

## Replacing traditional sections with Teams-based groupwork: Remote learning and beyond

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**Abstract.** The sudden shift to online teaching and learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to consider alternatives to entrenched teaching practices. Making use of the private channel function in Microsoft Teams, I replaced traditional sections in an introductory linguistics course with asynchronous groupwork. This enabled students to form learning communities that facilitated peer learning and support in spite of remote learning, while unexpectedly connecting students with instructors in more personalized ways than typically witnessed in traditional sections. The medium allowed the teaching team to provide tailored feedback on each group's work, as well as point out errors that were common across groups. I reflect on some of the problems encountered and consider how these might be addressed in the future.

**Keywords.** asynchronous learning; groupwork; learning community; Microsoft Teams; discussion sections

**1. Introduction.** Discussion sections are commonplace in large university courses, and for good reasons: not only can they provide opportunities for active learning that supplement traditional lectures (e.g. Buckley et al. 2007), they also serve as useful platforms for novice instructors to develop their practice (Thomson & Zamboanga 2008). However, the actual management of sections can be challenging in practice. I report on a teaching intervention that was implemented in an undergraduate introductory linguistics course taught at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where I replaced traditional sections with groupwork operationalized through Microsoft Teams.

1.1. BEFORE COVID-19. The course typically enrolls between 250 to 350 students and had always been taught in a lecture-discussion section format. Prior to the intervention, sections<sup>1</sup> were conducted in-person either by the lecturer or graduate student teaching assistants (GSTAs) and were capped at 25 students per section. Sections met once a week, for a duration of 45-minutes, and involved instructor-led discussions of problem sets that students were expected to attempt prior to the session. Attendance was mandatory and students were graded on the basis of their level of participation and the quality of their contributions. While this model provided a physical space that connected students with one another and with the instructors, there were limitations that were at odds with the goals of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. First, there were issues with managing and assessing participation. Students in Singapore tend to be rather shy, so class participation is typically imbalanced: a few outspoken students would dominate the discussions while many others would be unincluded, in addition to being penalized for their lack of class participation. Classroom management was challenging for inexperienced GSTAs, who often faced difficulties moderating discussions due to the uneven levels of participation. Because of the

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<sup>1</sup> These are more commonly referred to as 'tutorials' locally.

group setting, we were also unable to provide detailed feedback that was tailored to students' individual weaknesses, and shy students tended to avoid seeking clarifications.

1.2. COVID-19 AND THE SHIFT TO REMOTE LEARNING. In the semester that the course was to be conducted, the University mandated a campus-wide shift to remote learning due to the pandemic. This introduced new issues for the teaching team. First, the pre-existing difficulties with managing participation in a physical classroom would likely be compounded if we were to attempt to replicate the existing model in a synchronous online setting. Moreover, given the importance of community in online learning arrangements (e.g. Angelino et al. 2007, Liu et al. 2007), I was concerned that students, particularly freshmen with no prior experience in higher education, who make up the bulk of the enrolment, might become disengaged from the learning environment due to the lack of in-person interaction.

**2. Intervention.** With these considerations in mind, I decided to modify how sections would be conducted: instead of its traditional function as a forum for small-group instruction and discussion, I decided to use the section as an administrative unit for the organization of smaller groups. Students in each section randomly formed sub-groups of three to four members, which we referred to as 'gangs',<sup>2</sup> and membership was maintained throughout the semester. A Microsoft Team<sup>3</sup> (henceforth 'Team') was created for each section, and within each Team, a private channel was created for each gang. Only gang-members and the teaching team had access to their private channel, making it a dedicated space for each gang to work in. Students were able to leave real-time messages on a message board, initiate video calls, and create/edit documents within their private channels. Figure 1 provides an example of a Team created for a section, where all students in the section/Team had access to the 'General' channel, while Figure 2 illustrates an example of a private channel within the Team. There were six gangs (A-F) in this Team, each with its own private channel. There were 13 such Teams in total.

Every week, students would conduct video calls within their private channels and create a new document to work together with their 'gangmates' on the week's problem set (Figure 3). At the heart of this activity was the notion of peer teaching and learning, which "may be particularly relevant when one seeks to maximise the student's responsibility for his own learning and active participation in the learning process, and to enhance the development of skills for cooperation and social interaction" (Goldschmid & Goldschmid 1976: 29). Problem sets were assigned after lectures,<sup>4</sup> which were conducted synchronously over Zoom, and students could choose whether to use the scheduled section time to work on their solutions. After each week's deadline, the teaching team graded and provided feedback on the solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'gang' is sometimes used in Singapore to refer to a small, close-knit group, without any criminal or other derogatory connotations, and the label was chosen for this connotation, as the intended purpose of these groups was to foster learning communities.

