# Microsoft OneNote Collaboration Space: A Powerful Platform to Engage Participation in an ESL Classroom

**Puteri Ayufiza Asmuni**

University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sultanate of Oman

## Abstract:

With the continuous suspensions of schools and educational institutions due to COVID-19, many educators around the world have been seen struggling and grappling with an array of digital learning platforms to choose from. During this time, educators and policymakers have expressed concerns about adequate student engagement through remote learning or, in some cases, inability to reach students completely (Chambers, Scala and English). Many teachers are unsure of the most effective, practical, and user-friendly digital educational tools to utilize to deliver lessons, conduct classroom activities and provide feedback to students. As a result, students have become demotivated to partake in classroom activities and become disengaged from the virtual classroom experiences. Findings revealed that majority of students prefer face-to-face classrooms to online learning and most of them are not willing to learn online in the future. (Imsa-ard). To help minimize the gap between teachers and students in an online learning environment, Big Tech companies like Google, Microsoft and Apple have devised numerous platforms and apps to assist educators to provide real-time feedback and coaching to their students**.** This paper addresses the effectiveness of Microsoft OneNote Collaboration Space in encouraging students to work together and engaging students' classroom participation.

**Keywords:** classroom; disengaged; feedback, online; practical

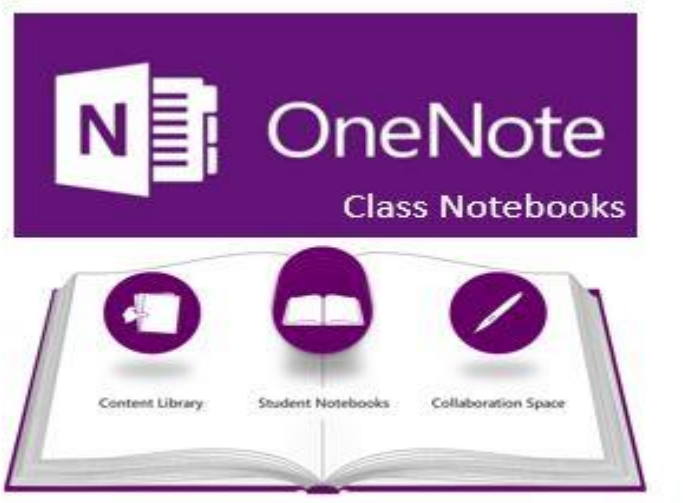
## 1.0 Introduction

Until February 1st 2021, more than 103 million people around the world have been tested positive for COVID-19, and around 2.23 million people have succumbed to this deadly virus (Google News.com). The suspensions of schools and classes due to the pandemic have also caused more than 234,266,891 billion children and youths around the world to be out of school (UNESCO.org). Due to this unprecedented situation, the Colleges of Technology affiliated with the Ministry of Manpower in Oman have been instructed to complete their remaining curricula through online learning (omannews.gov.om). The emergent protocol to opt for a swift transition from a face-to-face classroom to full-on online learning is to ensure that students are not being removed from their classroom learning experiences entirely, apart from providing students with learning continuity.

Lecturers have been coerced into unchartered territories within a short period of time. They have had to improvise and reinvent their teaching methodologies to suit the pressing demand of a new culture of teaching and learning, and at the same time they must choose the most

suitable digital platforms and tools for skills-building. As a result of this alarming situation, another issue that has been of paramount concern is creating a new social distancing pedagogy model that can facilitate teachers to conduct lessons under the new normal. Watkins et al. (2004) suggests that being attached to existing pedagogies and practices makes it difficult for teachers to adjust to innovations and upgrade existing ones. Lecturers are seen struggling to get themselves familiarized with instructional designs for the purpose of interactive content creations to engage students' participation and support students' learning. Getting acquainted with this pedagogy is crucial in delivering a successful virtual lesson where both lecturers and students can be involved in a dynamic teaching and learning environment. Richmond and Cummings (2005) asserted that online classes are effective when students learning styles are accomodated through the structure of its course delivery, teacher-student communication, appropriate assignments and activities that are conducive to online learning, and effective use of online resources.

*Figure 1: OneNote Class Notebooks*




*Source: Microsoft.com*

### 1.1 The Emergent Shift to Online Learning in Oman

In the context of ESL, Oman is one of the GCC countries that has steadily incorporated English as a Second Language (ESL) as a part of its curricula in order to keep its learners in line with the demand of the 21st century skill requirements. The National Strategy for Education 2040 reported the following areas that needed to be further improved:

- The need to improve school graduates' performance in Mathematics, Science, Arabic and English.
- The need to equip students with 21st century skills and competencies such as analytical thinking, problem solving, creativity, innovation and research skills.

