

This is a shortened translation of an article published by the authors in *Informationen Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (Feick & Alm, 2021). Permission was obtained from De Gruyter to publish this article in the *NZSAL Journal*.

GROUP WORK IN TIMES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION: ON THE USE AND PERCEPTION OF BREAKOUT ROOMS

Antonie Alm¹ & Diana Feick²

University of Otago¹
University of Auckland²

Abstract

This article discusses the function of breakout rooms in remote teaching during the 2020 pandemic. Based on survey and interview data from teachers and learners from 22 countries, our study explores perceived challenges and opportunities for virtual group work. Focusing on aspects of group management, communication, participation and group dynamics, we propose that breakout rooms can provide a valuable social space for isolated language learners and enhance collaborative language learning.

Keywords: group work; remote language learning; breakout rooms

Introduction

This study arose from the shift to tertiary online teaching of German as a Foreign Language (GFL) during the Covid pandemic. The move to video conferencing and the opportunities afforded by this technology for collaborative learning through Breakout Rooms (BOR) led to new ways of conducting partner and group work. During lockdown, BOR, virtual spaces for small groups within web conferencing applications, often represented the only space where students could meet and interact in German. We were interested to find out how this shift to virtual group work (GW) was perceived from the perspective of both learners and teachers. This related primarily to the ways in which participants regarded the effect of virtual space on GW, as well as how group dynamics and the communication and participation processes changed in BOR. A discussion of the current research on GW in the language classroom and the theoretical underpinning of GW in virtual learning environments is followed by a discussion of the study's design before we present our core research findings. In the final section of the paper, we discuss our findings and summarise the implications of this study for the teaching of GFL.

Theoretical background and current state of research

Group work in language teaching

Partner and group work¹ is a fundamental part of action-oriented foreign language teaching. Efforts to successfully implement this social form assume a collaborative approach to (foreign language) learning (Dooly, 2018; Storch, 2018). This approach has a learning theory basis in other social-constructivist, sociocultural as well as interactional approaches (Gass, 1997), according to which (language) learning is socially situated and social interaction leads, inter alia, to cognitive and linguistic development through collaborative scaffolding, co-construction and the negotiation of meaning.

In the last 30 years, collaborative aspects of language learning² have been the subject of thorough research (Nunan, 1992; Storch, 2018). It was shown that GW is conducive to learning when there is either a collaborative dialogue (Swain & Watanabe, 2019) or a collaborative style of interaction (Storch, 2018) and the group dynamic is characterised by a collective identity (Dooly, 2018, p. 3). In addition, GW is more efficient than pair or individual work when it comes to the production of grammatically correct texts (Dobao, 2012).

With reference to the learning theories cited above, the research suggests several functions for GW (Chappell, 2014; Pyun, 2004; Schramm, 2010):

- The development of communicative skills, especially speaking, by means of authentic and direct interaction,
- The development of cognitive skills through the negotiation of meaning, collective thinking and co-construction,
- The promotion of self-confidence and motivation,
- The promotion of methodological competence as well as learning autonomy,
- The building of interpersonal relationships (social competence), and
- The enabling of diversity within the group to respect individual differences.

Empirical evidence shows that successful GW depends on influential factors such as the role of teachers and students and their dispositions, differences in competence, the group dynamic and interaction, the use of L1, and the design of the tasks (Swain & Watanabe, 2019). In what follows, we will set out in more detail the findings on those aspects relevant to the present study: the dispositions of teachers and students, task design, the role of the teacher, and group dynamics.

With respect to the dispositions of students, Pyun (2004) showed in one of the first pertinent studies on GW that most of the learners of Korean surveyed (n=28) confirmed the positive effect of GW, even if more than half of the students found working alone was more efficient or just as efficient. Moreover, the students accorded the task design, the group composition, and the teacher's role an important function in successful GW. Regarding the task format, they preferred conversation tasks, dialogue exercises and tasks involving the exchange of opinions.

Other task categories suitable for GW were exercises for activating knowledge, discussions, directed discovery learning, project work, group games, information gaps, decision-making, writing conferences, reading circles, and group puzzles (Schramm, 2010). Students in an autonomous group work setting (Feick 2016) can be guided towards assuming responsibility. Whether activity parameters are under the sole control of the teacher depends above all on the leadership style of the teacher and the resulting group dynamic as well as learning successes (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999). Prescott (2017) showed in a case study that teachers place varying degrees of emphasis on creating a collaborative group dynamic that impacts students' enjoyment and engagement. The study, however, could not determine whether this plays out in how students perceive their learning success. It can be assumed that the underlying dispositions of teachers will be a critical factor in influencing the dynamics of GW in online classes.

