



Using Gather Town in Critical Reading Arabic: An Attempt to Overcome the Weaknesses of Online Learning

Ihwan Rahman Bahtiar¹, Nuruddin², Raden Ahmad Barnabas³, Siti Jubaidah⁴, Andri Ilham⁵, Khotimatun Nafi'ah⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5}Universitas Negeri Jakarta

- ihwanrb@unj.ac.id¹, nuruddin.unj@unj.ac.id², barnabas@unj.ac.id³, siti.jubaidah@unj.ac.id⁴, andriilham@unj.ac.id⁵, khotimatunnafiah@unj.ac.id⁶

Article Info

Article History

Received: 15-12-2024

Revised: 14-01-2025

Accepted: 31-01-2025

Kata kunci:

Bahasa Arab,
Gather Town,
Pembelajaran Daring,
Konferensi Video.

Abstract

Tetap diterapkannya pembelajaran daring pasca pandemi menyebabkan penggunaan aplikasi konferensi video tetap tinggi dalam pembelajaran di perguruan tinggi. Beberapa hasil penelitian memang menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan video konferensi seperti Zoom dan Google Meeting berdampak positif terhadap proses pembelajaran daring. Meskipun demikian, video konferensi tidak sepenuhnya mampu menghadirkan suasana nyata di kelas virtual. Gather Town sebagai salah satu platform video konferensi hadir menawarkan fitur baru yang dapat menciptakan suasana kelas virtual layaknya kelas nyata. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan kegiatan perkuliahan daring menggunakan Gather Town dan persepsi mahasiswa tentang aplikasi tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Gather Town mudah untuk digunakan dan menawarkan suasana baru dalam pembelajaran daring. Hasil persepsi mahasiswa pun menunjukkan bahwa Gather Town mudah dioperasikan, mampu menimbulkan motivasi dan minat belajar, mungkin untuk digunakan, merangsang kemampuan berpikir kritis dan memecahkan masalah, dan sesuai dengan konteks kehidupan nyata dan karakteristik mahasiswa.

Abstract

As online learning continues to be implemented post-pandemic, the use of video conferencing applications in higher education remains high. Some research shows that video conferencing, such as Zoom and Google Meet, has a positive impact on the online learning process. However, video conferences can only partially bring the natural atmosphere into the virtual classroom. As one of the video conferencing platforms, Gather Town offers new features that can create a virtual classroom atmosphere like a real class. This study aims to describe online lecture activities using Gather Town and students' perceptions of the application. The results show that Gather Town is easy to use and offers a new atmosphere in online learning. The results of student perceptions also show that Gather Town is easy to use, can inspire motivation and interest in education, is applicable, stimulates critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and is consistent with real-world contexts and student characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning will continue to be possible even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning continues, particularly at the university

level (Salim, 2023). The implementation of online learning itself is leading to the increasing use of video conferencing applications. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology states that online applications have increased by up to 442 percent, and video conferencing applications such as Google Meet and Zoom are being used the fastest (Kominfo.go.id, 2021). The policy of working and learning from home strongly influences the rapid use of video conferencing. The impact of learning from home could be the most significant factor driving the increased use of video conferencing applications during the pandemic. This cannot be separated from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's statement that 68,729,037 students are learning from home and using video conferencing applications (Setiawan, 2021).

Video conferencing, such as Zoom and Google Meet, is now considered ideal by most educators. There are at least four reasons why this video conferencing application is a favored medium—first, the completeness of features supporting interactive learning (Daolio, 2020; Monica & Fitriawati, 2020). Second, direct communication is accessible (Far-Far, 2021; Haqien & Rahman, 2020). Third is space and time flexibility (Mastuti et al., 2020). Fourth, effectiveness in building learner engagement (Wulandari, 2021).

The research results on using video conferencing applications in learning show positive results. Mulyono said that virtual learning through video conferencing (Zoom) is effective for all learning materials and can improve students' learning outcomes (Mulyono et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Aswir stated that using video conferencing applications (Google Meet) helps students actively participate in learning and makes it easier to understand the material (Aswir et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Mubarak concluded that video conferencing (Zoom) is an alternative and representative medium for conducting lectures requiring direct face-to-face activities (Mubarak et al., 2020).