The 21st century -skills have identified communication as one of the most prominent skills that learners must acquire to thrive in a world that constantly seeks for talents who can effectively and responsibly convey and comprehend information in various situations. Careeradvisor.asia suggested that collaboration, teamwork, communication and organisational skills are aptitudes that are needed to succeed in a fast-paced and constantly-changing environment. Without the skills to communicate effectively, students in the 21st century will not be well-equipped to progress in their careers (aeseducation.com).

Prior to Covid-19, the English Language Centres under the then Colleges of Technology (now known as University of Applied Sciences) in Oman used Moodle to support learning in face-to-face classrooms. For supplementary purposes, students were assigned homework, quizzes and assignments on this platform to assist them in reinforcing their English language skills. Jose and Abidin (2015) claimed that the effort to utilise this interactive facility had enhanced the implementation of e-learning at the institutions. However, due to the abrupt suspensions of schools and higher learning institutions because of Covid-19 in March 2020, a contingency plan was devised. The purpose of the emergent plan was to minimize the challenges and shortcomings both lecturers and students might encounter, and as a result, the university agreed to opt for different applications, including Moodle as the main window of interaction between students and e-learning systems and Microsoft Teams as the sole platform for synchronous learning (omannews.gov.om). The One Note Class Notebook has been utilized as an added educational tool that can be embedded in Microsoft Teams to assist lecturers in managing classroom activities, providing feedback and assigning homework and quizzes. Since this paper aims to address the effectiveness of Collaboration Space in OneNote Class Notebook, the descriptions below will specify the features of OneNote Class Notebook, which include its major components: Collaboration Space, Content Library and Student Notebook.

**Collaboration Space**

The Collaboration Space allows teachers and students to communicate and participate in classroom activities on an interactive platform. Though there are many applications in the market that provide similar functions, the Collaboration Space appears to be more distinct as it encourages collaboration amongst students and teachers when there is a need for pair work or group work. “This is ideal for group projects, project-based learning, and co-creation between teachers and students.” (cultofpedagogy.com). On this platform, students can discuss, develop new ideas and at the same time receive prompt feedback from teachers. Apart from that, it also offers digital inking capabilities which allow teachers and students to add handwritten notes and sketches. (cultofpedagogy.com). The participants can also enjoy the extended flexibility that enables users to incorporate videos and audio notes anywhere on the page.

**Content Library**

The Content Library acts as s digital cabinet for teachers to share important course documents with students (cultofpedagogy.com). Because of its restricted functionality which only grants students with read-only access, teachers have the full autonomy to store and distribute documents while maintaining their security intact.

**Student Notebook**

The Student Notebook eases students into personalizing their very own notebook or portfolio. It enables each student to complete, submit and maintain their homework, assignments, copies of lecture notes and record everything in confidence while permitting read-only access to teachers and parents (cultofpedagogy.com).

The research questions below seek to shed some light on the issue of engaging students' participation in an ESL classroom due to the emergent shift to online learning:

1. How do students perceive Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space?
2. How effective is Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space in engaging students' participation in an ESL classroom?

## 1.2 Literature Review

E-learning or online learning is defined as learning by utilizing electronic technologies for accessing educational curriculums outside of traditional classrooms (e-student.org). Clark and Mayer (2016) suggested e-learning as "instructions delivered through digital devices with the intent of supporting learning". Even though many people believe that online learning solely involves teachers and students to be virtually present at the same time, e- learning or online learning can be delivered in a synchronous or in an asynchronous manner. In a synchronous setting, participants are expected to be engaged at the same time (synchronously), as opposed to an asynchronous learning environment, where no real-time interaction takes place (easy-lms.com).

When the Supreme Committee in Oman called for suspensions for all schools and higher learning institutions in March 2021(english.alarabiya.net), problems stemming from teacher readiness and student motivation arose. Syahrin, S., & Salih, A. A. (2020) stated that the abrupt move towards digital and distance learning received drawbacks and criticisms even though the advocates of online education view the pandemic as an opportunity for students to experience learning with a variety of applications and online tools.

Previous statement by Al- Maskiry (2018), supported this by saying that some educators are not keen to embrace technology. This scenario, combined with students' limited knowledge in digital literacy has created a negative attitude towards online learning among students. Emmanuel Aboagye, et al. (2020) discovered that students were not ready to partake in an online learning experience during the pandemic due to the lack of knowledge in digital literacy and the presumptions that being temporarily out of school equates to shifting their focus to family rather than obtaining an education. As a result, teachers find that students are easily distracted in an online learning envoironment and have become disengaged from classroom activities owing to the absence of face-to-face interactions between teacher and students and communication with peers during classroom activities.