The affective dimension of group dynamics is also critically important from the learners' perspective. Dörnyei and Malderez (1999) applied this socio-psychological concept to foreign language teaching, though mainly from the perspective of large groups, so that their findings need to be examined in the context of smaller collectives. Important aspects of group dynamics relate to the formation of the group and the relations between group members, as well as group norms and goals. Similar processes can be assumed to occur in forming small groups, especially when GW in online teaching is characterised by the frequent formation of new groups of students who do not know each other. The functioning of a newly formed group depends especially on social relationships and group norms. Groups with a strong social cohesion are characterised by mutual acceptance; that is, by a non-judgemental way of seeing, which is independent of any initial feelings of sympathy and attraction. Research shows that group cohesion emerges from physical proximity (seating order), personal contact (including extra-curricular contact), interaction (GW, project work), cooperation, group success, and competitions, as well as the common overcoming of difficulties. High group cohesion, also known as a collaborative mindset (Sato & Ballinger, 2012), leads to increased group productivity and motivation as well as learning successes and is marked by mutual sympathy, engagement and pride

in the group (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999). It is presumed that strong group cohesion in class also positively affects the cohesion of small groups.

Group norms are ultimately part of a value system internal to the group, which is informed by influential peers (e.g., peer pressure) and institutional norms (e.g., codes of behaviour, course rules) and which influence individual learning achievements and work ethic (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999). It is to be expected that the norms of the large group will be reflected in those of the small group and that, in the digital context, they will be overlaid with the communicative norms of social media.

Research has delivered few findings on group dynamics in L2 and its effects on participation and oral motivation in GW. The study by Martin-Beltrán et al. (2016), however, showed that positive social relationships within a tandem project characterised by mutual support and solidarity encouraged a readiness to communicate amongst members of the group.

The digitisation of learning environments represents a crucial factor in determining the shape and success of GW, which informs our examination of the specific ways digital teaching and learning environments operate.

Group work in virtual language learning environments

Virtual language learning environments (VLLE) are spaces accessible via the internet which enable directed or informal language learning, e.g., learning platforms or portals, video conferences, web pages or social media. These spaces rely on computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is by nature multimodal, differing from the communication encountered in the physical classroom. It subsequently produces different effects on interaction processes in a foreign language (Guo & Möllering, 2016; Hampel, 2012, 2019; Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Ng, 2020; Vurdien, 2019).

There are comprehensive research findings on the effects of CMC on collaborative language learning. It was found that GW in both CMC-based and face-to-face (f2f) modes was marked by varying patterns of interaction (Storch, 2018). In addition, the modality effect on collaborative dialogue (measured as the frequency of language-related episodes) in synchronous written work in CMC was greater and more form-focused than in oral f2f communication (Zeng, 2017).

As far as student relationships in VLLE are concerned, it could be demonstrated that social presence, evidenced by reciprocity, trust, a sense of belonging and solidarity, was subject to the mechanisms of technological mediation. While Feick (2020) showed that multimodality was of enormous importance in the way

groups reached decisions in the traditional classroom, Walker (2017, 2020) found in the context of distance learning that audio-based tools were able to counter social separation and isolation. According to this view, social presence can be conveyed in an auditory way, and the vocal presence of the learner on the affective, social-cohesive and interactional planes may contribute to overcoming temporal and spatial distance. Ko (2012) supplemented this study by finding that Taiwanese learners of French felt a greater sense of social presence when engaged in synchronous communication supported by video than in audio-driven interaction.

Scarcely any empirical information exists for BOR, which are a VLLE for small group activities. Chandler (2016) showed that in synchronous online tutorials, BOR encourage collaboration, interaction and support between peers. They contribute to the empowerment of learners, and they provide teachers with a respite from online teaching when students remain on their own in their breakout spaces. With the emergence of online language teaching during the pandemic, more studies have produced some insightful findings. Lay and Giblett (2020) point out the difficulty for teachers in getting an overview of students' work in the BOR, and they report "a different learning atmosphere" (p. 557) in the work of small groups.