Although the study results show that video conferencing applications positively impact learning, implementation has hurdles. At least three main obstacles exist to using video conferencing for online learning. First:

infrastructure. Signal and quota restrictions still appear to be the main obstacles in implementing online learning, especially video conference-based online learning. Based on a survey conducted by Iskandar among 144 students, the barriers to attending lectures using the online system were the internet network/signal (39.9%) and the internet quota (37.8%) (Iskandar, I., Masthura, S., & Oktaviyana, 2020). Khaerati et al. expressed the same in their research, where they found that limited quotas/data packages, internships, and limited internet access facilities/networks (availability of providers) are the main barriers for lecturers in online learning (Khaerati et al., 2021). Almost the same statement was also expressed by Raswan, who emphasized that network limitations hindered online learning, especially those based on video conferencing such as Zoom (Raswan, 2021).

Regarding this first problem, various efforts have been made by both the central and regional governments. For example, in 2020, the central government provided internet quota subsidies to students, teachers, and lecturers through the Ministry of Education and Culture (Sulistiyarningsih, 2020). Not only in the form of quota support, but the government is also expanding the internet network in remote areas via Kominfo to support the smooth running of distance learning. This network expansion will be completed by 2022 (Riski, 2020). What about local governments? Local governments in various regions have also made efforts to support the implementation of learning. For example, in the city of Yogyakarta, the local government equipped public elementary schools with internet facilities and provided free Wi-Fi in 112 public areas (Laily M, 2020).

The second obstacle is related to educators' limited ability to use the application. Some teachers still experience symptoms of technology stuttering. Dewi's (2021) findings show that not all educators can use internet technology or social media as a learning tool. For this reason, both the Ministry of Education and Culture are organizing various assistance and training for online implementation for teachers and parents (Kasih, 2021). At primary and

secondary levels, the Directorate and General of Higher Education continue to conduct online learning training with 100,000 lecturers (Rustandi, 2020).

The third obstacle is related to the psychological aspect. This third barrier is associated with the longing for the atmosphere in the classroom. Although video conferencing can facilitate virtual face-to-face meetings between teachers and students, the classroom still has a lost and unreached atmosphere. If this condition is not activated, it will lead to boredom in the learner. Although learning occurs online, learners must create a classroom atmosphere that is not significantly different from offline teaching. Students do not experience this atmosphere, but real-world facts show that online learning cannot create this atmosphere (Jatira & S, 2021).

Using this inability to create an authentic classroom atmosphere, Gather Presence Inc., a US-based company, developed a video conferencing application called Gather Town. Gather Town is a platform that combines video calling with 2D maps, allowing users to walk around and talk to other people. Regarding appearance and content, it is a 90s video game with 8-bit quality. (Kumparan.com, 2021).

Gather Town is a video conferencing platform like Zoom and Google Meet. It just so happens that this platform offers an authentic classroom atmosphere when used. Users can take on the role of students or meet participants through the characters they create. On this platform, users form groups and have private discussions, enter and exit the room, choose seats, and present tasks on the podium, just like in a real class (Nur Fitria, 2021). In addition to creating an authentic classroom atmosphere in cyberspace, Gather Town is even more fun because it invites students to play games virtually. Due to the advantages that Gather Town offers, it is necessary to explore and test the application of this platform in the lecture activities we teach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some of the data collected by researchers during the observation process, documentation, and distribution of questionnaires in the Arabic computer lecture process using the Gather Town platform during the online learning phase, the researchers formulated the following stages

A. Stages of Learning Using Gather Town

1. Preparation

- a. Go to: <https://www.gather.town/>.