Moreover, Clayton, Berwin et al (2002) stated that minimal amount of timely feedback and quick responses from teachers in online learning are also one of the factors that contribute to students' poor participation in class. This is expected as virtual and delayed responses from

teachers coupled with the inability to see the teachers‘ body language can cripple students‘ interests and cause them to be detached from the whole learning experience. When students are taken away from the physical face-to-face learning environment which, for years, has offered them nothing but a safe, conducive, and nurturing educational sphere, an outcome that depletes learners' motivation and participation is inevitable. These two important forces (motivation and participation) that drive learners to become actively involved in class are compromised due to the abrupt changes in lesson delivery and reductions of classroom interactions. In addition, the scramble of an emergent need to conduct online lessons or classes have unfortunately resulted in a teacher-centered approach (ukfiet.org). Though virtually students still get to be present in a "class" with their peers, most instructions and lessons are delivered in a didactic, passive manner, dampening students' motivation and creating a negative attitude towards learning.

A closer look at the previous studies by Clayton, Berwin et al (2002) and Syahrin, S., & Salih, A. A. (2020) on online learning and ESL Classroom experience during Covid -19 disclosed some limitations representing the digital platforms, the specific educational tools and apps utilized for the online learning environments. The features and functionality of the virtual spaces and tools were not adequately described to indicate their specific role in assisting and enriching teachers' and students' online teaching and learning experiences. Although Clayton, Berwin et al (2002) stipulated the hardware and software used by the institution in the case studies, the impact of the system on students' participation in class remains limited. A closer look at Syahrin, S., & Salih, A. A. (2020) revealed that though the objectives of the study revolve around evaluating an e-learning course based on technologies being incorporated, very little was elaborated on what and how the selected technologies pertaining to digital platforms, educational tools and apps have bearings on the learning environment, lesson delivery and learning resources.

## 2.0 Methods

To gain better insights into the effectiveness of Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space, a thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze qualitative data based on students' contributions and responses during classroom activities done on the platform.

### 2.1 Participants

The data in this paper were sourced from 30 students of Level 2 ESL Foundation Year with the author being the class tutor and the participant observer from Al-Musanna University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Oman. Apart from the students' proficiency level that was readily low, it is also worth mentioning that the students' level of motivation and attitude towards learning the English Language had also been rather challenging for their tutors to manage. Students showcased reluctance to answering questions, contributing ideas, and they also did not respond well to group work or any task-based activities. This scenario, coupled with the abrupt suspensions of face-to-face classes, have resulted in unfavorable outcomes during the initial implementation of the online classes. Preliminary observations by the author on students' participation indicated that students, particularly those with very low proficiency level, barely took part in any classroom activities due to lack of interests, low self-esteem and motivation level. However, this trend witnessed a pivotal turn after the introduction of Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space. Though the sample size of this study was not large

enough for a conclusive result, the recurring patterns that emerged from the analysis have provided a steady and promising direction towards establishing a new platform to engage students' participation in an online ESL classroom.

### 2.2 Data Collection

To obtain the data, students' work during synchronous learning sessions was gathered and categorized according to three different stages:

**Stage 1:** Introduction to Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space (students' initial perception towards Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space during a pre-listening activity)

**Stage 2:** Utilizing Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space a Week After the Implementation (students' participation in the collaboration space during a pre-writing activity)

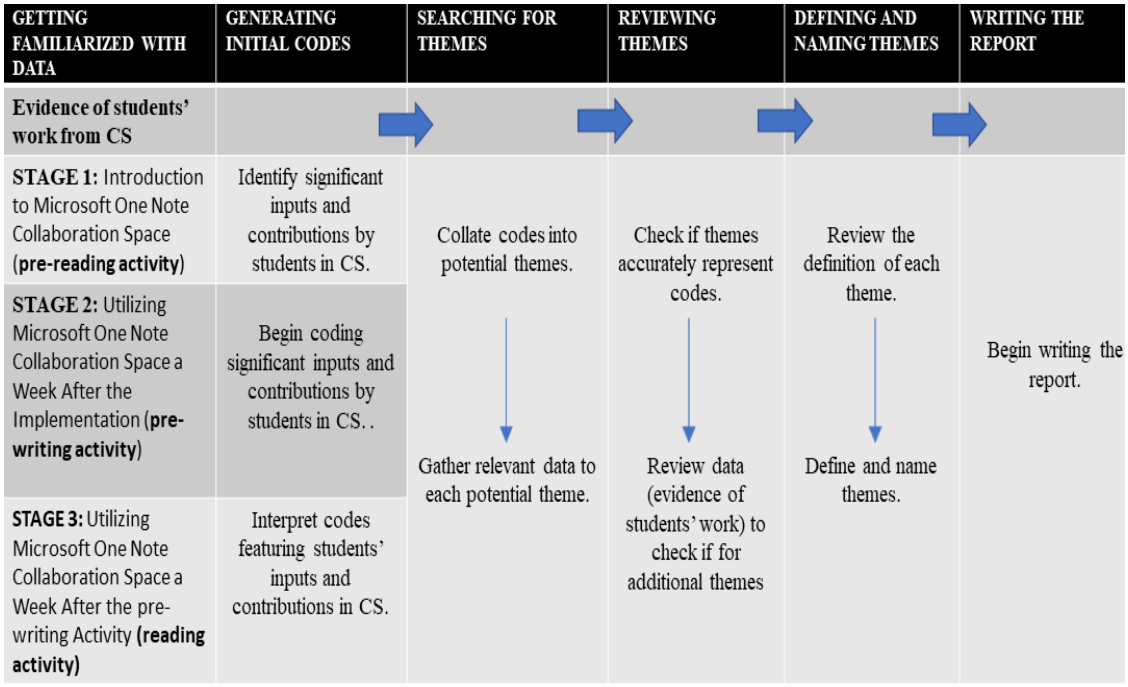
**Stage 3:** Utilizing Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space a Week After the Pre-Writing Activity (students' participation in the collaboration space during a reading activity)