Further, BOR were especially successful in small group interactions when the webcams were switched on, producing a socio-affective benefit (Gruber & Bauer, 2020). Cunningham and Bergstrom (2020) emphasise the importance of the teacher in setting up the BOR. They encouraged their students to use BOR as collaborative spaces connected by video to increase social presence and a sense of belonging. Some students preferred nonetheless to participate without a video feed, though in the course evaluations, most gave a positive assessment of the work in BOR. Ng (2020) confirmed these findings in an evaluation of her Zoom classes with trainee English teachers. She described the entry of the teacher into a BOR as "more intrusive" than in the face-to-face classroom and as an obstacle when monitoring the language production of learners. In an analytical study of interaction with Chinese learners, Guo and Möllering (2016) observed that the webcam was rarely used and, even then, only in the main space of the video conference. They interpreted this as a strategic, selective use of the video function, which could be attributed to social (e.g., inhibitions, privacy) and technical causes. Digital self-determination (privacy and the right to data security) seems, therefore, to be relevant for online teaching during the pandemic and especially for the use of BOR.

These initial glimpses of work with BOR confirm the need to look more precisely and empirically at the perspectives of teachers and learners who use these online tools. The research questions that underpin our study were:

1. What did German as a Foreign Language teachers think of group work in Breakout Rooms in online teaching during the pandemic?
2. What did German as a Foreign Language students think of Breakout Rooms in online teaching?

Study design

This exploratory study consists of a pilot study and a two-part main study (see Table).

Table 1. Overview Design

	Phase 1:	Phase 2:	Phase 3
	Pilot study	Main study 1	Main study 2
Teachers	Guided Interviews (n=3)	Online-survey, open-ended questions (n=39) (FBL)	Focused video interviews (n=3)
Students	Online-survey (n=26) (FBNZ)	/	Adapted Online-survey (n=18) (FBI, FBK, FBF)

The aim of the pilot study (March-June 2020) was to identify issues related to teachers' and learners' use and perception of BOR in GFL online classes. After the first lockdown in New Zealand, one oral and two written guided interviews were conducted with three GFL lecturers at New Zealand universities. In addition, their students (N=26) filled out an online questionnaire created with Qualtrics software consisting of eight open-ended questions. The preliminary coding of the data provided first insights into the use and the experiences of BOR in online teaching.

The following aspects turned out to be particularly relevant and formed the basis for the design of the two survey instruments in the main study: Task formats, preparation and follow-up as well as the design of BOR activities, teacher behaviour during BOR phases, learner behaviour in BOR, communicative and social aspects of group work in BOR, visual presence in BOR, group dynamics in BOR as well as technical particularities. With regard to the design, it should be noted that self-reports by survey participants can potentially be influenced by social desirability (Riemer, 2016) and thus only represent a subjective view of an experienced situation.

The main study was designed as a qualitative survey study with an in-depth design, whereby findings from main study 2 explained the results of main study 1 and shed light on unexpected findings (Schramm, 2016) as well as classifying them in case-specific sociocultural contexts. The online questionnaire of main study 1 contained the relevant questions identified in the pilot study. The 11

questions were open-ended so that participants could provide as much detail as possible in writing about their experiences with BOR.

The survey was sent out via email to the DAAD-Ortslektoren network. In all, 39 people from 22 European, American, Oceanic and Asian countries took part in the survey, allowing conclusions to be drawn about the subject of the study beyond the individual case.

For the second part of the main study, three participants from Italy, Finland and Colombia were selected who shared previously unconsidered perspectives in their questionnaire responses, and they were interviewed via Zoom (Archibald et al. 2019). The interviews were transcribed with the software F4 according to the convention of Dresing and Pehl (2015).

The three interviewees agreed to send an 11-item online questionnaire to their students to elicit their perspectives. Eighteen students (15 from Italy, 1 from Finland and 2 from Colombia) took part in this survey. The 26 questionnaire responses of the students in the pilot study were also taken into account in the analysis (n= 44). The data analysis was carried out inductively-deductively, category-building using the software Qualtrics, whereby a between-method triangulation of the questionnaire and interview data took place.

The teacher data were compared with the student data. An interview from the pilot study was also used for the data analysis of the main study due to its high significance.