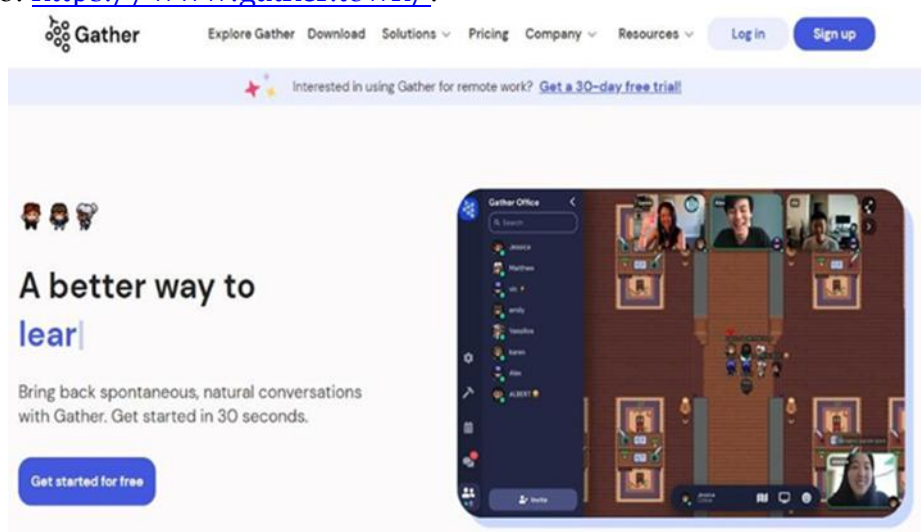


Fig 1. Gather Town Web Home Page

- b. Select the "Sign in" button and then "Sign in with Google."
- c. Select the Google account to use.
- d. Next, you will be asked to create an avatar in 8-bit lines. Enter a name and choose a hairstyle and costume.
- e. To create a new class, please select "Create Space" and then select one of the rooms.
- f. We are asked to select a specific room in the virtual classroom. For example, we select the auditorium.
- g. Fill in the name of the space with the name of the course you teach, then select Create Space.
- h. Also, check the camera, microphone, and speakers to ensure they are usable. Then tap Join Meeting.
- i. After all, we are already in virtual space, as if we were playing the role of a lecturer or student in an actual class.



Fig 2. View of The Created Virtual Classroom

2. Implementation

Once the virtual classroom is set up, the next step is implementing learning using Gather Town. The steps to begin learning with these media are as follows.

- a. Lecturers invite our students to virtual lessons. Select "Invite" and then "Copy Link," and share it with our students.
- b. Students register for the class provided using the link shared by the instructor.
- c. Sign in with Google.
- d. An offer to join the course will appear. Please select "Join Area."
- e. Students who manage to enter will see some student characters.



Fig 3. Character and Video Display of Students Who Have Joined the Class

- f. The lecturer steps onto the podium in the virtual classroom to open the lecture.
- g. The lecturer encourages a discussion about the material to be presented.
- h. The lecturer allowed some students to express their opinions in front of the class.
- i. The lecturer strengthens the students by providing additional materials.

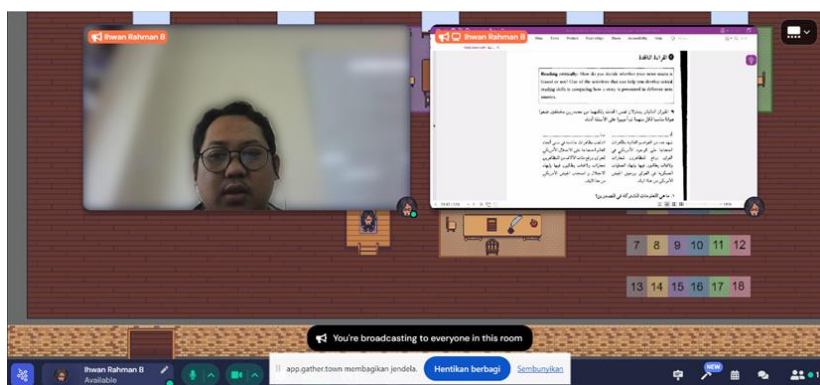


Fig 4. Screen Sharing Activity at Gather Town

- j. The lecturer did an icebreaker to break the ice by giving a quiz.
- k. The teacher allows students to simulate the material.
- l. The teacher gives students a case to solve.
- m. The lecturer and students summarize the results of the lecture.

B. Student Perceptions of the Use of Gather Town

In the evaluation phase, researchers distributed questionnaires to students to learn how they felt about using Gather Town in lectures. The questionnaire was created on the Google Forms platform to be completed online. Each statement received a rating range of 1-5. The higher the score, the more positive the students' reaction. The results of the questionnaire distribution to students can be described as follows.