<sup>3</sup> Access to the application is made available as part of the University's subscription to Microsoft licenses.

<sup>4</sup> However, the problem set for a particular topic may be due several weeks after the lecture for that topic, as the University has different schedules for lectures and sections.

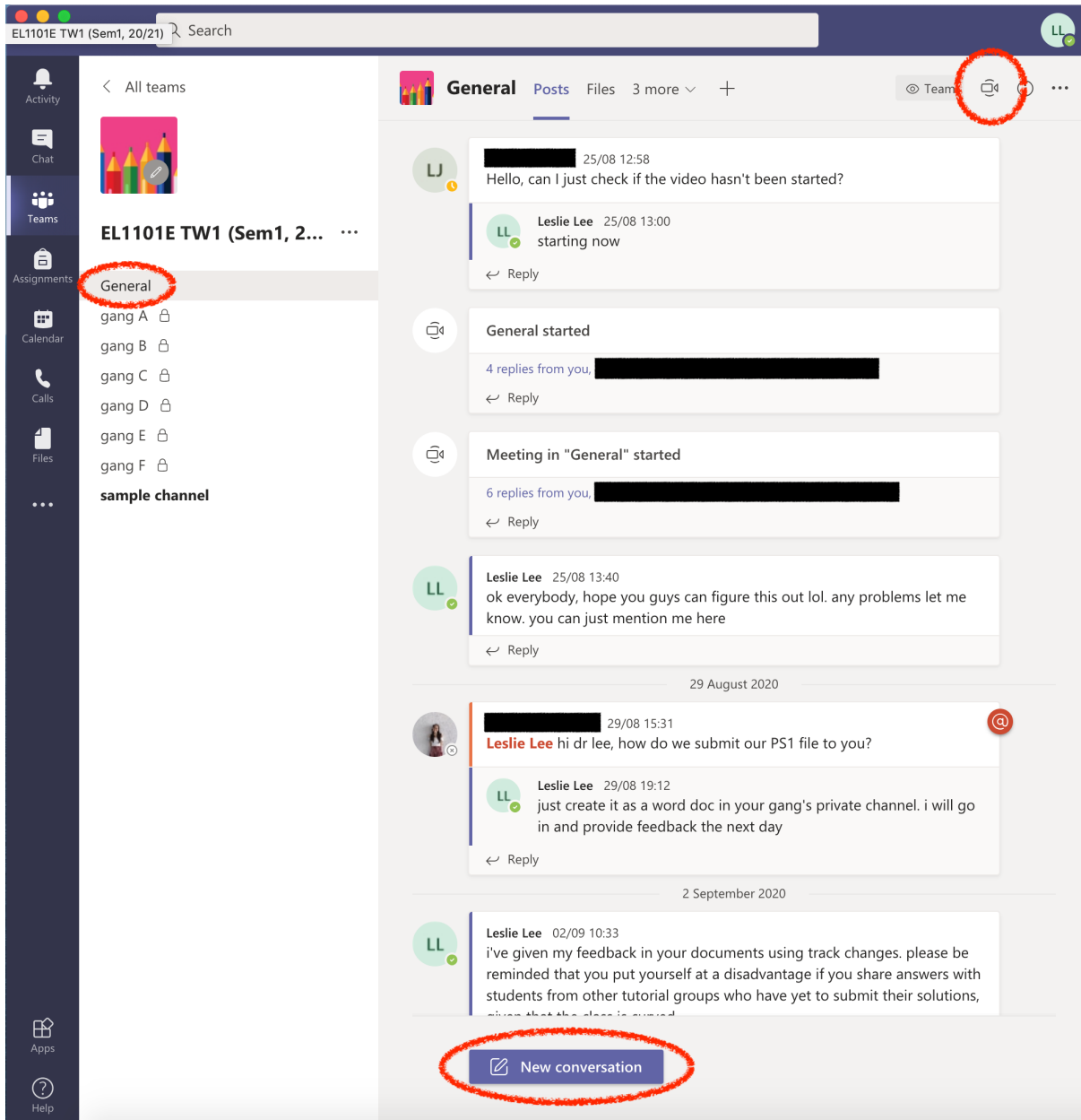


Figure 1. Example of the 'General' channel in a Team created for a section, where conversations can be seen by the entire section/Team. Video calls initiated here are accessible by everyone in the section/Team (and the teaching team).