This paper focuses on three participants. They were given the pseudonyms Alex (New Zealand), Melanie (Finland) and Karolina (Colombia). Alex shared his experiences from his two German courses at A1 and B1 levels. Melanie shared her observations about learners of German at different levels within an engineering degree programme. Karolina expressed her perceptions of an intensive German course for nurses and German courses for MA students.

Findings

In the following, we present the research results to questions 1 and 2 on the role of teachers and communication in BOR (4.1), group dynamics in BOR (4.2) as well as visual presence and participation (4.3).

Safe space: The role of teachers and communication in BOR

Virtual group work is characterised by teachers' and students' (communicative) behaviour and the individual perceptions that emerge from it. These latter will be

described and contrasted in more detail in what follows. Teachers mainly regarded BOR as a communication space, rather like a protected space in which one is simultaneously in both a closed virtual space and a familiar, domestic environment:

I think that it offers students in difficult situations an extra bit of security. Because ... you are not actually in this room, you're in that secure place you construct around yourself. (Interview Alex #00:37:09-5#)

The presence of teachers in these spaces was therefore based on the one hand by the intention to create such a safe, undisturbed space in which students direct their learning to the greatest possible degree. On the other hand, that imperative came into conflict with the traditional monitoring behaviour of some teachers. In many instances, as Alex's example makes clear, the presence and role of teachers during BOR sessions had to be renegotiated:

When they had to prepare for tasks, I generally did it so that I said: I'm staying out of it. I left it up to the students, when they needed help, to let me know by hitting the button. (Interview Alex #00:14:31-1#– #00:15:02-8#)

He used the technical possibilities of the software to make himself available when needed. It was more important to him to allow work to flow freely in the BOR, so he mainly adopted an observer role outside that space and ceded the initiative for making contact to the students.

The information provided by teachers revealed a broad spectrum of their behaviour in the BOR that ranged from regularly doing the rounds of groups to few or – in one case – no visits to the BOR. Teachers reported answering questions and solving problems during their time in these spaces. A small group of respondents used their presence to check things and correct mistakes, while others adopted a more passive listening role. The unannounced intrusion into the BOR was sometimes experienced as more uncomfortable than walking around the groups in a traditional classroom:

When I work with new groups, "I go around at the start" and listen briefly to their conversations, but I feel rather like a spy :-), more than in the classroom where I think it's ok to do a quick round keeping a bit of distance to the groups. (FBL20)

On the students' side, the presence of teachers was welcomed by the majority and students felt themselves to be supported by it. The movement of actors in a teaching space, an essential component in the dynamic of the physical classroom,

seems, through its new instantiation in the context of the virtual lesson, to have had a marked effect on group management processes.

In comparison with GW in the classroom, the visually and acoustically discrete units of the BOR were regarded by some teachers as incompatible with the atmosphere and flow of work in a class:

They miss the stimulating noises in class, you don't hear the other groups and don't pick up any ideas by chance which you'd otherwise overhear or see. Often, when you're run out of ideas or things have come to a halt in the group, it's motivating when you see that the others are working. (FBL20)

The perception of others operating at the periphery can be advantageous for the creation of interdependent groups. However, the sounds generated by other groups in the classroom as they learn are eliminated in the BOR.

Students also regarded this as a loss and spoke of the limited opportunities for listening in when the teacher was helping other groups. Students also noted that it was more difficult to get in touch with the teacher when they had problems. This meant that some put more into helping each other:

We were working through tasks together without direct supervision of the teacher, so had to think somewhat more critically about what we were doing before we had the opportunity to ask for help (when the teacher visited our breakout room). (FBNZ20)

Nevertheless, in terms of communication, some teachers found that it was just this spatial isolation from the instructor and other members of the class that encouraged concentration and was conducive to creating a secure space in which, compared with traditional classrooms, learners could speak with fewer inhibitions.