The rationale behind selecting data from synchronous learning sessions as opposed to asynchronous sessions was to garner immediate personal engagements between students and instructors and to monitor more responsive exchanges between students and instructors during real-time interactions (clas.ucdenver.edu).

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by adopting the thematic analysis approach by Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Students' contributions and responses extracted from Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space in the forms of writing, drawing, underlining, circling, matching and content creations were gathered and categorized. Subsequently, the data from each skill were examined for coding purposes and content descriptions. The following stage involved identifying significant patterns to generate possible themes. By establishing and defining recurring themes, the author arrived at the representation and interpretation of data. The chart below illustrates the stages of the thematic analysis approach.

*Figure 2: Adopted from Thematic Analysis Approach by Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006)*




It was decided that the most reliable way to interpret the data was by allowing them to determine the development of themes (inductive approach) rather than doing it deductively by setting pre-conceived themes in mind that could potentially limit the interpretation of data Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006).

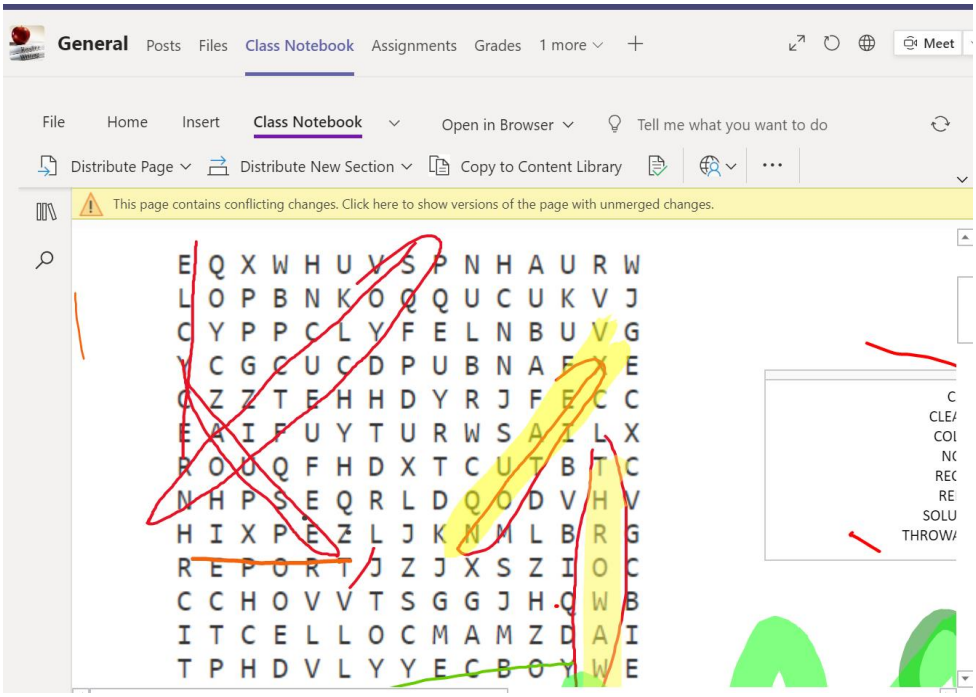
## 3.0 Results

The results of this research paper are categorized into different themes which correspond to the three stages of data collection as explained in 2.2.

**3.1 Reluctance and Hesitance:** Introduction to Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space (students' initial perception towards Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space during a pre-listening activity)

The image below illustrates how students initially perceived Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space when it was first introduced to them as a pre-reading activity. The activity was done to activate the students' schemata before they were given an academic reading text. 10 targeted lexical items were incorporated into a WORD SEARCH puzzle on the collaboration space platform and students were instructed to look for the hidden words. In the beginning, students were given the freedom to spend several minutes experimenting with the functionality of the collaboration space. After that, they began working on the task.

