

Debriefing in Online Primary ESL Classrooms During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

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Abstract—The meaningfulness of the current educational landscape, where online learning is heavily practised, is often questioned. Experiential learning focuses on the learning process that learners undergo. It is believed to help them to make sense of the learning process through active participation and meaningful reflective practice. Debriefing is an experiential learning strategy that requires learners to reflect on their learning experiences and connect them to real-life situations. However, only a limited number of studies have investigated the use of debriefing in the English language teaching and learning context. To this end, this case study aimed to explore the effects of debriefing in online ESL classrooms and the challenges of online debriefing. The case study was conducted in Bintulu, a town in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, and involved two teachers who were actively conducting online ESL lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and observations of recorded online ESL lessons with a focus on the debriefing sessions. The findings indicated that debriefing has positive effects on active English language learners as it helps to improve their critical thinking ability as well as their oral and written language proficiency. The challenges of debriefing in online ESL classrooms include learners being hesitant to talk during lessons, teachers facing difficulties in using appropriate debriefing questions, as well as various technical problems.

Index Terms—debriefing, experiential learning, online learning, English as a Second Language (ESL), reflective practice, active learning

I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, when the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus began to affect Malaysia, the educational system was transformed from the normal face-to-face interaction to an online learning approach. Mahyoob (2020) stated that the deadly COVID-19 virus engendered a transformation of the whole educational process, including English language education.

Back in 2012, Malaysia integrated online educational technologies into the education system under the 1BestariNet Project. This project was first implemented following the new aspiration of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to use information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance the education system (MOE, 2013). The integration of ICT in education helps to produce autonomous learners who are in control of their own learning and are able to access knowledge online at their own pace through the wide range of online courses and platforms available. The 1BestariNet Project was replaced with Google Classroom in July 2019 (MOE, 2019), which the MOE rebranded as the Digital Educational Learning Initiative Malaysia (DELIMA) in June 2020. DELIMA enables teachers to share learning resources for online teaching and learning as well as to prepare learners to be competent individuals in the 21st century. Although elements of ICT have been integrated in the education system for a long time, the ERT does not provide teachers with adequate preparation for a full online teaching and learning environment. Crawford et al. (2020) stated that teachers must possess specific skills and knowledge to design and implement meaningful online teaching and learning.

Meaningful experiential learning methods, which integrate the learning process through experience, are believed to promote meaningful learning (Knutson, 2003). Debriefing is a commonly used experiential learning strategy. The debriefing strategy comprises a follow-up discussion or reflection following a simulation or experiential learning exercise (Cantrell, 2008). Cantrell (2008) asserted that the discussion or debriefing session can be used to provide critique, assess the impact of the learning experience on learners, encourage reflection and critical thinking, and ensure that learners achieve a shared understanding of the learning content. Thus, debriefing serves several beneficial purposes in English language teaching and learning. Most crucially, debriefing helps to confirm learners' knowledge, elucidate

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misunderstandings, correct mistakes, apply experiences in different but related scenarios, and reinforce learning (Uz-Bilgin et al., 2015).

However, despite the importance of debriefing after a learning experience, teachers tend to overlook this aspect and omit it from their teaching. This is explained by their lack of knowledge of debriefing. Generally, debriefing focuses on reflection as well as critical and analytical thinking regarding the learning experience. Fatemeh and Hamidreza (2012) stated that the conceptual meaning of experience-based learning remains elusive and many practitioners are unclear about the approach, including how and when to use it. For teachers, to become reflective means assessing whether a new teaching strategy is useful and effective in language teaching. When a strategy is used in a classroom, the teacher must describe, analyse, and interpret it before transforming it into a more developed strategy. It is understood that a reflective teacher must be open to change. Thus, teachers must experiment with various pedagogical techniques in their practice. Debriefing also allows teachers to conduct self, peer, and student evaluation to enrich their professionalism (Reyes-Chua, 2018). Through such evaluations, teachers may eventually improve their online classroom practice.