I believe that, compared with classroom situations, there are real advantages for students who are shy and have problems with self-confidence when it comes to oral communication. (Interview Alex #00:37:49-8#)

The students surveyed also considered the isolated spaces to be quieter, more informal and more encouraging of interaction, and they spoke of a greater private sphere. Most thought these features were conducive to motivating speech:

It helped us to feel more relaxed and give us time to think about what we were saying. (FBNZ14)

It was effective as it allowed me to speak ... without having to worry about being embarrassed about saying something incorrectly out loud, as I normally would in front of a larger class. (FBNZ6)

There were several associated positive effects perceived by students, such as a greater variety of conversation partners, an increase in communication time and fluency, contact with different approaches to speaking, a diminished feeling of being judged and observed, less fear of making mistakes, diminished pressure to perform and less shame:

Less people were watching me so I wouldn't feel as bad if I made a big mistake. Also, BOR meant that I actually got a chance to practice speaking. As opposed to a big classroom with many students. (FBNZ22)

Only a few respondents expressed a contrary opinion in which BOR were regarded as inhibiting for shy or fearful learners. This point of view was confirmed by several teachers who found students in BOR to be more distracted, quieter and less communicative:

Students are less confident in asking questions. Especially those who don't know me from the classroom. They are also much more inhibited amongst each other. (FBL33)

The technical functionality of CMC in much web-conferencing software was another essential factor in influencing the perception of communication in BOR. In this respect, Alex noted:

The typical group conversation was replaced by a sequence of individual commentaries. Because they could not all speak at the same time, the conversation was much, much more staccato. That's quite unnatural in a sense because it's not how group conversations work ... and then there were always communication problems as well, I think. (Interview Alex #00:17:37-8#)

In other contexts, however, CMC in BOR was unproblematic because it was marked by culturally specific communication styles, as may be seen in Melanie's report:

It's easy in Finland because you never interrupt when someone else is speaking. They let the other person finish, and they often tolerate a certain

degree of silence ... if the silence lasts a little longer, then the next person will begin and feel compelled to provide their contribution. (Interview Melanie #00:52:03-9#)

The fact that, without a video feed, learners' non-verbal communication was lacking was a deficiency for many of the respondents:

In the classroom you cannot just get rid of your gestures or physical presence ... The signals of listeners or signs of comprehension are largely absent and most students replace them with nods or emojis. (FBL9)

The ease of transitioning from audio to visual communication channels or the ability to completely switch them off confronted communication partners with a range of interactional groupings and limited opportunities for conveying and negotiating meaning non-verbally. The communicative differences which emerged through the (non-) use of a webcam and its effects on the flow of speech were the most frequently cited phenomena in this regard (see below).

Relational space: group dynamics in BOR

Positive social relations are significant for online teaching during a pandemic. Whereas relations between students in traditional coursework tend to develop accidentally and informally before, during, and after class, during a pandemic, students are generally isolated from one another at home, and their interpersonal contacts are greatly reduced. The survey data clearly showed that teachers recognised and exploited the function of BOR spaces for initiating and maintaining social relations:

I also just found it an important way of enabling students to have a bit of an exchange with each other, which they have before and after sessions in the classroom. And which they also experience briefly during class ... I found it really important for such things just to keep a bit of classroom flair alive. (Interview Alex #00:11:15-9#)

In Alex's case, this meant that he set BOR phases to be sometimes longer than that required for the task. Melanie deliberately integrated breaks into the sessions to provide space for social exchange and to encourage relationship building.

I also tell them that they may decide themselves as a group if they finish early, that they can maybe have a little coffee break together ... And that works quite well ... They sit together and have a coffee break but keep speaking German anyway. (Interview Melanie #00:23:33-1#)

Chat groups are another noteworthy initiative where students could meet before the beginning of class to have an informal exchange. Other respondents confirmed that GW in BOR, where groups were automatically allocated, encouraged companionship and a profusion of social contacts and eased the integration of outsiders. In other cases, opportunities for social exchange were reduced, and the spontaneity and good humour of traditional GW were sometimes lost, especially when students did not know each other personally before online classes began. Melanie pointed to a clear difference with classroom teaching in terms of the quality of social relations:

Ties are looser than normal although we “meet” just as often as in the classroom ... In group work the students still get to know each other quite well – but still they wouldn’t recognise each other if they were to meet on the street. (FBL32)

On the student side, most respondents stated that BORs positively affected the development of relationships. They reported that they could get to know a greater number of unfamiliar group members, and the (sometimes already existing) relationships between them were strengthened:

BOR and Zoom in general felt less formal than a classroom setting, which made it easier to make friends and do pair exercises. (FBNZ5)

In a few cases, though, online group work was seen as a hindrance to a sense of togetherness and as the cause of greater social distance and isolation:

I found it more awkward to talk to other students in breakout rooms compared to face-to-face communication in class, especially if I did not previously know them very well. (FBNZ17)

It was harder to connect. Online communication feels fake to me and didn’t seem like human interaction. (FBNZ22)

BOR enabled students to develop and cultivate relationships. Yet, they could also represent an obstacle to building relationships amongst students due to the selections made by instructors or the restricted range of communication modes available.