*Figure 3: Pre-reading activity*

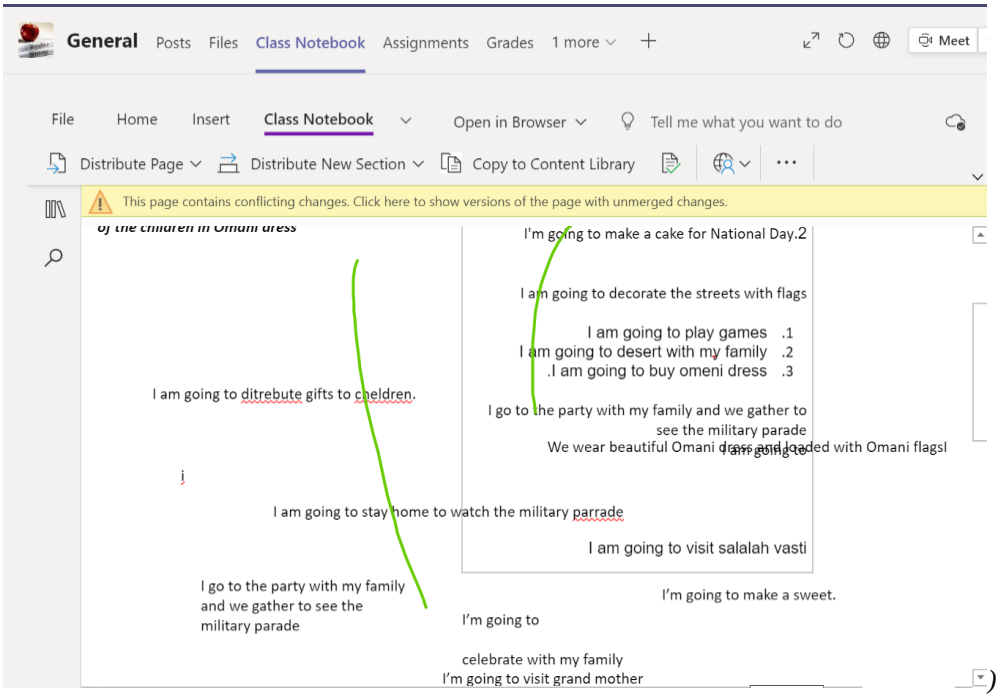



As depicted in Fig. 3, only around five to six students took the initiative to look for the hidden words while the rest of the class remained quiet and uninterested. After students were encouraged by the author to take part in the activity, two students started to experiment with the green and yellow highlights in the collaboration space. However, instead of looking for the hidden words, they scribbled on the page while the rest of the class remained barely interested in completing the task. The activity had to be ended as students were very reserved and reluctant to participate.

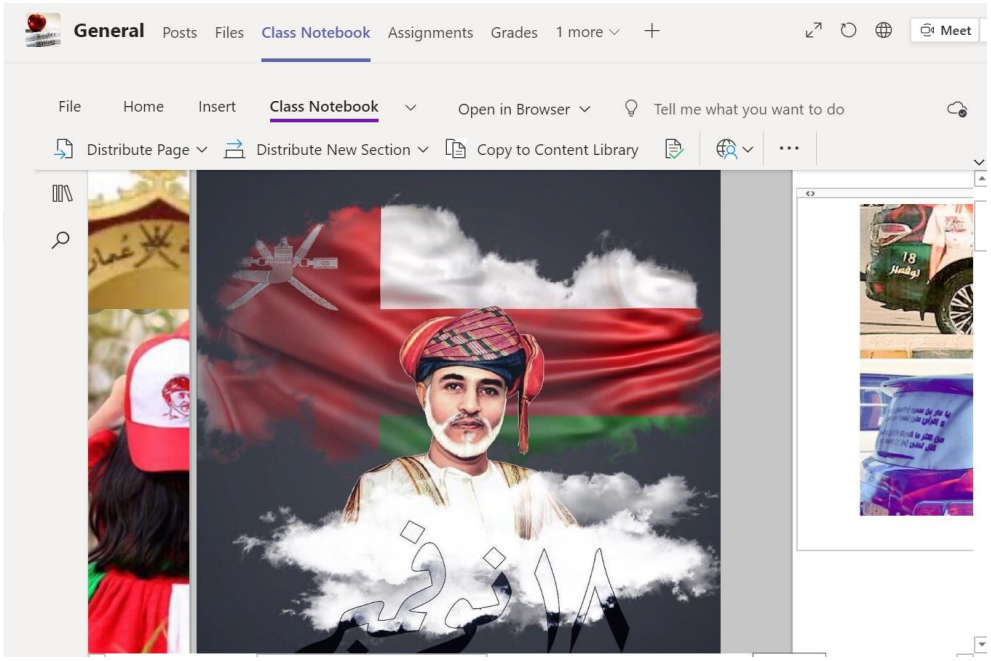
The finding revealed in Fig. 3 depicted that the level of participation among the students was merely traceable. This could be seen in the weak traces of red and orange lines together with the targeted lexical items produced by a small number of their classmates in the puzzle. Nonetheless, the interpretation of this figure which suggests low level of student engagement should be treated with caution. As evidenced in the yellow prompt at the top of the page, there might have been some inputs from students that were not instantly captured by the system due to weak internet connectivity.