In addition to lacking the knowledge required to debrief, teachers are also afraid of the challenges of debriefing in the language learning context. According to Deason et al. (2013), teachers or trainers face the challenge of fostering an atmosphere that enables participants or learners to seek feedback and strive for improvement. A major challenge in debriefing that teachers often face is obtaining correct, sufficient, and appropriate responses from learners. Numerous factors contribute to learners' silence during debriefing. They include not wanting to be the first person to respond; being afraid of sounding stupid, which reflects their ego and confidence; and not understanding the experience they have undergone (Deason et al., 2013). Another challenge that teachers face during debriefing is not knowing what to ask. This refers to questioning techniques during debriefing, which are crucial for ensuring that the debriefing process leads learners to reflect on their learning experience, thereby improving their understanding of the knowledge.

Debriefing is an effective strategy for encouraging critical thinking among ESL learners, thus helping them to improve their language learning. However, this strategy is rarely used in the ESL context despite its benefits for learners' learning experience. Debriefing is generally a reflective activity that follows an experiential learning exercise (Reeds, 2016). As the term suggests, experiential learning values experience as a significant factor in the learning process. Nevertheless, experience alone does not guarantee one's learning; rather, effort is also required to make such experience meaningful for learning through reflection. This was also stated by Afida Safriani (n.d.), who highlighted that experience is not passive but rather active as it results in a change of learners' personality. This means that knowledge is constructed as a result of an active learning process.

Essentially, debriefing plays a vital role in enriching language learners' online language learning experience. To date, several studies have suggested the importance of debriefing in developing learners' reflective thinking in relation to their learning experience. Hence, this study aimed to explore the effectiveness of debriefing in online ESL learning as well as to identify the challenges faced in debriefing in an online learning setting.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- (a) To what extent does debriefing affect an online ESL classroom?
- (b) What are the challenges faced by teachers in implementing debriefing in an online ESL classroom?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Debriefing in Teaching and Learning*

Debriefing is derived from experiential learning theory and generally involves a question-and-answer session between the debriefer and the participants or learners. Debriefing can also refer to a formal or informal discussion held after a lesson or any task (Sasirekha & Tan, 2022). Activities in the debriefing process include anchor pieces, sit and get, community puzzle, and reflection (Reyes-Chua, 2018). The various activities are believed to be able to help learners to reflect and provide their opinions or output on the task that was conducted, which results in meaningful learning. Reyes-Chua (2018) reviewed the use of debriefing in the evaluation of certain classroom activities. His results revealed that when debriefing is conducted, learners can achieve collaboration, reflective thinking, critical thinking, and understanding. The author added that the use of question-and-answer sessions enhances learning and suggested that the language teacher should make the manner in which the strategy is to be conducted clear at the beginning of the class. Debriefing also helps instructors to determine whether their teaching is effective.

Uz-Bilgin et al. (2015) believed that debriefing benefits learners through confirming knowledge, clarifying misunderstandings, correcting mistakes, applying experiences to other situations, and reinforcing learning. In the language learning setting, the purpose of debriefing is to transfer concepts and activities to the setting outside of the classroom and to clarify misunderstandings and mistakes. Hence, the end result of debriefing is that learners discover meaningful connections between activities and their daily routine. For instance, after a language lesson in which a language game was conducted, learners would be debriefed and reflect on the language items that they learned. Thus, they will be able to apply the language in their daily communication, be it written or spoken.

In a qualitative study, Reeds (2016) demonstrated that learners learn meaningfully through debriefing as a reflective activity. Teachers, acting as the debriefers, help learners to reflect on their learning experiences. According to Pearson and Smith (1985), learners do not learn from experience without reflection. As teaching and learning are always a two-way process, teachers must ensure that classroom activities are meaningful, inspirational, and worthwhile. In an online

learning setting, this can be achieved through debriefing, where teachers facilitate learners in thinking critically about online learning activities at the end of the online learning session. Debriefing involves question-and-answer sessions, either oral or written, where reflection is the key element (Reyes-Chua, 2018). Learners reflecting on what they have accomplished after their learning experience is critical for activating their critical thinking and improving their language learning. It is also the best time for teachers to think, ponder, and reflect about their actions before designing more effective methods for teaching and strategies for learning. Raths (2018) stated that debriefing offers learners the chance to reflect on and explain their learning experiences, which in turn helps them to integrate and learn new things by organising, comparing, classifying, evaluating, summarising, and analysing an experience.