Private space: visual presence in BOR

One major influencing factor on relationships in virtual space is the construction of social presence via multimodal forms of communication. It became apparent that the video mode was crucial for GW in BOR since it enabled visual and

auditory presence and participation. Teachers viewed this aspect from their brief interventions with groups in the BOR and their experiences outside these spaces. It was evident that students tended to switch their cameras off during full class sessions and that visual participation occurred more frequently in the BOR than in the main teaching space. The main reasons given for this were (alongside technical limitations): cultural considerations, respect for privacy or the need by students to conceal parallel activities or their residential locations, a sense of discomfort or peer pressure.

Around 1/3 of the respondent teachers explicitly insisted that cameras be turned on during online classes. Common reasons for this were: to enable a better overview of student participation, to improve communication, or to carry out specific activities such as presentations or tests. In groups where students voluntarily turned on their cameras, the explanations given were: politeness, the fact that everyone knew each other, to optimise interaction and to encourage a “feeling of togetherness” (FBL, Karolina).

In those cases where there was a difference in visual participation between the main class and BOR, instructors explained it by referring to politeness, ease of GW, optimisation of communication, better ways of people getting to know each other, and a greater feeling of security in a small group.

Therefore, the greatest challenge in group management seemed to lie in dealing with visual participation. While for Alex, this was justified by wanting to protect privacy so that the decision was left to the learners themselves, Melanie saw the phenomenon of peer pressure as the greatest obstacle to her communicatively and socially motivated preference for visual participation:

I think that it has to be left up to the individual ... Some people used this background function to simply say: you see me, but you don't see my surroundings. ... I don't think it's fair to demand a view into people's private lives. (Interview Alex #00:28:46-7#)

But then I see that there are people who have their cameras on and see ‘Oh, the others aren't doing it for some reason’, and then they ask themselves: ‘Are we turning our cameras on?’ And if there's no response, then they prefer to turn them off quickly. It doesn't matter what the instructions were, it's somehow a kind of peer group pressure. Yes, it's a never-ending struggle. (Interview Melanie #00:49:01-6#)

In retrospect, Melanie noted that students in their course evaluations had expressed the desire that teachers insist more forcefully on using cameras to create visual presence and eliminate what was perceived as peer pressure.

On the learners' side, there was a balance of views on whether cameras should be on or off. Exactly as with the instructors, the need for a visual presence was grounded in the desire to be able to see non-verbal modes of communication, to show that one was present, it was felt to be a matter of courtesy, it seemed more pleasant, more real, or because a presentation or test required it:

I rarely had my video off as I like having the same experience as I would in a real class, being able to interact and understand people through their expressions. (FBNZ21)

Often the reasons given by students for not providing a visual presence were (alongside technical limitations): shyness, preventing others from viewing one's private life, a sense that one was not presentable, peer pressure, or the need to conceal other, possibly inappropriate, activities:

I didn't want everyone watching me randomly. (FBNZ8)

Switched off, because it's a bit odd to share the private space of your own room with people who are often strangers. (FBI1)

The camera functionality in web conferencing software, therefore, led to greater self-consciousness and self-judgement, sometimes even becoming a distraction in a way that is quite unusual in traditional GW. Particularly noteworthy in this regard was the change from visual to auditory modes in which the learner took on only a listening role:

Sometimes the classes were very early and you haven't had a shower ... That way it took concentration off yourself and allowed you to focus on what's going on in the class. Also sometimes we would still be eating breakfast. So you would mute yourself and turn off the camera so you can still listen in but not be disruptive. (FBNZ11)

This selective visual presence changed, as the interviews with teachers confirmed, between the main teaching space and the breakout rooms.

On, when someone else turned it on, and off, when no one else had it on. We all shared the same sense of insecurity in showing ourselves to the camera. (FB1)

In those cases where visual presence was not affected by technical difficulties, it demonstrated learners' agency in selecting their style of participation. It was accompanied by a technological empowerment unavailable in the physical environment. In addition, it became apparent that physical presence in a private space exists in a reciprocal and perhaps even a conflicting relationship with a

parallel virtual presence in a VSLU and that, as a consequence, aspects of formal and informal learning are combined.