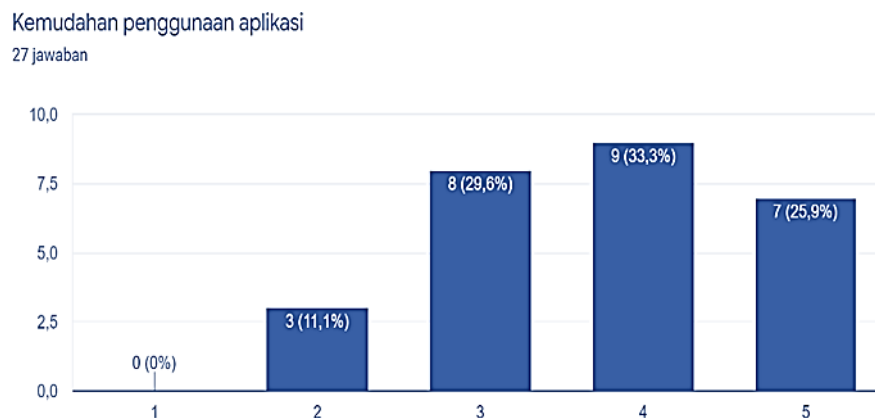


Chart 1. Students perceive the Ease of Use of Gather Town Based

- 1=Very difficult
- 2=Difficult
- 3=Neutral
- 4=Easy
- 5=Very easy

Based on chart 1 above, we can see that three students (11.1%) gave a rating of 2 on the ease aspect, eight students (29.6%) gave a rating of 3, and 9 students (33, 3%) showed a score of 4, and 7 students (25.9%) gave a score of 5. The total score of students on this convenience aspect is 101, while the total number of students (25.9%) gave a score of 5.

The maximum score is 135 (27 people x 5 (highest score)). Therefore, students generally find Gather Town easy to use while learning. The basis for this decision is the following point comparison.

They are positioning Figures and Tables: Place figures and tables at the top and bottom of columns. Avoid placing them in the middle of columns. Prominent figures and tables may span across both columns. Figure captions should be below the figures; table heads should appear above the tables. Insert figures and tables after they are cited in the text. Use the abbreviation "Fig. 1," even at the beginning of a sentence.

Table 1. Criteria for Scores Obtained on the Ease Aspect

Criteria	Very difficult	Difficult	Neutral	Easy	Very easy
Score	27	54	81	108	135

Application score				101	
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Penggunaan aplikasi menimbulkan minat dan motivasi mahasiswa ketika digunakan dalam pembelajaran
 27 jawaban

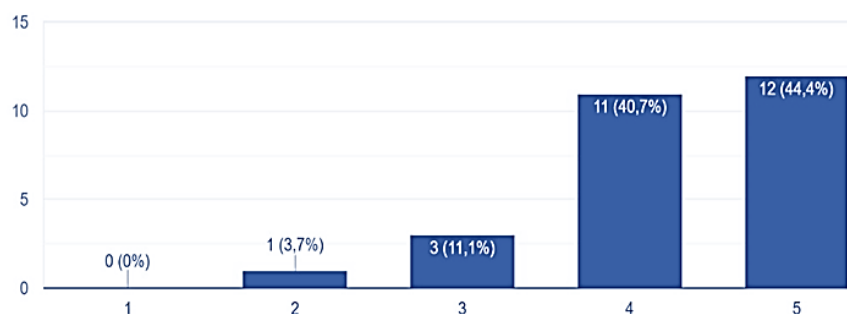


Chart 2. Perceptions among students regarding the effect of Gather Town on motivation to learn

- 1=Poor
- 2=Fair
- 3=Good
- 4=Very good
- 5=Excellent

From chart 2 above, it is clear that one student (3.7%) gave a rating of 2, 4 students (14.8%) gave a rating of 3, and 10 students (37%) gave a rating of 2 on the motivation aspect four gave, and 12 students (44.4%) gave a score of 5. The total student score on this comfort aspect is 115 out of a maximum of 135 (27 people x 5 [highest score]). Therefore, students generally believe that using Gather Town while studying can stimulate their motivation and encourage them to study. The basis for this decision is the following point comparison.

