
Reflections on student agency through the use of voice notes in university English tutorials during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have had to reconsider and reshape their teaching and learning pedagogies overnight during the Covid-19 pandemic. The dramatic closure of education institutions in South Africa, and worldwide, gave rise to questions around our adaptability, readiness, and response to change in the HEI sector. While universities made the rapid move to emergency remote teaching and learning, it remained to be seen how students responded to this move. This study reports on the use of voice notes to promote student voice and agency in English tutorials at a university in Gauteng, South Africa. The main aim of

this paper is to examine student reflections on the use of voice notes to foster agency in tutorials. Based on the inequalities present in South Africa's education system, specifically HEIs, this paper is conceptually framed in critical theory. Through an examination of data elicited from student interviews, observations, and voice notes, this case study finds that participant reflections highlight the significance of a critical approach, in utilising voice notes in English tutorials, to assist students in being active participants in the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: student reflections, voice notes, critical theory, agency, university tutorials

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1. Introduction

Following the stringent lockdown during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and HEIs have since reopened worldwide. However, education is still in recovery by way of ascertaining the damage done and lessons learned from the pandemic. The pandemic affected more than 1.5 billion youth, with the most vulnerable being hit the hardest (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; McLennan, 2021). In their 2020 proposals for a post-Covid-19 era, the World Economic Forum (2020) highlighted the need for a revival of educational systems. As a result, COVID-19 has dictated that higher education institutions (HEIs) reconsider and reshape teaching and learning in real time. The dramatic closure of education institutions in South Africa (and worldwide) raised questions around education, as universities were challenged with the creation and implementation of successful digital models of education, while maintaining social justice goals. This has subsequently taught us several lessons.

The rapid changes called into question issues such as in-person teaching and learning practices; availability of and access to digital resources; academic staff and student readiness for learning in digital environments; and connectivity and access to internet services and facilities, all while maintaining overarching philosophies of teaching and learning. Given the drastically changing roles of academics and students, this prompted worldwide scrutiny of teaching and learning in ways not experienced before (Choi et al., 2021; El-Soussi, 2022; Ferrer-Pérez et al., 2022). The implementation of sustainable pedagogical approaches requires broad consultation particularly with key participants such as academics and students. Lack of academic and student engagement can gravely affect the sustainability of pedagogical models that are rolled out.

What remains important is the need to maintain philosophies and pedagogies of teaching and learning, in this case, critical approaches to pedagogy, albeit having been under the circumstances of the pandemic. Another key concern was to maintain second-language (L2) student participation and interaction during online English tutorials, given that student participation in tutorials is often lacking (Marlina, 2009; Motaung & Dube, 2020). In the English Department at Gauteng University (GU, pseudonym used for ethical reasons), tutors and students were given the opportunity to use the social media tool, Telegram. The use of social media tools is not uncommon in English classrooms. Telegram serves a similar function to WhatsApp, and when effectively using the tool, users can share images, voice notes and videos, and make video or voice calls. The system served as an additional source of communication to the university learning management system, Blackboard. The application provided a range of

opportunities for students to participate and communicate with tutors and their fellow students.

While several studies have been conducted on the positive use of Telegram in English foreign language classrooms for language acquisition (for instance, Abu-Ayfah, 2019; Ibrahim et al, 2016; Wiranegara & Hairi, 2020; Zhao et al., 2022), it is problematic that little has been reported on student participation, through a critical framework. The aim of this paper is to examine L2 student reflections on the use of voice notes in Telegram, as a way of fostering voice and agency in tutorials. Our main concern is: How do L2 students reflect on the use of voice notes as ways of fostering voice and agency in tutorials? In recognising the challenges faced by marginalised groups in education, this paper is conceptually framed in critical theory. Critical theory promotes full and equal participation of all citizens in a society to actively participate in the social, political, educational, and cultural aspects of their lives. It is for this reason that L2 students need to develop a sense of agency to become active participants in their learning.