Discussion and conclusion

The study found that BOR used for GW were configured by respondents as safe spaces for communication, as spaces for social relationships, and as private learning spaces. In terms of safe communication spaces, there was a prevalent sense that the virtual nature of BOR as self-enclosed areas and the less frequent and often more restrained presence of the instructor enhanced students' motivation and their opportunities for speaking. At the same time, the data from students showed that, in some contexts, computerised modes of communication also obstructed comprehension and collaboration in BOR, particularly when participants were not visually but only acoustically present. This finding aligns with Hampel's (2019) conceptualisation of virtual learning spaces, according to which online interaction restricts visual space and limits the information accessible to interactants, which can have consequences for their capacity to communicate.

The study also clarified the enormous importance of BOR as spaces of social relationships. Every aspect of group formation, cohesion and dynamics (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999) in virtual learning spaces is primarily enabled by GW in BOR. In the context of a pandemic, GW in BOR showed itself to be a key activity in forming social relationships and substituted for the more informal contact of students in regular classes. Instructors who recognised this function created opportunities for building and cultivating relationships prior to the online lesson and during the GW sessions in the BOR. Moreover, for learners, BOR led to more and sometimes closer social contact with their classmates than was the case in traditional settings.

Finally, the visual presence provided by a switched-on webcam was shown to be indispensable for the construction of social presence (Walker, 2017) and group cohesion in times of social isolation. The study provides empirical confirmation of the same experience-based theses of Cunningham and Bergstrom (2020) and Gruber and Bauer (2020). In addition, it could be seen that there was a tension between respecting students' private sphere, the value of nonverbal communication for video broadcast language learning and the associated course / group norms or pressures. The opportunity to control visual participation independently strengthened the agency of students and empowered them to co-construct communication and learning processes in breakout rooms as potentially private learning spaces – and more generally in video-based online lessons, as well. Ultimately this can lead to a democratisation of digital teaching and learning processes.

The findings of this exploratory study allow us to formulate initial didactic and methodological implications for the teaching of German as a Foreign Language. The virtual nature of breakout rooms made them central for group work in online teaching in the pandemic context, and their functions became significantly expanded compared with the normal, physical classroom. Teachers were faced with the challenge of adapting the configuration of tasks, group management and their roles during group work to their learners' desire for sociability. The capacity of multimodal online communications to promote language learning should be carefully weighed against instructors' and students' rights for digital self-determination, especially when virtual learning spaces and private places merge. Group norms and virtual (communicative) behaviour need to be discussed and renegotiated against this background.

As research into virtual learning environments (see also Feick & Rymarczyk, 2022), especially in the context of collaborative learning, is still in its infancy, other studies are required which will investigate learner-to-learner and teacher-to-learner interactions as well as the behaviour of teachers in BOR. In addition, it would be useful to compare GW in the physical classroom with that of the BOR. This study has shown, moreover, that BOR show the potential for the development of individual agency, for the autonomy of groups of learners and the cohesion of small groups. This potential could also be empirically examined. The increased use of breakout rooms for group work in virtual GFL learning sets a marker for the future of virtual teaching and learning settings, both collaborative and hybrid.

Notes

1. In this paper we will be using group work as an overarching concept which also includes work in pairs.
2. For the purposes of clarity, the concepts of group work and collaborative learning will be used synonymously in this paper.

Acknowledgement

We thank Dr Peter Barton for his help in translating this article.

References

- Archibald, M. M., Ambagtsheer, R. C., Casey, M. G., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: Perceptions