**3.2 Perseverance and Increased level of Participation:** Utilizing Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space a Week After the Implementation (students' participation in the collaboration space during a pre-writing activity)

*Figure 4: Pre- writing activity (sentences)*




*5: Pre- writing activity (images)*




A week after the introduction to the collaboration space, students were instructed to make use of the platform to write sentences by applying the grammar form of "be" + "going to" to describe their future plans and arrangements for the upcoming National Day in Oman. Further evidence from Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 revealed that students' level of participation had significantly

increased. As showcased in Fig. 4, 11 students wrote the targeted grammar item in the collaboration space. It is worth noting that most of the sentences captured in Fig. 4 accurately presented the targeted grammar item. This is indicative of the students' proficiency level which granted them the confidence to write in the collaboration space for the entire class to see. Interestingly, Fig. 5 showcased refreshing findings. Students who did not manage to write in the collaboration space (perhaps due to low self-confidence or connectivity issues) still chose to partake in the activity by sharing images of how they were planning to celebrate their National Day on the following page.

Figs. 4 and 5 reinforce the effectiveness of the collaboration space at this stage as increased level of participation could already be witnessed among the students. Students with higher proficiency level were confident and contributed their ideas promptly in the collaborations space while the ones who were still struggling with the targeted grammar item persevered and remained keen to be involved in the activity nonetheless.

**3.3 Confidence and Interest:** Utilizing Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space a Week After the pre-writing Activity (students' participation in the collaboration space during a reading activity)