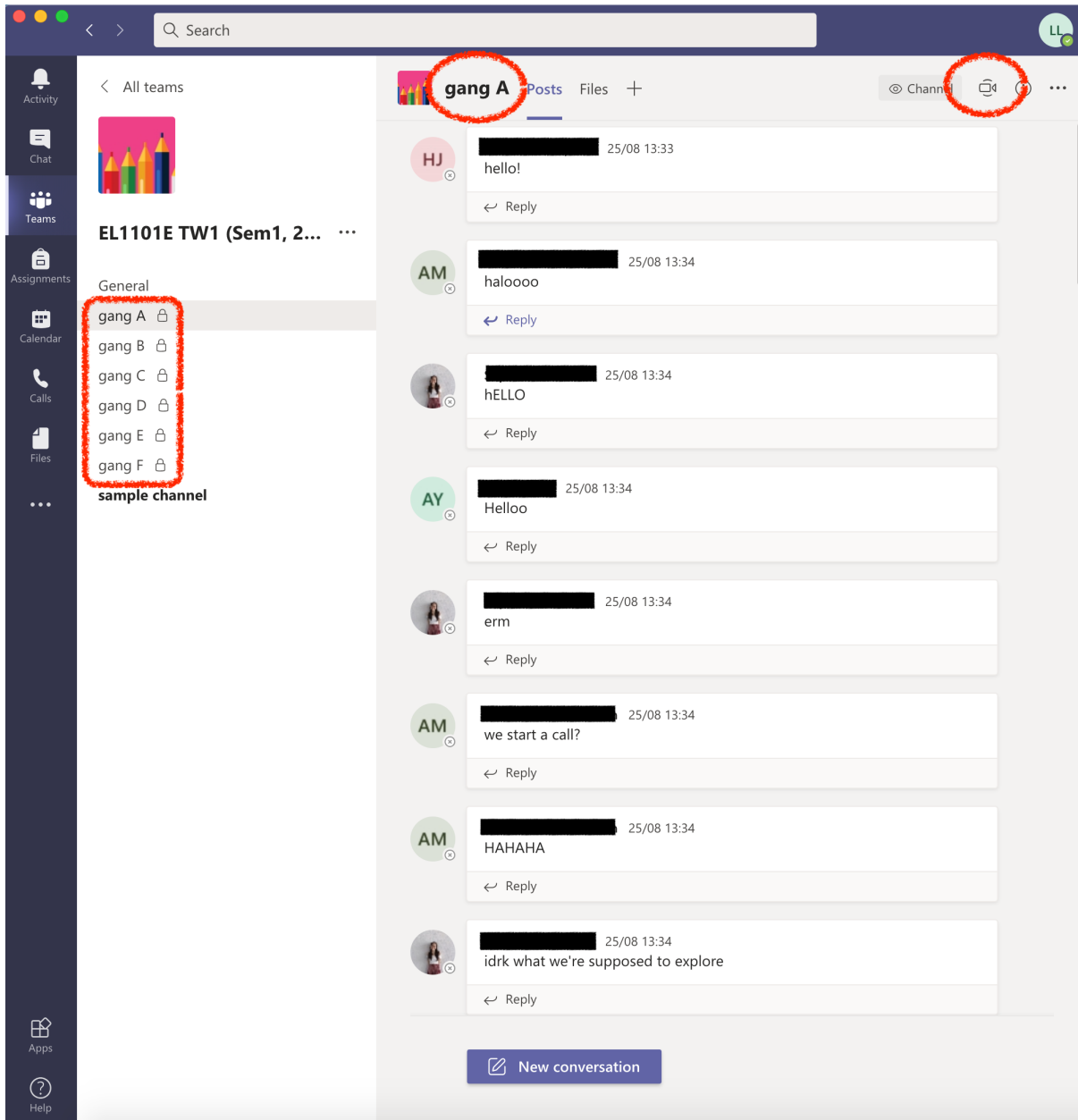


Figure 2. Example of a private channel created for a gang. The conversations here are only visible to the members of the gang (and the teaching team) and video calls initiated here are only accessible by members of the gang (and the teaching team).