- and experiences of researchers and participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–8.
- Chappell, P. (2014). *Group work in the English language curriculum: Sociocultural and ecological perspectives on second language classroom learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chandler, K. (2016). Using breakout rooms in synchronous online tutorials. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 4(3), 16–23.
- Dobao, F. A. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in L2 classroom: Comparing group, pair and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21, 40–58.
- Dooly, M. (2018). Collaborative learning. In J. I. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. Wiley Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0394>.
- Dresing, T., & Pehl, T. (2015). *Praxisbuch Interview, Transkription & Analyse. Anleitungen und Regelsysteme für qualitativ Forschende*. Online: www.audiotranskription.de/praxisbuch (07.12.2020).
- Dörnyei, Z., & Malderez, A. (1999). The role of group dynamics in foreign language learning and teaching. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in language learning* (pp. 155-169). Cambridge University Press.
- Feick, D., & Alm, A. (2021). Gruppenarbeit in Zeiten der sozialen Isolation: Zur Nutzung und Wahrnehmung von Breakout-Räumen. *Informationen Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, 48(5), 516-544.
- Feick, D., & Rymarczyk, J. (2022). *Fremdsprachenlernen im virtuellen Raum*. Peter Lang.
- Feick, D. (2020). Ist das Kollaboration? Multimodale Aspekte von Gruppeninteraktionen in der Fremdsprache Deutsch. *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, 57(2), 79–88.
- Feick, D. (2016). *Autonomie in der Lernendengruppe: Entscheidungsdiskurs und Mitbestimmung in einem DaF-Handyvideoprojekt*. Narr Francke Attempto.
- Gass, S. M. (2017). *Input, interaction, and the second language learner*. Routledge.
- Guo, S., & Möllering, M. (2016). The implementation of task-based teaching in an online Chinese class through web conferencing. *System*, 62, 26–38.
- Hampel, R. (2019). The conceptualization of time, space, and the body in virtual sites and the impact on language learner identities. In S. Bagga-Gupta, G. Dahlberg, & Y. Lindberg (Eds.), *Virtual sites as learning spaces: Critical issues on languaging research in changing eduscapes* (pp. 269-294). Springer International.
- Hampel, R. (2012). Multimodal computer-mediated communication and distance language learning. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Wiley Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal081>.

- Hampel, R., & Stickler, U. (2012). The use of videoconferencing to support multimodal interaction in an online language classroom. *ReCALL*, 24(2), 116–137.
- Ko, C. (2012). A case study of language learners' social presence in synchronous CMC. *ReCALL*, 24(1), 66–84.
- Lay, T., & Giblett, K. (2020). Zoom, Padlet, Screencast + Co.– Fremdsprachen lehren und lernen in Zeiten der Corona-Krise. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht*, 25(2), 553–565.
- Martin-Beltrán, M., Chen, P.J., Guzman, N., & Merrills, K. (2016). How adolescents use social discourse to open space for language learning during peer interactions. In M. Sato, & S. Ballinger (Eds.), *Peer interaction and second language learning: Pedagogical potential and research agenda* (pp. 319-348). John Benjamins.
- Ng, C. H. (2020). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) through synchronous online teaching in english language preservice teacher education. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 2(2), 62–73.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Collaborative language learning and teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Prescott, F. J. (2017). Observations from the language classroom: The importance of the group. *EduLingua*, 3(1), 1–18.
- Pyun, O. (2004). The role of group work in the second language classroom. *The Korean language in America*, 9, 169–191.
- Riemer, C. (2016). Befragung. In D. Caspar, F. Klippel, M. K. Legutke & K. Schramm (Eds.), *Forschungsmethoden in der Fremdsprachendidaktik: Ein Handbuch* (pp. 155-173). Narr Francke Attempto.
- Sato, M., & Ballinger, S. (2012). Raising language awareness in peer interaction: A cross-context, cross-method examination. *Language awareness*, 21(1), 157–179.
- Schramm, K. (2016). Empirische Forschung In D. Caspar, F. Klippel, M. K. Legutke & K. Schramm (Eds.), *Forschungsmethoden in der Fremdsprachendidaktik: Ein Handbuch* (pp. 49-58). Narr Francke Attempto.
- Schramm, K. (2010). Sozialformen. In H-J. Krumm, C. Fandrych, B. Hufeisen & C. Riemer (Eds.), *Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache: Ein internationales Handbuch* (pp. 1182–1187). De Gruyter.
- Steininger, I. (2016). Partner- und Gruppenarbeit. In E. Burwitz-Melzer, G. Mehlhorn, C. Riemer, K-P. Bausch & H-J. Krumm (Eds.), *Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht* (pp. 343–347). A. Francke.
- Storch, N. (2018). Collaborative writing. In J. I. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. Wiley Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0395>.
- Swain, M., & Watanabe, Y. (2019). Languaging: Collaborative dialogue as a source of second language learning. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The*

encyclopedia of applied linguistics. Wiley Online Library.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0664.pub2>.

Vurdien, R. (2019). Videoconferencing: Developing students' communicative competence. *Journal of Foreign Language Education and Technology* 4(2), 269–298.