Debriefing in English language classroom helps to create autonomous learners who are responsible for their learning and make use of their language learning experiences to gain competency in the language. This requires teachers to play an active role in the process and be able to guide learners to reflect on their learning experiences. However, remarkably little research has examined the use of debriefing in the English language learning context, yet the extant findings on this strategy in teaching and learning indicate that it is beneficial for enhancing learning.

The term 'debriefing' is often related to the terms 'reflection' and 'experiential learning'. This is due to the fact that debriefing is the use of reflection, and the use of reflective elements of experiential learning was identified as an experiential cycle that centres on the change in quality of the outcome or practice (Reyes-Chua, 2018).

B. Online ESL Learning

Online learning or e-learning uses Internet technology that allows teachers and learners to conduct teaching and learning inside or outside of the classroom (Verawardina et al., 2020). This implies that online learning occurs with the presence of an Internet connection and ICT tools, such as a computer, smartphone, or tablet. Allen and Seaman (2016) also contributed to the definition of online learning by defining it as a course that delivers content online.

Some commonly used online educational technologies are Google Classroom, Google Meet, WhatsApp, Telegram, Edmodo, and Zoom, through which a virtual classroom helps teachers to save time, continue teaching, and enhance interpersonal communication among learners (Omar et al., 2018). In a fully online learning situation, teachers and learners only meet virtually through the Internet and various technologies.

In the ESL context, online learning is said to impact the pace of learners' second language learning (Lukas & Yunus, 2020). Rapidly developments in technology provide learners with new opportunities to explore language learning. For instance, the combination of audio, visual, and animation effects has made online learning more appealing and effective (Wijaya & Helmi, 2018). This is evident in the use of online learning tools, such as Kahoot, Quizizz, Quizlet, and Plickers, which add the element of fun and meaningful learning to the learning process. Although online language learning may sound ideal, some studies have indicated that teaching and learning language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing online, are not easy tasks. For example, Sayuti, et al. (2020) reported that learners' lack of confidence in speaking during a virtual class made them uncomfortable during interaction hours. In addition, unprivileged learners may confront various problems when following online lessons, such as poor Internet access and insufficient devices for distant-learning (Song et al., 2021). Moreover, learners with mixed abilities have problems in catching up with their peers as teachers provide standardised tasks in an online language classroom. This suggests that online language learning may not benefit all learners. Hence, when teachers conduct online language learning, they should ensure that they provide learners with a meaningful learning experience. This could be achieved by debriefing them, thus enabling them to review their learning and make sense of the experience.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study followed a qualitative research methodology. It employed a case study design, which enables researchers to examine data within a specific context, such as exploring the effects and challenges of debriefing in an online primary ESL classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study was conducted in a primary school located in Bintulu, a town in Sarawak, Malaysia. The school selected has a large enrolment and is located in an urban area, where home-based learning (HbL) or online learning has largely taken place during the pandemic. The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which debriefing impacts online ESL classrooms and to identify the challenges underlying the execution of debriefing in an online learning setting. The research participants were two English language teachers, who were selected purposively. Purposive sampling ensured that the participants possessed and could provide the information that this study aimed to explore. Specifically, the selected teachers taught English language and actively conducted home-based learning online during the pandemic.

The data were collected using interviews and observations. These methods were used to understand the extent to which debriefing impacts online learning and to identify the challenges faced by teachers in conducting debriefing in an online learning setting. A set of open-ended questions were used to interview the participants, and their responses were then transcribed, coded, and analysed into themes. Observations of the recorded online ESL classrooms were recorded in field notes, only focusing on the debriefing part of the lesson, also known as the 'Moment of Crisis'.

IV. RESULTS

A. Effects of Debriefing in Online ESL Classroom

The findings of this case study revealed that debriefing helps to stimulate learners' critical thinking through reflective practice and a review of the learning experience. This was observed when learners demonstrated their ability to relate their learning experiences to real-life events when discussing their weekend activities in one of the recorded ESL lessons. An example interaction is provided as follows:

Teacher: *'Samantha, what do you do during the weekend?'*

Samantha: *'I watch TV'.*

Teacher: *'Thank you, Samantha. Who else wants to share about your weekend activities?'*

A few learners respond: *'Main game, teacher', 'cooking', 'do homework'.* – FN1

When the students were debriefed with questions related to their learning, they were able to think about, ponder, and reflect upon previous actions as a strategy for learning. Rath (2018) explained that debriefing provides learners with the opportunity to reflect upon and explain the meaning of the experience that they have undergone in a lesson, which helps them to integrate and retain what they have learned.