2. Conceptual framework: Agency and participation through a critical lens

This study proposes that education can endorse social transformation by equipping L2 students with the knowledge and opportunities to realise their agency and consciousness in educational English spaces. The study draws on the work of Paulo Freire (1970; 2005) who supports the nurturing of student consciousness to promote student participation and develop agency in classrooms. Freire (1970, p.74) advocates for active participation and dialogue in learning, given his belief that “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no real education”. Although various approaches to increase student participation have been considered, the ‘banking’ concept of student learning still prevails in many higher education classrooms (Freire, 1970; 2005). This means that students’ critical and creative thought processes are still immobilised as the knowledge that is both shared and internalised is still controlled predominantly by the tutors and lecturers. The prevalence of this concept in HEIs ultimately places students at a disadvantage by reinforcing inequities in learning should critical consciousness and dialogic opportunities not be reinforced (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014; Jemal, 2017; Heberle et al., 2020). Thus, this study argues for tutorials to foster student participation and agency.

According to Giroux (2010) pedagogy ought to have meaning and prioritise social justice and transformation in the world by liberating students to become active participants. This is possible when marginalised students are provided with resources

given to them by a curriculum that caters for them. The community and teachers who are passionate about addressing unequal practices can generate these resources (Giroux, 2004; McInerney, 2009; Riddle et al., 2024). Therefore, drawing on critical pedagogy has the potential to build students' "intellectual self-confidence and ability to identify a range of perspectives which are necessary for effective participation in higher education" by making them active and agentive participants in their learning (Castle & Osman, 2006, p.66). This is particularly beneficial in the South African context where "systematic inequality in education, coupled with a policy of undermining the very fabric of African society" exists (Castle & Osman, 2006, p. 66).

This study places significant focus on the value of student agency in achieving participation in education. According to Rose (2005), agency and human existence are both crucial components of one's biological nature. In terms of education, agency is associated with the development of a student's social and cognitive experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1987; Bandura, 2008). Additionally, Freire (2005) believes that through a sense of independent consciousness any situation or challenge can be changed to achieve social justice and liberation for the individuals involved. Therefore, agency in education has the ability to foster student growth and comprehension when they are recognised as agentive beings who can actively make decisions regarding their life and learning and are not viewed as mere products of their environments (Bandura, 2006; Isaacs, 2016; MacKenzie & Chiang, 2023).

Conscientisation fosters anti-oppressive pedagogy and education (Shahjahan, 2009; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2014; Berila, 2016). Critical consciousness in education is largely associated with the core values of critical pedagogy, given that it relates to students being aware of certain oppressive experiences in their lives that compromise their livelihoods. Through encouraging students and tutors to examine structures that will implement social transformation (Freire, 2005, p. 145), they are able to assume conscious and active roles in education. When students are critically conscious, they have the ability to challenge educational systems that reproduce oppressive or traditional approaches, such as banking education, and to develop a willingness to participate in their educational liberation (Freire, 2005). In this study, consciousness refers to students' ability to participate and challenge notions in tutorials, using voice notes as a form of participation.

Freire (1970) maintains that critical theory and pedagogy, in relation to agency, explore the relationships between critical students and teachers that are formed to address the issues that are related to injustices such as discrimination, rooted hegemony, menacing ideology, unrealistic beliefs, and unclear curricular outcomes. This notion is applicable to the South African context where critical pedagogy will benefit an education system

that has been affected by historical educational injustices. By nurturing student consciousness and fostering student agency, students are afforded a ‘voice’ to challenges social injustices. It is ultimately the role of teachers to equip students with critical skills in order to develop a critical consciousness that allows them to be present in the world in which they live by acting in and upon it (Bartolomé, 2004; Jemal, 2017). Critical consciousness is key to student agency and participation because, when students are situated in a place that does not allow them the right to freely express themselves, they find it difficult to consider their classrooms as democratic spaces (Hooks, 2003).

3. Research design

This study follows an interpretivist paradigm given its aim to interpret and understand the experiences of human beings (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). The paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine university students’ reflections on their experiences with Telegram voice notes that sought to develop their agency and encourage participation in tutorials.