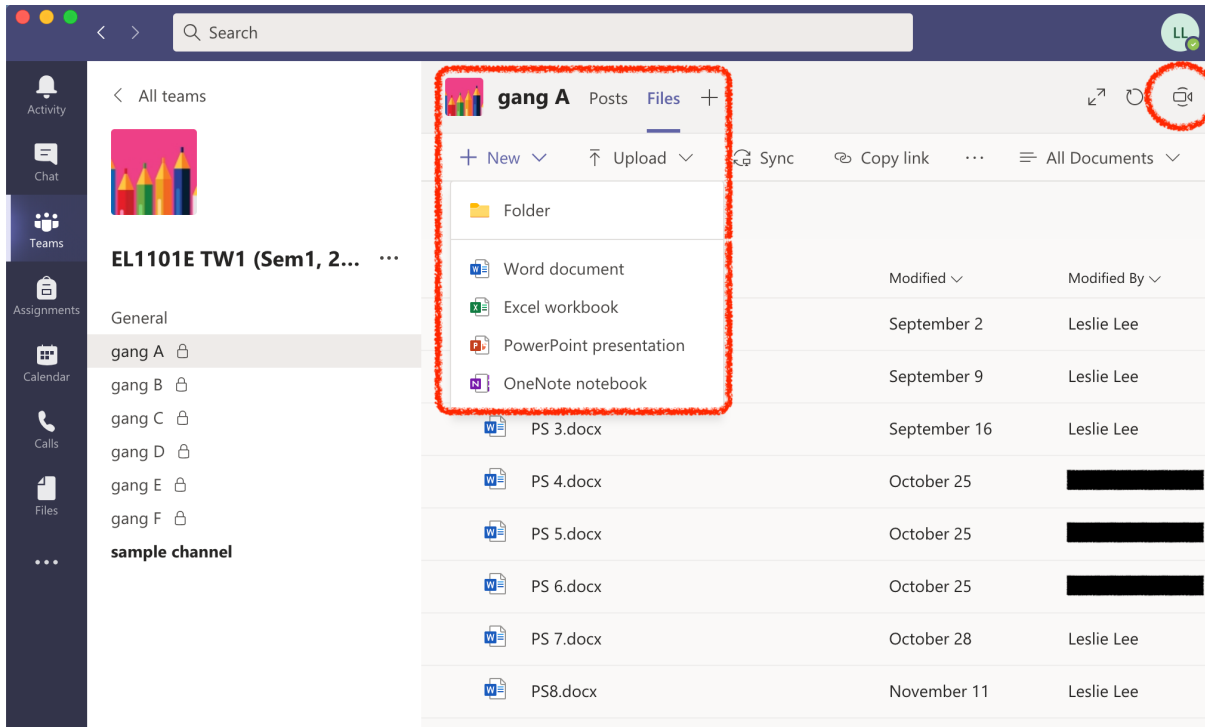


Figure 3. Example of documents created by a gang within its private channel, which are graded by the instructor.

**3. Evaluation.** As students were graded on the basis of their solutions rather than class participation, this eliminated prior problems associated with managing and assessing participation. The small gang sizes also meant that shy students, who would otherwise not speak up in traditional sections, would face less public/social pressure and could be more proactive in sharing their views.<sup>5</sup> The medium allowed the teaching team to provide high-quality, tailored feedback on each gang's solution, which we could not do in the old model – Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the extended feedback that the students received. In addition, because each section was organized as a Team, we were able to address common errors in the general channel, as shown in Figure 6: every week, the teaching team discussed common mistakes and highlighted them to their respective sections/Teams in the general channel. This allowed gangs that did not make such mistakes to be aware of common pitfalls as well, ensuring equal access to general feedback.

In addition to the practical benefits mentioned above, the use of groupwork and the provision of a bespoke space for each gang to work in helped to foster learning communities, in spite of the remote learning situation. For instance, besides meeting weekly in their private channels to discuss the problem sets, some gangs also initiated meetings to revise for midterm tests, demonstrating that they viewed their gang as a learning community whose utility was not limited to working on the problem sets (see Figure 7).

<sup>5</sup> As students interacted in their private channels primarily via unrecorded video calls, I am unable to present any evidence for this. For the same reason, I am unable to provide a specific example of how students interacted to help each other understand an idea or develop an analytical skill, as requested by a reviewer. One suggestion for future studies would be to survey students at the end of the course on whether this arrangement allowed them to share their ideas more freely, and if the discussions benefitted their learning.