In addition, debriefing positively affected learners' confidence in communicating their thoughts – both oral and written. This is due to the fact that debriefing involves two-way communication that requires the debriefer and participants to actively express their learning experience through a question-and-answer session. In a debriefing session, learners are free to express their feelings about the English lesson. This was done in written form in one of the debriefing sessions, where the students wrote their opinions about the lesson in the Mentimeter online application. Through this platform, the learners commented on the lesson and shared their emotions throughout it. Some feedback from the learners included 'fun', 'great', 'bad connection', and 'too long'. This reflects the social presence element of virtual debriefing, whereby learners and the debriefer should be able to project their personal traits and identity in the virtual session and contribute to debriefing (Cheng et al., 2020). This element is crucial in online debriefing as it is important for the learners as participants to feel unjudged for providing their opinions and ideas in the session. The comments on the session also help teachers to improve their teaching approach in the future.

Furthermore, debriefing helps the debriefer or teacher as the instructor to validate learners' understanding and adjust their teaching methods according to learners' learning needs. One of the participants mentioned this matter in an interview by stating that he had learned to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the online lesson through debriefing with learners:

'[T]heir answers also help me to know if they understand the lesson. If they responded with a less satisfying response, there is something I need to do to help them achieve the standards of learning'. – Mr. I

This was especially noted when learners responded to questions because the knowledge that had been taught was evident after the learning experience (Magdeline et al., 2021). In most cases, teachers would be able to identify learners' understanding through their responses in the class or learning session. Hence, teachers would critically reflect on the teaching style or method that works for learners. Hail, Hurst, and Camp (n.d.) argued that teachers must make adjustments to their instructional style as well as techniques by reflecting on their practices for providing learners with meaningful learning.

B. Debriefing Challenges in the Online ESL Setting

This case study revealed that a major challenge faced by both participants during online debriefing is that learners do not talk or hesitate to share their experiences and ideas in a virtual learning session. One of the participants stated that it was especially difficult to conduct debriefing in one of her Year 5 classes because most of her learners are passive and do not have good proficiency in English language compared with her other class. The participants stated the following:

'...budak tak nak langsung jawab soalan, panggil berkali-kali pun tak muncul'. [*'... students refused to answer questions, even when they are called...'*] – Miss A

'[I] feel like it's hard to get them to talk'. – Mr. I

According to the teacher, learners may not answer questions for several reasons, including not having a stable Internet connection, not knowing how to respond, or having a negative attitude towards English language learning. The problems of learners investing less effort and offering fewer responses during online sessions result in low engagement and interaction between learners and teachers (Lukas & Melor, 2021). Moreover, Fey et al. (2014) accentuated that debriefing is always a two-way communication process; thus, teachers must facilitate and guide learners to ensure output in a particular learning experience.

Furthermore, this study found that the teachers faced difficulties in asking the right questions during online debriefing. Questions are indeed critical in the process of debriefing because they act as the stimulus that makes learners think critically. Hence, the questioning technique is a crucial skill that professional instructors need to master (Tania et al., n.d.). Furthermore, the debriefing process is highly interactive, which requires teachers to ask questions to guide learners in learning and responding to continue the discussion and develop an understanding of the lesson (Deason et al., 2013). This indicates that teachers must practise effective questioning techniques that suit the level of their learners to ensure the meaningfulness of the lesson.

Finally, accessibility to online learning is a prominent challenge in online debriefing. This includes problems with Internet connectivity as well as a lack of resources and devices (Tan et al., 2021). The participants stated that technical

problems such as a poor Internet connection as well as other technical problems (e.g., camera and audio issues) affected the process of debriefing. When learners are unable to join certain parts of the lesson, they may lose the essence of learning, which may result in them being left behind. When this occurs, learners may not be able to effectively reflect the knowledge that they acquired from the session. Thus, teachers should always record the session so that learners can catch up at their own pace.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Relationship Between the Teacher Factor and Effects of Online Debriefing*

The findings from the collected data indicated that teachers' abilities to debrief are correlated with the effects of online debriefing. Teachers play the role of a debriefer or facilitator who stimulates learners' reflective skills.