3.1 Site

Gauteng University (pseudonym maintained for ethical purposes), situated in the Gauteng province, was the research site. The university has a large student population of over 50 000 (HEDA, 2018), which includes a majority Black L2 student body. The study focused on the modules English 1A (in Semester 1) and English 1B (in Semester 2) in the year of the study. These are literature modules that teach critical skills in English. The English tutorials in this research are offered by the module to refine students’ writing and analytical thinking skills. Tutorials in this study are viewed as spaces that encompass and nurture heterogeneity where tutors work with students to assist them in recognising and honouring their individuality (Carter, 2009; Nichols, 2017). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic that surfaced in 2020, physical lectures and tutorials were terminated by the university administration and student learning migrated to online platforms.

Since student participation was a major concern in tutorials, and greatly affected by the shift to online learning, the English department implemented a mobile application called Telegram to assist in student learning and participation. This ran parallel to the university Blackboard learning management system. Thus, Telegram became a site for the research. To attempt to address issues of voice, agency, and participation in English tutorials, two strategies for participation were implemented that echoed the works of

Freire (1970; 2005). The first strategy that was implemented was the use of voice notes. Voice notes were implemented as an innovative way to enhance participation in the online tutorials. The intention was to allow students to hear the voices of their peers, as well as to depict an environment that reflects some aspects of a physical classroom. Voice notes comprised student input in the form of ideas, agreements or disagreements, and comments on the academic content of the literature modules. This strategy was suitable as it allowed students to express their thoughts and other contributions verbally. The second strategy that was implemented was texting. Texting involved student exchanges around tutorial content where they were able to critically engage in tutorials by asking and answering questions, as well as sharing their own ideas with their peers. The aim of voice notes and texting was to allow for student participation in a way that was familiar and accessible to students, given earlier identified issues of little participation in tutorials. Note that only the use of voice notes is reported on in this paper.

3.2 Participants

Lectures are attended by about 700 students, divided into two classes of about 350 students per class. Tutorials provide a supportive function given that they are small groups where students are assisted in developing critical skills, sharing ideas, and learning about writing academic English essays. The specific focus is English 1A/B tutorial groups where most students are L2 speakers. There were 13 English tutorial groups, with 20 to 25 students per group. The sample comprised 20 first-year university students, all of whom are L2 speakers of English. The sample was selected using purposeful sampling methods, defined by Creswell (2012) as sampling that is done with a specific aim in mind. Four tutorial groups of the 13, which represented approximately 25% of the overall groups were selected for the study. Five students from each of these tutorial groups, which also elicited approximately 20-25% of the students, were selected. The sample then, was a quarter of the number of tutorials and, in each tutorial, a quarter of the number of students was included.

It is essential to the data collection to gather student profiles. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to maintain confidentiality. Table 1 that follows lists the details of the student participants.

Table 1: Student participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Home language (HL)	High school English level	Degree
Akhona	24	M	Afrikaans	HL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Busi	19	F	Tshivenda	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (Communication)
Caitlin	18	F	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Education (Senior and FET phase)
Daria	17	F	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Emelia	19	F	Shona	HL	Bachelor of Laws
Felleng	19	F	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Gugu	18	F	Sepedi	FAL	Bachelor of Education (Senior and FET phase)
Hlengiwe	18	F	Sesotho	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Isra	19	F	Isizulu	HL	Bachelor of Laws
James	19	M	Setswana	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (Psychology)
Khoza	19	F	Sepedi	HL	Bachelor of Education (Senior and FET phase)
Lana	18	F	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Mehmet	19	M	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (Anthropology and Development Studies)
Nomtha	19	F	Ndebele	HL	Bachelor of Education (Senior and FET phase)
Ophelia	19	F	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Philda	18	F	Siswati	HL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Quraisha	19	F	Xhosa	FA	Bachelor of Arts (Communication and Media)
Robert	18	M	Sepedi	FAL	Bachelor of Education (Senior and FET phase)
Siena	19	F	Isizulu	FAL	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Tiana	18	F	Isizulu	HL	Bachelor of Laws

Note: HL= Home Language; FAL= First Additional Language

3.3 Data gathering methods

Individual online interviews were conducted to elicit data from the research participants. In a qualitative paradigm, interviews are regarded a popular data collection method as it is a way to “obtain in-depth information about a participant's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, and feelings about a topic” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 207). Therefore, in-depth individual interviews were conducted to decipher student views regarding the use of voice notes in tutorials and its possible effect on their sense of agency. All interviews were recorded online and later transcribed. Participants were given the opportunity to read the transcripts for accuracy and member-checking.