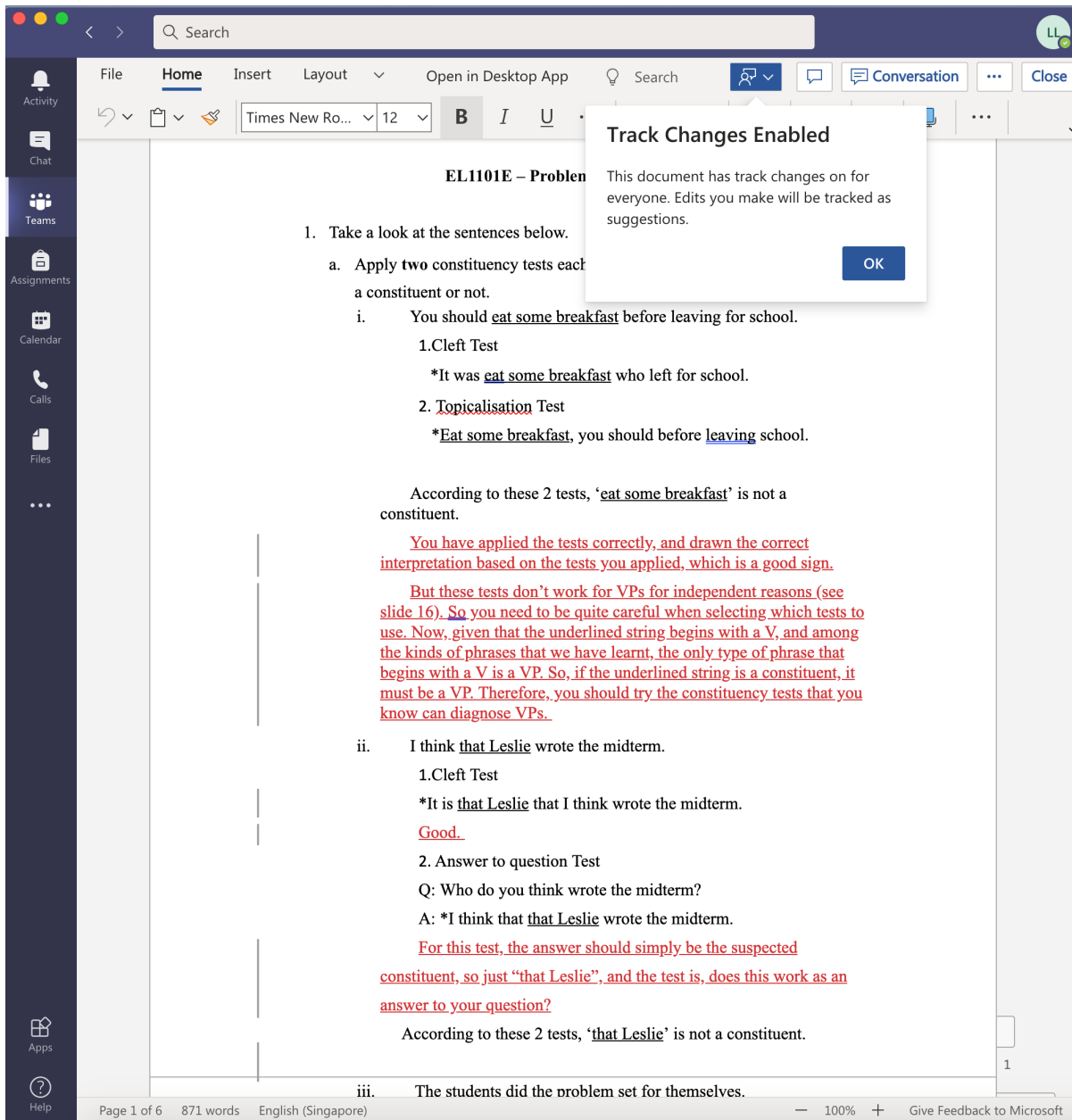


Figure 4. Example of tailored feedback using track changes.

Problem set 4.docx

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sviram, svirati, sviranje, sviraju  
 infinitive – svirati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - sviranje

'touch' -  
 diram, dirati, diraju, diranje  
 infinitive – dirati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - diranje

'watch' -  
 gledaju, gledanje, gledam, gledati  
 infinitive – gledati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - gledanje

'live' -  
 stanujem, stanovati, stanuju, stanovanje  
 infinitive – stanovati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - stanovanje

'buy' -  
 kupuju, kupujem, kupovanje, kupovati  
 infinitive – kupovati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - kupovanje

'call' -  
 nazivati, nazivanje, nazivam, nazivaju  
 infinitive – nazivati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - nazivanje

'starve' -  
 gladovati, gladovanje, gladujem, gladuju  
 infinitive – gladovati  
 turns into deverbal nouns - gladovanje

'I' -  
 am, em

'they' -  
 aju/uju

1b) The ending of the stems determines whether the word is directed as 'to', 'I', 'the' and 'they.' The allomorph 'ati' means "to" this is not a stem, which appears after the stems ending with the consonants [r] [d] and [v].