This study revealed that as the debriefer, teachers sometimes experienced difficulty in debriefing virtually. In this sense, the teacher factor refers to teachers' questioning skills, which play a critical role in effective teaching. Teachers often use questions to ensure that learners are attentive and engaged as well as to assess their comprehension. However, in a virtual debriefing, the questions act as the stimulus to help learners reflect and review their learning experience. Here, learners are expected to be encouraged to express their opinions and ideas, make decisions, find solutions or initiatives, as well as generate new ideas on matters related to the content of the lesson for application to real-life events (Noraffandy & Nor Hasniza, 2021).

In addition, the questions used in virtual debriefing help learners to build their critical thinking ability, which leads to the development of a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning materials. As they respond to questions, they are required to assess their own understanding and skills, rather than simply sitting comfortably with surface knowledge (Reyes-Chua, 2018). Thus, teachers should be able to ask questions to tackle learners' critical thinking ability. The debriefer should therefore understand that a class of learners comprises diverse abilities and design personalised debriefing questions based on the learners' level of proficiency (Bromeley et al., 2019). Raths (2018) added that when learners are taught strategies to recall and reconstruct what they have experienced, teachers can instruct not only for the acquisition of facts but also for an overall understanding. Hence, questions asked during debriefing sessions act as building blocks that enable learners to see the overall concepts of learning.

B. *Relationship Between the Learner Factor and Effects of Online Debriefing*

This study found that learners' attitude towards e-learning plays a significant role in online debriefing. Learners must perceive online debriefing positively for the process to be successful, where two-way communication occurs between learners and debriefer. However, learners' hesitation to speak and voice their opinions, ideas, and thoughts during the sessions is a challenge in online debriefing. This factor could be rooted in learners' negative attitude towards online ESL sessions and unfamiliarity with online learning (Lukas & Melor, 2021). In this case, higher-proficiency learners were observed to tend to be more active in responding to questions asked in the debriefing session and to demonstrate a strong ability to reflect and review learning experiences in the online ESL session. Moreover, higher-proficiency learners displayed a good understanding of the subject being taught when they attempted to provide examples of the application of knowledge in real-life events. Based on the observations noted from the recorded online ESL session, higher-proficiency learners were also more responsive to debriefing questions because they were confident and able to respond quickly. By contrast, most low-proficiency learners remained silent during the debriefing session, which could be because they did not know how to respond in the debriefing process; furthermore, they could have experienced difficulty in adapting to new changes in online learning and been unable to produce original and unique ideas, which requires higher-order thinking skills (Khainon et al., 2017).

In addition, another type of problem derived from the learner factor is technical problems. Technical difficulties have long been known to be a drawback to the use of online platforms (Sitzman et al., 2010). According to Munzer (2002), technical difficulties refer to a condition where an individual encounters interruptions when interfacing with technology. Some learners experience hardware or device problems, such as speaker and camera malfunctions. Moreover, some learners face challenges with their Internet connection, such as financial issues or issues related to their local area. Thus, learners would not be able to follow an online lesson effectively, resulting in them being unsure about how to respond in a debriefing session and gradually withdrawing from the learning process.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, debriefing offers positive impacts on English language learning, especially for active learners. Debriefing also makes online ESL learning meaningful through enabling learners to connect their experiences in the lesson to real-life events. Despite the challenges faced in conducting online ESL lessons, this study recommends that language teachers attempt to use the debriefing strategy as it will help them to prompt critical thinking among learners and encourage them to share ideas during online lessons. Furthermore, teachers should offer assistance to struggling learners so that they can reflect on and make sense of the learning experience and thus apply it for authentic real-world purposes. As this study covered two topics, namely the effects of debriefing and its challenges in an online ESL learning setting, it adds to the body of research on debriefing in English language learning settings. This study may also

enhance teachers' pedagogical practice through exposure to debriefing, since most of the time debriefing (more commonly called 'reflection') is conducted in an impromptu manner without proper planning. Because highly limited resources are available regarding how exactly to implement debriefing in the context of language teaching and learning, this study recommends that future studies specifically investigate the implementation of debriefing in English language learning contexts. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the attitudes and motivations of teachers or learners in debriefing as they might be significant factors. Therefore, future research should also investigate the relationships between knowledge testing and motivation in the various modes of debriefing.

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