Online observations were conducted by the main researcher, who attended the English tutorials to ascertain how students engaged in classroom discussions and responded to the voice notes. Specifically, elements of voice and agency (or the lack thereof) were focal points to the observations. All tutorials were recorded online. According to Creswell (2012), using observations to collect data allows researchers to collect first-hand, open-ended information and experiences by observing research participants within the relevant site. Through observing tutorials on an online tutorial platform, the main researcher was able to examine the situations that occurred between tutors and students in a natural tutorial environment. The utilisation of observations as a data collection method allowed the main researcher the opportunity to recognise certain events that were exhibited through the participants' actions and voices, that expressed their thoughts and feelings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Alshenqeeti, 2014). The main researcher also had access to all student voice notes. Students were given the opportunity to text or send voice notes to respond to issues discussed in class to increase potential for interaction in tutorials, as well as to provide opportunities for voice and agency. Some of these voice notes are referred to in the data, where applicable.

Therefore, data triangulation was ensured using multiple participants and various data collection methods, such as interviews and observations. Triangulation refers to the process of verifying evidence gathered from diverse participants, data collection methods, and later themes found in data analysis. Thus, all attempts to ensure validity, trustworthiness, and credibility in the study was made. According to Morrow (2005, p. 256), “[t]he more variety in the data sources one is able to obtain, the greater will be the richness, breadth, and depth of the data gathered”. The interviews were conducted during a set time period that was agreed upon by the participants and main researcher. The interviews were recorded with an audio device, a cell-phone, which was agreed to by the participants. The interviews were transcribed, and the field notes were made during observations to serve as evidence of the research and data collection and to

ensure that the data is presented in a fair and unbiased way. Immersion in data analysis is necessary in the data analysis phase (Morrow, 2005). This is the process by which one repeatedly reads transcripts and listens to recordings. Morrow, (2005, p. 256) finds that these forays that have been repeated into the data “lead the investigator to a deep understanding of all that comprises the data corpus (body of data) and how its parts are interrelated”. These approaches allowed the main researcher to evaluate the data through multiple lenses and then determine the impact of participatory strategies on English tutorials. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The data transcripts were coded into identifiable themes and categories that were central to the students’ responses. The themes linked significantly to research relating to the aim of the study.

Before conducting this research and collecting the relevant data, ethical issues were considered. Firstly, signed permission was granted by the university to be used as the research site. Furthermore, signed consent was provided by the Head of the English Department (HOD), the English 1A/B course coordinator, and all the student participants. The HOD, course coordinator, and students were all provided with the following information: the intention and reason for the study, the participant requirements, such as time needed for interviews, the benefits as well as risks associated with the study, and the assurance of confidentiality by using pseudonyms, providing the researchers’ contact details, and reinforcing that participation was voluntary for all participants.

4. Data description and analysis

To establish students’ experiences of using voice notes in English tutorials, the perceptions and reflections of student participation in English tutorials were examined. In this paper, two of the themes are reported on: student experiences with the platform and voice notes for agency and participation.

4.1. Student experiences with the online platform: “I absolutely have a voice in tutorials”

A significant component of the potential success of critical pedagogy is the role teachers take in creating environments for students where they can express themselves and actively engage in the teaching and learning process. The following extracts highlight the reflections students share of their online tutorial spaces. Akhona, a L2 first-year student, expresses that his agency is fostered in English tutorials because he is provided with the opportunity to express his opinions and thoughts without being judged:

Yes, I absolutely have a voice in tutorials. Once again, I feel like it could be partly because of some of the works that we've chosen because they are controversial or very diverse. For example, The Catcher in the Rye. It's a novel that has been banned [in some countries] and I guess the university could have been safe and chosen a different novel, but I feel like the university's telling us that, by choosing this novel, we can discuss anything we want freely without judgment. That's the kind of environment we're in. Given the circumstances [Covid-19], yes, I think that my tutor absolutely gives me a platform to voice myself through voice notes. I would have liked to have in-person classes but with what we have online, what we're doing is perfect (Akhona, May 2021).