'aju' and 'uju' are suffixes these are not stems describing 'they.' The allomorph 'uju' is attached after a stop (however gledaju may be an exception), whereas the allomorph 'aju' is attached after approximants.

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1c) The affix '-am' or '-em' describes "I". The allomorph '-am' occurs after the consonants [r], [d], and [v], while the allomorph '-em' occurs only after the consonant [j].

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notice that what you have here are not "allomorphs" of a "morpheme", b/c each of these do not represent a "minimal unit of meaning". they are complex words containing more than one piece of meaning, e.g. [sviram] contains the meaning of 'play' and the meaning of 'I'; [sviraju] contains the meaning of 'play' and the meaning of 'they'.

your task was to identify which parts of the words correspond to, e.g. 'play' vs 'I'/'they' and so on, by looking for patterns that hold across all the words in the data.

so, e.g. if you consider all the words related to 'play', they all share the meaning of 'play', but each of them differs from the others bc of some other meaning:

I/'they'/infinitive/deverbal, you need to therefore try to "isolate" the part of the word (the morpheme) that corresponds to 'play' and the part of the word that is giving you the other aspect of meaning, the expectation is that, if the meaning is the same, then the form should be (more or less) the same.

so in this case, since all the words relating to 'play' share [svira], one might hypothesise that this is the morpheme stem for 'play', and the remaining parts, which differ for each word, are the morpheme affixes for those meanings.

but you need to check if your hypothesis holds for the other words as well, every one of these sets contains a word that incorporates the meaning of 'I', 'they', infinitive, deverbal, so, our expectation would therefore be that the affixes should look (more or less) the same across

Page 1 of 3 600 words English (UK) 100% Give Feedback to Microsoft

Figure 5. Example of tailored feedback using comments.

