

The Effect of Backchannel Communication in Developing Students' Critical Thinking Skills

Mohan Rathakrishnan*

School of Language, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Arumugam Raman

School of Education and Modern Language, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Manvender Kaur Sarjit Singh

School of Language, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Lee Jun Choi

Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300, KotakSamarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of backchannel communication in developing students' critical thinking skill: macro and micro critical thinking. There are many tools in backchannel communication (BC). Padlet has been used as one of backchannel communication in this research. There are seventy students from two classes (Class X and Class Z) involved as sample in this study. Quasi-experimental research design applied in this research. Class X was selected as the experimental group (using padlet online discussion) and Class Z became the control group (classroom discussion) while learning Critical Thinking subject. Padlet online discussion was used as tool to plot discussion in a group on the topic given by the teacher. The finding shows that students who used back channel communication showed greater macro critical thinking level than to those who did not use back channel communication. While for students who used BC did not show greater critical thinking level than to those who did not use BC. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge on technologies for learning and online learning. This will allow better understanding on how technology can facilitate learning especially critical thinking.

Keywords: Backchannel communication; Macro and micro critical thinking; Padlet online.



CC BY: [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1. Introduction

In the second phase of the Excellence in Malaysian Higher Education policy, the education system has emphasized that students should be taught to be more proactive, discuss analytical and creatively. Continuous quality improvement in teaching and learning online as well as understanding the students' ability in learning is an important task. Promoting active learning among the foundation students have become an important agenda in educating new intake students in the Malaysian university. Hence, to accommodate the importance of thinking maturely, one of subject listed is "Critical Thinking Skill". Therefore, critical thinking skill is pertinently important among first year university students. The course syllabus indicates that students should be independent in thinking and have proficient in the use of language (Paul and Elder, 2004).

Nevertheless, from the researchers' observation, first year university students are facing problem to identify, communicate and to integrate the syllabus content. One of the reasons could be attributed to the fact that student likely to perceive it is a boring subject. Besides, it is observed that students are totally depending on the course facilitator to prepare all the materials, ideas, notes and discourse models of specific academic areas (Paul and Elder, 2004).

One of the ways to tackle these problems is to adopt back channel communication (BC) in the class. Back channel is a complementary channel for interactions and collaborations among students and instructors usually in the form of synchronous chat like Hotseat, TodaysMeet, Padlet and other related tools. Some of these tools allow learner to be anonymous when posting and discussing their ideas. According to the existing research, there are several studies demonstrating the benefits of having backchannel communications in classroom or lectures. For the purpose of this research, padlet has been used as BC. Among the positive benefits documented are the conveniences of asking questions and getting responses from the instructors, learn new information from peers and having more fun learning (Bolliger and Halupa, 2012; Yardi, 2006).

However, very limited research has been done on examining whether the backchannel communication can promote critical thinking among undergraduate students. It is therefore, important for the lecturers to understand how undergraduate students use the BC to deeply engage with the instructors, peers and the subject matter or just merely discussing informally about class topic or sometimes "off-topics" that will not enhance their learning process. Also, there are several challenges of BC implementation that are not well understood. The opponents argue that back channel may become a source of distraction among students (Schwartz, 2003) (Phalen, 2003). Students may not be