Evident in his reflection, Akhona expresses that the idea of having a ‘voice’ in tutorials is connected to having the freedom to share opinions and challenge societal norms through the voice notes. He feels that the prescribed curriculum of his English module allows him to challenge his comfort zone and perceptions, which in turn allows him to verbalise his thoughts in an environment that favours critical consciousness and does not restrict him or his peers in terms of the discussions that may be had around the curriculum. He explains that he is given the platform to “discuss anything [...] freely without judgment”, which makes his English tutorial experiences “perfect” because he feels as though he is part of a group and space that favours social justice in education. According to Lake and Kress (2013:49) dialogue is the “starting point for the genesis of a humanistic world that has yet to be” because it exposes possibility around searching for and exploring real-life, with a critical optimism that a world that is more just can be created in future. Therefore, the use of voice notes appear to facilitate dialogue and freedom in online tutorials.

Following Akhona’s response, Gugu and James, two other participants, also expressed similar views: that voice notes provide them with the opportunity to be active participants in their educational experiences. Their responses mirror Freire’s (2000) conception of dialogue which is seen as an equal and humanising exchange between communities where there is neither “utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages [...] only people who are attempting together, to learn more than they know” (Freire, 2000, p.90). In other words, dialogue is seen as a freeing act that may be shared among students and teachers where there are no hierarchical structures but rather an atmosphere of knowledge sharing, respect, and trust.

Yeah, I do have a voice. I think I'm listened to and understood. I am also corrected when I'm wrong. I am given a [verbal] platform and I voice them

if I have any misconception or anything. I feel free, more than free, and I voice them in my [voice] notes. (Gugu, May 2021).

I think, for me, English is one of the most important subjects because it's gonna help me with a lot of things. For example, so far, we have learned how to take both sides of a story and make a conclusion. So, that will help me with other things in life. Like, if I'm faced with a challenge, I need to look at both perspectives and come to a conclusion of how I deal with that kind of thing. So, it doesn't only help me academically, but it also helps me in life in general. Yes, I think I have the platform because the tutor sets an environment where we are free, and we can ask whatever we want. We can express our opinions without being told: "No, you are wrong". This is how Telegram (voice notes) help us as a platform. At the end of the day, I have an opinion and I also have the platform to broaden my opinion and explain further (James, May 2021).

Both Gugu and James believe that their tutorials afford them the platform to be engaged and empowered through dialogue. Significantly, Gugu expresses that she feels as though she has a 'voice' in her tutorials because she feels "listened to and understood". She also feels comfortable to voice her opinions and seek assistance from her tutor or peers when she has any "misconception[s]". These accounts, paired with Gugu stating: "I feel free, more than free" highlights the role of creating spaces that cater to the needs of disadvantaged or marginalised groups where they feel as though they have the platform to engage in dialogue that is empowering and educational. For the attainment of academic success and social change, it is important to recognise how the creation of platforms that encourage student participation and consciousness is necessary. According to Pillay (2017, p.2), "teachers (are) agents of change in the classroom [and] effective agents of change have a moral purpose, democratic principles and a clear vision of why they are teachers". This implies that providing students with opportunities to exert their voice and agency is highly dependent of the practices and beliefs of teachers. The lives of students, such as the L2 students in this study, can be improved through intervention, participation, and empowerment that the voice notes offer (Lunenburg, 2010; Wang & Lee, 2021; Shafiee Rad & Jafarpour, 2023).

Additionally, the significance of student empowerment can be associated with recognising student opinions to help them realise the importance of their contributions to classroom discussions but also to allow for engagement and the sharing of ideas among peers. James states that, in his English tutorials, "[a]t the end of the day, [he] [has] an opinion" because his tutor recognises his contributions and provides him with a platform "to broaden [his] opinion and explain further". James expresses that having

platforms like Telegram (with opportunities to use voice notes during the Covid-19 pandemic) foster his sense of agency because he has learned to “look at both perspectives (relating to holistic life experiences) and come to a conclusion”. Evidently, this development of his critical skills helps him both “academically” and “in life in general”. This response highlights how critical pedagogy and agency empowers some students to become active participants in their learning and are able to bring about social justice and transformation for a better society (Freire, 2005; Jemal, 2017; Joseph-Jeyaraj, 2020). While some student views are taken into consideration, this cannot be generalised to all the participants.