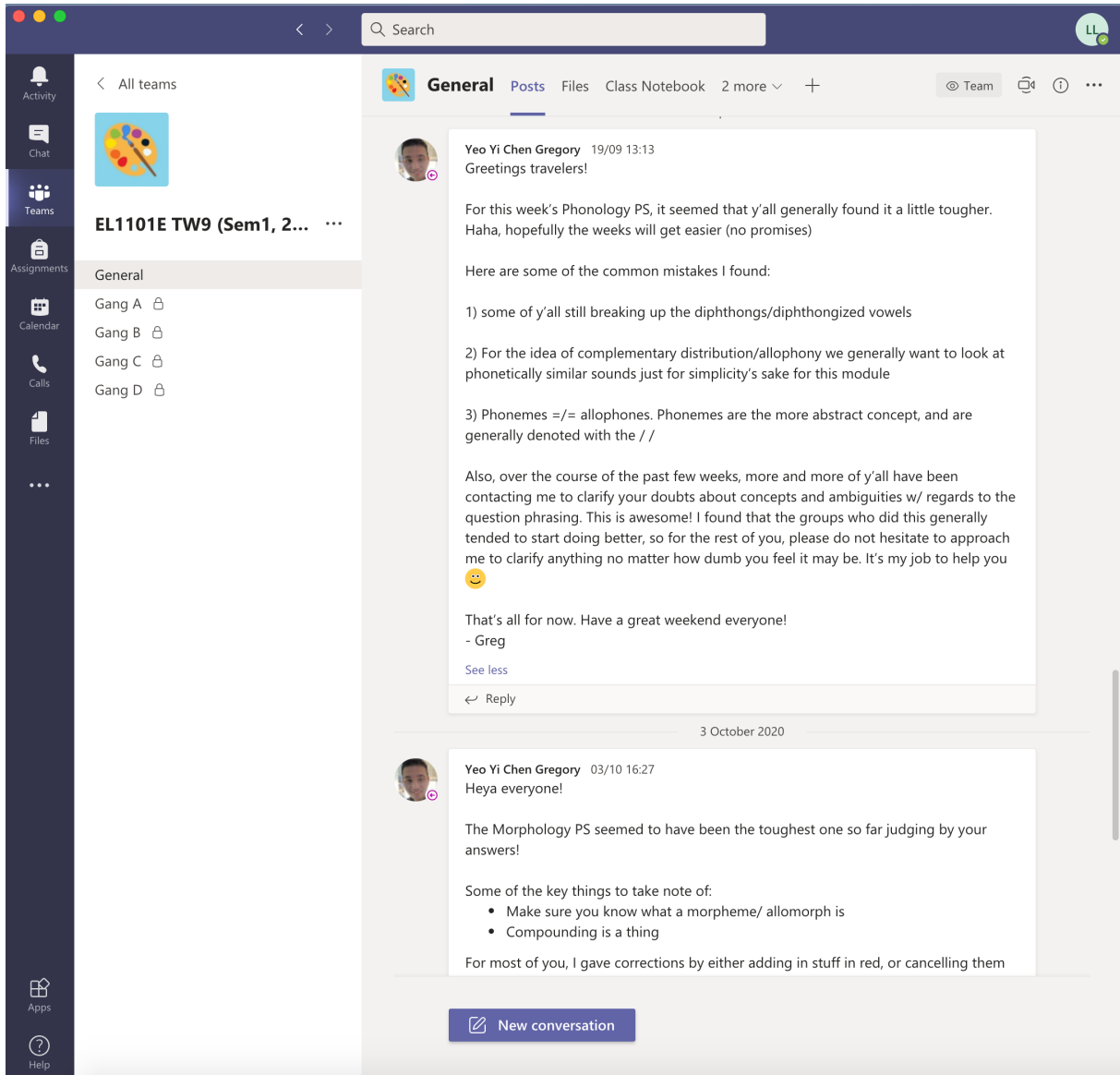


Figure 6. Example of feedback provided in general channel for entire section/Team.