*Figure 6: Reading activity (True/False/Not Given)*

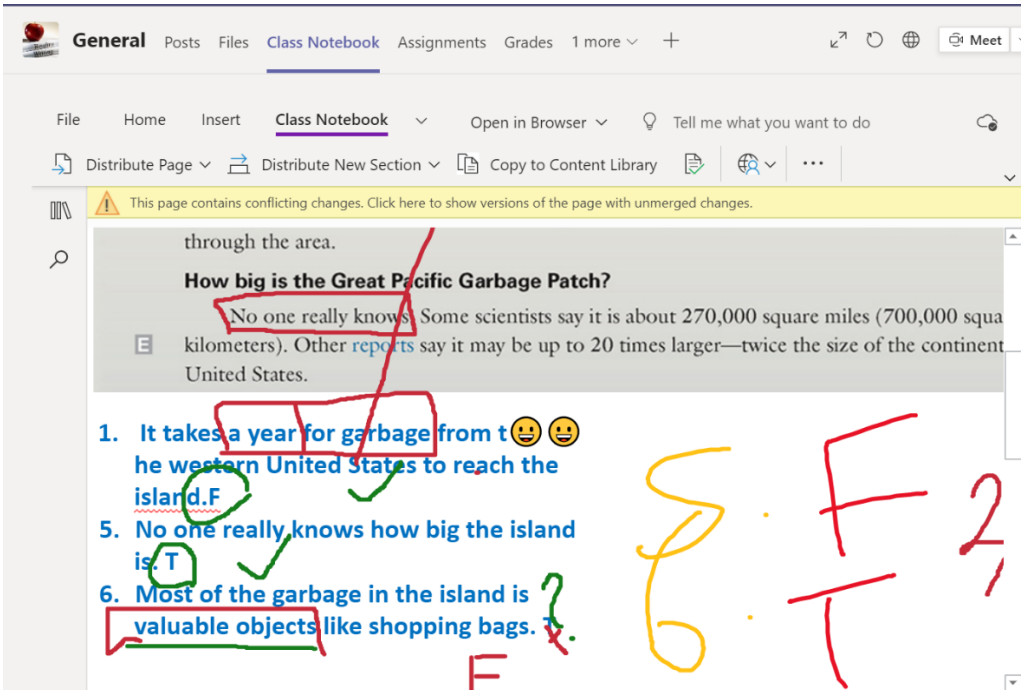


*Figure 7: Reading activity (True/False/Not Given)*

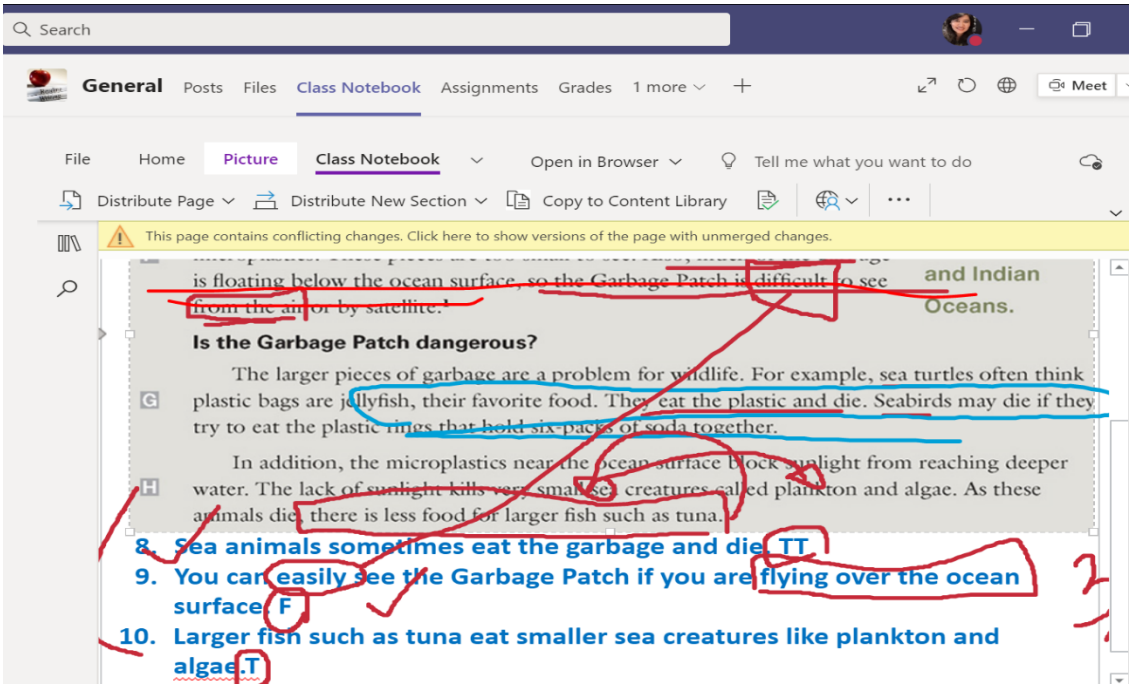
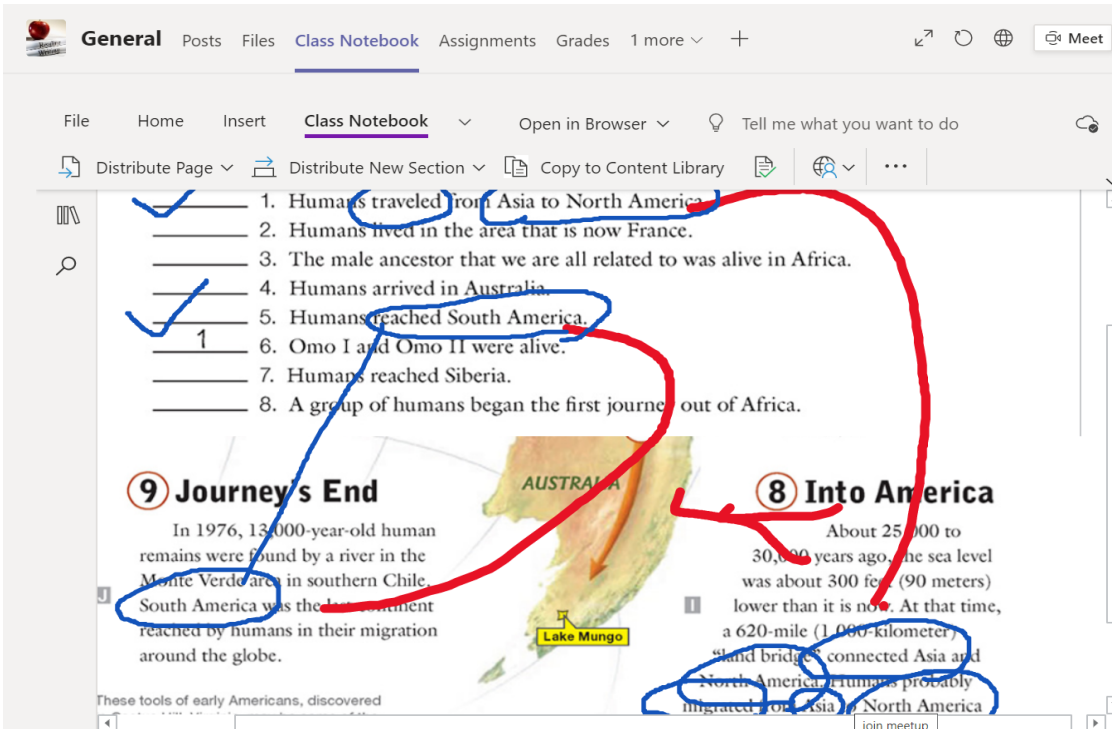



*Figure 8: Reading activity (Matching Headings)*




The findings in Figs. 6, 7 and 8 remarkably indicate that the students had reached a point where they were already comfortable and adept at navigating their way in the collaboration space, as compared to their first experience working on the platform. During a reading

activity that required them to apply different reading strategies such as identifying, matching and evaluating keywords, students showcased confidence and interest in taking ownership of their contributions. They took it upon themselves to draw, circle and underline key words and information to demonstrate their reading strategies. Apart from the increased level of participation and the accurate application of reading strategies, students exhibited the disciplines that are required in a teamwork or collaboration. This is evidenced in the absence of their purposeless scribbling and highlighting in the collaboration space.