4.2. Voice notes for agency and participation: “Real engaging comes within voices”

To examine whether the tutorial platform may be enriched through student voices, voice notes were introduced to encourage students to share their thoughts and ideas. Voice notes required students to record themselves and share their recordings with their peers in an attempt to promote interaction and to enrich classroom dialogue. Student Gugu believes that participation can be enhanced through this kind of dialogue as she states that “real engaging comes within voices”. She believes that verbalising one’s thoughts carries greater meaning and allows for better interpretation:

I think that real engaging comes within voices because somebody can type one sentence, whereas their sentence has more meaning to it if it was verbally said. So, I think when people send their voices, we get to know how this person sees a certain concept. I think voices provide a deeper meaning to discussions (Gugu, May 2021).

According to Gugu, voice notes are significant in tutorials as they aid in improving student engagement and comprehension: “voices provide a deeper meaning to discussions”. A core argument in this research is that dialogue between students and their teachers can foster mutual respect and deep engagement (Petersen & Merckel, 2013) through sharing experiences and establishing mutual respect (Jansen et al., 2009). According to Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall (2009, p.168), “dialogue is both the most hopeful and the most dangerous pedagogical practice, for in it, our own dogma and certainty and orthodoxy must be held in abeyance [and] must be subject to scrutiny”. This makes dialogue important in addressing social justice concerns. This also implies that using dialogue as a principle and practice allows for areas of voices, silence, and critical reflection to be explored by students where they can reflect on their experiences through critique and questioning. In their empirical study of the use of Whatsapp, which provides a similar function to Telegram, to promote online engagement at a rural

university, Motaung & Dube (2020, pp.216 – 220) found Whatsapp to be a valuable teaching and learning tool. They highlighted the need for universities to emancipate tutors, and avail digital devices to rural students to enhance teaching and learning (2020, pp. 216 – 220). Similarly, Ibrahim's et al. (2016) study found that Malaysian students felt that Telegram supported and enhanced teaching and learning, and additionally, Abu-Ayfah's (2019) study of Saudi Arabian college students found that students perceive Telegram a valuable tool for learning and for vocabulary acquisition in the language classroom in particular.

The value of voice notes is highlighted in the reflections provided by Emelia, a student who actively engaged in tutorial discussions:

Voice notes are great because they definitely increase the urgency of participation because you can't hide behind someone else's idea. Voice notes get everyone to participate because now you have to speak for yourself, you're not just adding on or agreeing to what someone else is saying (Emelia, May 2021).

Dialogical relations view students as knowledge-bearers so that teachers are not seen as the only source of knowledge and students are viewed as being capable of sharing knowledge so that they 'teach' while being taught (Freire, 1970; Foulis, 2018; O'Neill et al., 2023). Emelia expresses urgency to participate and provide authentic contributions because she believes that an active discussion, through a verbal medium, does not allow for one to "hide behind someone else's idea". Thus, through being conscious about one's participation and contribution, Emelia believes that students are given a platform through Telegram where they have to "speak for [themselves]". By employing strategies that urge students to develop their own understandings and views in the learning process, they have the potential to become critical beings who develop agency in learning spaces.

An additional data collection method, online classroom observations, was used to explore the realities of voice notes. The extracts below are transcriptions of voice notes from live tutorials sessions, observed by the main researcher. Based on the prescribed text in her English class *The Catcher in the Rye*, Emelia says:

I think the main character, Holden, is a very controversial character who is very cynical. He seems to have a derogatory comment for everything that everyone says or does and he's so fixed on this idea of being a kid forever, but he does not speak like a kid. I feel like this because of the choice of words he uses. Kids are not so judgmental, and he appears to be very judgmental (Emelia, June 2021).

Her response to another student:

Yes, I definitely agree with you that he doesn't seem to take things very seriously. And, as noted by his teacher, he is eventually going to grow into an adult and will be very unfortunate if he is unsuccessful because one does not remain a kid forever. And in that, like, I've known. I've also noted that, as much as he says people are phony, he also appears to be a phony in the sense that he does not always voice his feelings (Emelia, June 2021).