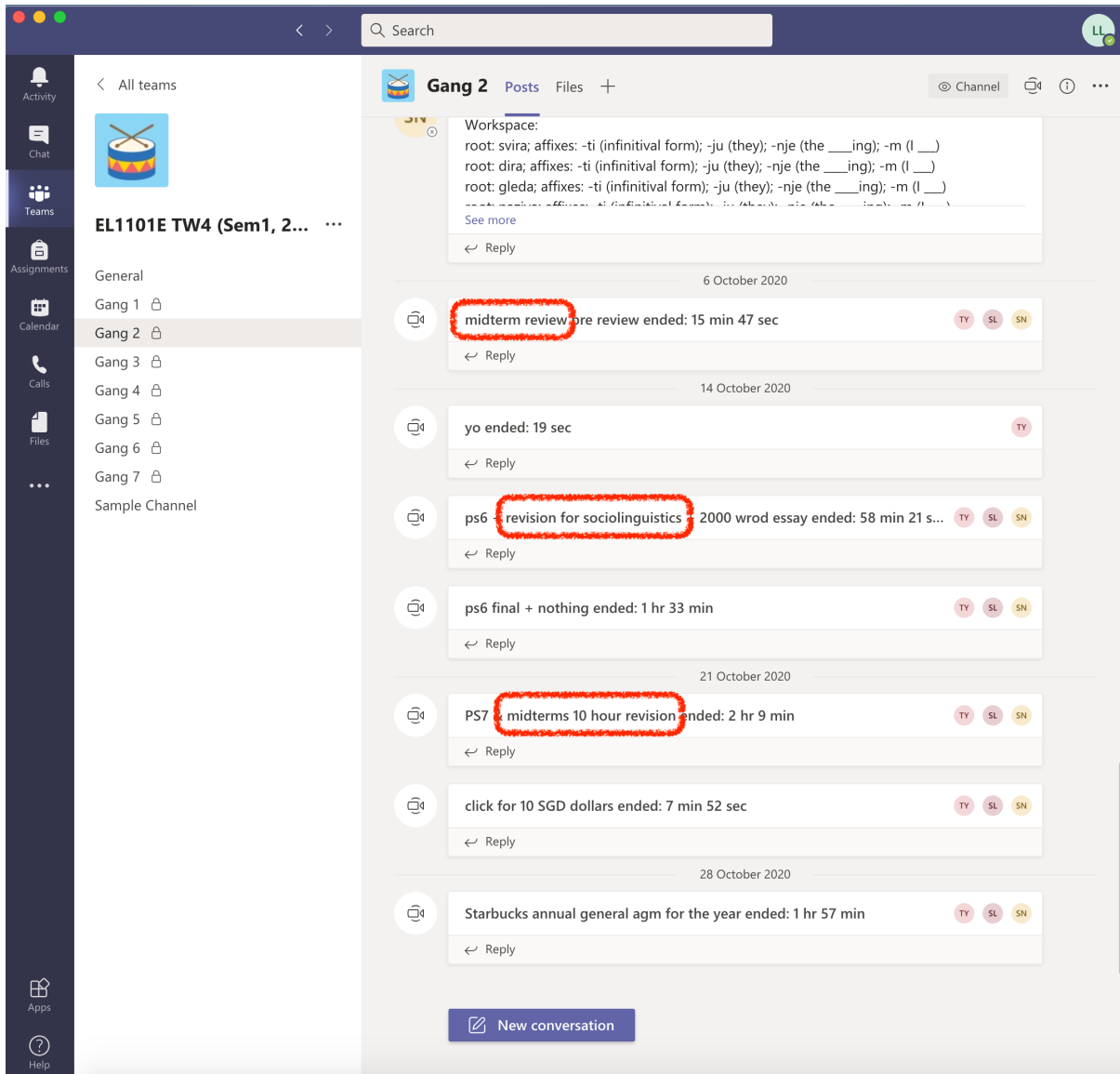


Figure 7. Student-initiated meetings beyond the discussion of problem sets.

An unexpected, but welcome, outcome of the intervention was that we saw closer interactions between students and instructors than in traditional sections. For example, gangs engaged us with questions about the problem sets in various ways allowed by the medium, e.g. by using the message board in their private channel, requesting video calls with the instructor within their private channel, or inserting questions within their submitted documents. Some students even felt comfortable asking questions about their individual assignments within their gang's private channel. This significance of this cannot be understated, as students are graded on an enforced curve and NUS students are notoriously grade-conscious: the fact that students did not mind their gangmates potentially benefitting from (the instructors' responses to) their questions about their individual assignments demonstrates the extent to which they treated their gang as an in-group learning community. Some of the comments that students left for the instructors in their solutions to the final problem set showed that students appreciated the close student-instructor interactions and saw their gang's private channel as a safe space for learning (see Figures 8 and 9).

Dear Ms Mei,

Thank you Ms Mei 😊 Thank you for being part of our EL journey!! We appreciate your patience and guidance  
☺ Do take care and stay safe !! ❤️

Figure 8. Example of a comment left by the students in their final solution.

Thank you so much Greg for the past 13 weeks and entertaining our lame jokes and nonsense.”). We really appreciate your helpful comments and feedback, making it a safe space for us! Sorry I said Khabib was a boxer. Are you really doing the sociolinguistics phd?? If you are, we wish you all the best!!!! Goodbye! Take care!!!! We really mean this [literal speech act].

With all our BUTS,  
Gang A

Figure 9. Another example of a comment left by the students in their final solution.

**4. Drawbacks.** As noted earlier, one benefit of having traditional sections is that they provide a forum for instructional development on the part of GSTAs (Thomson & Zamboanga 2008). On the one hand, this new arrangement entailed that our GSTAs did not have any practice with actual classroom management; on the other hand, they gained valuable experience in terms of learning to provide detailed, constructive feedback. In order to help GSTAs hone their classroom management skills, I plan to explore a hybrid model in the future, when face-to-face teaching resumes, that incorporates occasional physical meetings for purposes complementary to groupwork on the problem sets, e.g. as review sessions for examinations.

One issue that affected several gangs was that of ‘sleeping’ or uncooperative gangmates, which is perhaps unavoidable with group assignments. At some level, this is more unconstructive than having nonparticipants in traditional sections. In the case of the latter, discussions may be imbalanced, but at least active students were not unfairly penalized; having a ‘sleeping’ gangmate could, however, have a negative impact on the entire gang’s performance (and thus grade) on the problem sets. Unfortunately, such complaints tended to be raised late in the semester, so when cases were reported, all the teaching team could do was investigate the claims and impose penalties on the offending student where appropriate. In the future, it would be wise to emphasize the need to surface such issues early, so that the instructor can intervene swiftly to limit the handicap to rest of the gang.

**5. Conclusion.** The sudden shift to remote learning precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic has in many ways negatively impacted students’ learning experiences. But it has also given us pause to reflect on previously entrenched practices. My experience with asynchronous groupwork facilitated by Microsoft Teams is that it helps to foster learning communities while addressing many of the issues that I had previously faced in traditional sections that oppose the goals of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Together with other reports on asynchronous activities in the remote teaching of introductory linguistics, e.g. having students contribute to class wikis (Bjorndahl 2021) and having them respond to one another’s responses to weekly discussion prompts (Curtis 2021), these collective experiences highlight asynchronous activities as valuable

tools for engaging students and fostering learning communities, which may be worth retaining even after life returns to normal.

## References

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