Further observation by the author also points out that some students added their own pages in the collaboration space after the activity had ended, as a testament that they too had taken part in the activity. This evidence strongly suggests that the usage and function of this collaboration space should not be underplayed.

## 4.0 Discussion

The results in this paper are substantially in line with several previous studies that were done to gain insights into practical approaches that employ differentiated teaching and learning techniques, particularly in an e-learning environment.

### 4.1 Embracing Changes in the New Normal

Al- Maskiry (2018) reported that teachers who were proponents of the traditional face-to-face teaching were reluctant to incorporate technology in their teaching. Interestingly, the pandemic has created an opportunity for teachers and learners to enter a new educational sphere which propels technology to encourage students' active involvements. This scenario marries well with Al Jabri et al. (May 2018) which suggested that teachers in Oman should be encouraged to move away from a didactic approach and make more use of differentiated teaching and learning techniques.

A favourable finding that has emerged from the evidence in the collaboration space reveals that when learners are provided with a flexible and an adaptable safe learning environment, their level of participation can be raised, thinking can be encouraged, and progress can be fostered. This is evidenced in the report prepared by The World Bank Report (2012) which stated that to achieve improvement in performance among students, teachers need to apply new classroom management techniques that are more flexible and creative. The collaboration space has enabled teachers to design various activities that can accomodate different learning abilities and has simultaneuosly engaged class participation despite the proficiency gaps among students.

Given that the aim of this study is to address the effectiveness of Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space in engaging participation in an ESL classroom, the results discussed in this paper have so far have been very promising in respect of classroom participation, particularly within the context of online learning. Al Shabibi et al. (2018) argued that to encourage a more appropriate learning pace for students, teachers must be able to recognize the fact that students will need a number of learning opportunities and individualised approaches. The most striking testament to the argument above is revealed in Fig. 5, where the evidence showcases learners insisting on taking part in a pre-writing activity even by just sharing images in the collaboration space. This contribution, though might be perceived as minimal, is a remarkable sign of increased participation.

### 4.2 Limitations of Work

Noting that previous studies done on the effectiveness of Microsoft One Note Collaboration Space are rather limited, caution must be exercised concerning the sample size of the study and most importantly, the quality of internet strengths and the devices used by participants. Similar findings might not be transferrable to a much larger class as the teacher could encounter challenges in monitoring students' activities and the constant changes done in the collaboration space during group work activities. Connectivity issues concerning unreliable internet services and app compatibilities with device configurations are obstacles that could potentially limit the effectiveness of the platform (developer.android.com).

## 5.0 Conclusion

In summary, finding the right and most suitable digital platform that can provide an effective and enriching online learning experience for teachers and students is far from being conclusive. Future experiments and studies are necessary to support the findings in this research paper.

### 5.1 Key Findings and Analysis

Despite the limitations presented in this study, this paper touches upon the problems that arise during the emergent shift of face-to-face teaching to online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Higher learning institutions, schools, teachers, and policymakers around the world have been struggling to choose the most suitable platform and the most practical educational tools to enhance lesson deliveries and classroom activities. Apart from that, issues involving students' participation and teacher readiness are detailed out with support from previous literature works and several research studies outlining similar challenges owing to suspensions of schools and classes. To help reduce the challenges that teachers face in engaging students' participation, Big Tech companies like Microsoft, Google and Apple have offered numerous digital platforms, educational tools and app in the market.

The results and findings in this paper illustrate the effectiveness of Microsoft OneNote Collaboration Space in engaging students' participation in an ESL classroom. Among the key findings that emerge from the study are that with individualized approaches and careful task selection, students' level of participation can be adjusted to a satisfactory level. It is apparent that after getting students familiarized with the collaboration space, students' perception towards the digital platform took a favorable turn. Initial observation indicated that students were reluctant and hesitant to collaborate on the platform during a pre-reading activity. However, a week after the initial implementation of the collaboration space, the students exhibited positive responses. During a pre-writing activity, students showcased increased level of participation and perseverance. Students who were not able to write sentences in the collaboration space still took part in the activity by making their contributions visible in the form of photo sharing. The third activity which involved students demonstrating their reading strategies presented an improved trend. Students were already confident and interested in utilizing the collaboration space as more systematic and accurate responses were being put forward by them.

### 5.2 Recommendations and Implications

It is recommended that future research should be further developed to confirm the initial research findings in this paper. This could be done by observing participants from different sample sizes to obtain the accurate interpretation of the collaboration space concerning its effectiveness in an ESL classroom.

As outlined in the Discussion, in order to see improvement in performance among students, teachers need to be creative and resourceful in applying classroom management techniques that are more flexible. By utilizing the collaboration space, teachers will be able to design various activities that can accomodate different learning abilities and engage students to participate.

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