The observations reveal that voice notes shared by Emelia reflect the significance of participation through critical consciousness and classroom dialogue. It is clear that she provides her own understanding of the discussion topics by stating “I think” and “I feel” in her responses. Moreover, one sees how she is able to support her views through explanation. The data highlights how student agency and participation can be fostered through active engagement of students through the use of voice notes.

Another student, Gugu, explains that the sharing of voice notes fosters confidence and agency in her that would normally be doubted if she were to participate physically during tutorials:

I feel very good when sending voice notes. If I were to write something that I'm saying in a voice note, it would be a long text, and maybe, I would doubt it. When I'm saying it, I feel like I know that this is right because of how I structure my thoughts, and the other person is going to understand it. I have no doubt. So, I think voice notes are actually better than writing (Gugu, May 2021).

Gugu's reflection of using voice notes in her classroom discussions highlights the immediacy the verbal participatory strategy has on creating dialogue among students and addressing social justice concerns. She believes that she is more agentive because sharing voice notes make her “feel like [she] is right because of how [she] structure[s] [her] thoughts”. Although not generalisable, in this instance, the implication is that the use of voice notes allows students to articulate their thoughts in a way that is not only comprehensible to them, but to their peers. For students like Robert, having a voice in tutorials helps him realise the value of being actively engaged and conscious in classroom dialogue:

Voice notes contribute to a lot of my improvement in terms of my academics. Voicing my thoughts and being verbal in a tutorial is something that is important to me. I am emphasizing on the issue of being engaged with other students. If I send a text, I can be easily ignored. However, if it

is a verbal engagement, I can ask all the things that I need help with (Robert, June 2021).

Thus, voice notes provide an opportunity for students to be active participants and critical thinkers even when they are not in a physical classroom. Interestingly, although students are not experiencing their tutorials and discussions face-to-face, they are still able to socially interact with one another.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study, on the use and student perceptions of voice notes in English tutorials, has the potential to afford students critical engagement in the university classroom. The core findings in this research have addressed and responded to the research question: How do L2 students reflect on the use of voice notes as ways of fostering voice and agency in tutorials? For example, the findings revealed that students had a greater sense of agency when engaging through verbal communication, specifically voice notes. Critical engagement helps towards enabling students in gaining an understanding of the systems that shape their thinking and impact their world (Giroux, 2010; Mansfield, 2014; Amerstorfer, 2021). Some students, such as Gugu and Emelia, described how having a voice and agency in tutorials increased their confidence both internally and externally towards the academic syllabus. In other instances, students such as James and Robert advocated for the sense of empowerment that was created through the exchange of voice notes, as a result of their voice and agency being fostered through critical engagement. Therefore, the research reveals that student reflections are not only valuable but demonstrate a favourable stance on the use of voice notes, as a sense of voice and agency was significantly fostered in the English tutorials.

This paper engaged in student reflections on voice notes and their potential to cultivate voice and agency in English tutorials. Students reflected on the significance of assuming a more conscious role in their learning, which is achieved through the verbal interactions with their peers and tutors in online Telegram tutorials. The value of dialogue among L2 students in English classrooms cannot be overlooked as it provides a space for previously marginalised groups to engage in critical conversations that allow them to challenge unequal social structures in education. Through a critical pedagogical approach to education, student agency can be fostered by creating platforms in English spaces, such as tutorials, for students to recognise their capabilities and develop agency in their learning.

6. Limitations

This study involved a small sample of 20 students and four tutors from the university's English 1A module, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other English modules, first-year students, or tutors. To obtain more comparative results, a larger sample could have been used, including participants from various modules or institutions. Additionally, the study's data collection was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated online interviews via Telegram instead of in-person interactions. This shift may have resulted in missed responses or behaviours that would have been captured in a physical classroom setting, presenting a limitation to the study.

Furthermore, the humanising aspects of face-to-face interviews, such as probing, clarification, and establishing comfort, were not fully realised in online virtual exchanges. Observations were conducted electronically, limiting the researchers to the responses and behaviours participants chose to share via text or voice notes. While voice notes were useful for capturing tone and expression, important cues like body language were unavailable, restricting the researchers' ability to comment on non-verbal communication. This constraint slightly hindered the intended triangulation process. Additionally, in the context of the interpretivist framework, it is important to acknowledge that participants' responses were subjective and may vary or change over time.

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