamidele, 2021; Nisa, Prameswari & Alawiyah, 2021; Vergara Mendoza, Paccha Soto & Carabajo Romero, 2022) and revealed that students had mostly positive perceptions about the virtual rooms, and they enjoyed the experience of using this tool in their online classes. Learners also mentioned that there were some drawbacks when they worked together in the breakout rooms. Finally, the participants talked about the activities they thought were engaging and useful for practicing the foreign language.

Most students agreed that the virtual rooms gave them the opportunity to use and practice English. They also gained a sense of responsibility because of the active role required by them in the breakout rooms. Other advantages were related to learners feeling safer and less threatened in the virtual rooms partly because they saw each other as equals (Philp et al., 2010). Finally, the breakout rooms helped some learners to meet their classmates and to get to know each other a little better. It was possible for them to establish friendly relationships with their teammates, which according to them did not happen in the online classes that did not include breakout rooms.

The most common drawback was a lack of collaboration shown by some classmates who did not work well in the virtual rooms and avoided providing answers to the tasks and activities, and they simply muted their microphones. Another perceived disadvantage was that the teacher could not monitor all the breakout rooms at the same time. Interestingly, several learners said that breakout rooms can become boring if they are used every day. Students also complained about the lack of time to finish the activities, problems with technology (e.g., bad internet connection or microphone malfunctions), and background noise in their homes.

Finally, a recurrent topic in the data was related to the activities done in the breakout rooms. Learners expressed their preference for tasks over gram-

mar exercises and mentioned that they liked doing activities which involved making decisions, describing images, solving problems, writing collaboratively among others. In sum, they enjoyed doing tasks where they could interact and use the foreign language. The findings seem to suggest that when learners created a sense of community (Baralt et al., 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Solares, 2014; Thies, 2011; Leaver & Willis, 2005) by getting to know their peers, and when they worked with collaborative tasks, they made the most of breakout rooms for online language classrooms.

### **Pedagogical implications**

As it was presented in the findings and discussions section, using breakout rooms had both strengths and weaknesses for the online language classroom. The findings of the study are pedagogically important since there is an increased emphasis for more virtual language courses in university contexts. Breakout rooms are perceived by many learners as a tool to promote peer interaction in the online language classroom environment and to afford students more opportunities to use the foreign language. With this in mind, language teachers can train students to work collaboratively when they join the virtual space separately from the main session (see Sato & Lyster, 2016, for a review on the benefits of peer interaction training). Teachers can also promote and facilitate bonding between students, so friendships can be developed. Consequently, this can help learners feel more confident to participate, to share their ideas, and to help each other in the breakout rooms.

Another important implication for the online language classroom is the use of tasks in breakout rooms. The learners in this study expressed that they preferred to work with tasks over grammatical exercises. Therefore, teachers can try to increase students' interaction in the virtual rooms by including tasks where students use the foreign language to reach an agreement, solve problems, describe images, give and follow instructions, among others. Finally, an important issue to consider when including breakout rooms in the online language classroom is to use them often in the lessons but not daily since they can become tedious for students, and this may hinder their participation and how much they can benefit from the virtual rooms.

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