Table 2. Standards for Ratings Received about Motivation Production

Criteria	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent
Score	27	54	81	108	135
Application score				115	

Aplikasi memungkinkan digunakan oleh mahasiswa dalam pembelajaran

27 jawaban

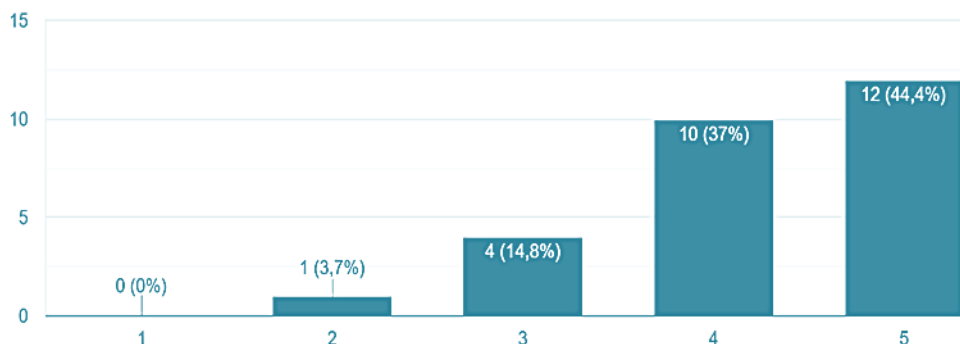


Chart 3. Students' Views on The Potential for Using Gather Town for Educational Purposes

- 1=Not probable
- 2=Somewhat improbable
- 3=Neutral
- 4=Somewhat probable
- 5=Very probable

In Chart 3 above, we can see that most students, or 12 people (44.4%), gave a rating of 5 for the ability to use Gather Town, 10 people (37%) gave a rating of 4, and 4 people (14.8%) gave a score of 3, and 1 person (3.7%) gave a score of 1. The total score obtained in this aspect is 114, while the maximum score achievable is 135. Therefore, it can be concluded that the general use of Gather Town can be applied to lecture activities. The conclusion refers to the comparison of the following points.

Table 3. Criteria for Scores Attained in the Area of Application Usability

Criteria	Not probable	Somewhat improbable	Neutral	Somewhat probable	Very probable
Score	27	54	81	108	135
Application score				114	



Chart 4. The Impact of Gather Town on Students' Critical Thinking Abilities as Perceived by Them

- 1=Not probable
- 2=Somewhat improbable
- 3=Neutral
- 4=Somewhat probable
- 5=Very probable

Chart 4 above shows that nine students (33.3%) scored three on the application impact on critical thinking skills. Eight people (29.6%) gave a score of 4, and 10 more people (37%) gave a score of 5. The total score achieved in this aspect is 109 out of 135 maximum achievable scores. Based on these results, students generally believe that using Gather Town in lectures can stimulate them to think critically and overcome the problems they face. The following point comparison table serves as the basis for this conclusion.

Table 4. Criteria for Scores Obtained on Critical Thinking Aspects

Criteria	Not probable	Somewhat improbable	Neutral	Somewhat probable	Very probable
Score	27	54	81	108	135
Application score				109	



Chart 5. Student Perceptions of the Appropriateness of Gather Town to Real-Life

- 1=Very not suitable
- 2=Not suitable
- 3=Neutral
- 4=Suitable
- 5=Very suitable

Chart 5 above shows that nine students (33.3%) were awarded grades 3, 4, and 5 for practical suitability. The total score obtained in this aspect is 108, while the maximum score achievable is 135. Therefore, students generally believe that the use of Gather Town in lectures is consistent with the real-life context and its characteristics. The basis for this conclusion is the following point comparison table.

Table 5. Criteria for Scores Obtained on Aspects of Suitability to Student Life and Character

Criteria	Very not suitable	Not suitable	Neutral	Suitable	Very suitable
Score	27	54	81	108	135
Application score				108	

Based on the evaluation results of the five aspects mentioned above, it can be concluded that the Gather Town platform can be used as a learning medium for students. Gather Town can develop more interactive and exciting learning activities because students can feel the atmosphere of a real class, even if they are in a virtual class.

CONCLUSION

The continuation of online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged the use of various videoconferencing media. However, some research shows that videoconferencing has a good impact on learning; videoconferencing applications cannot create a learning atmosphere like in a real classroom. Gather Town, one of the videoconferencing platforms, offers a new atmosphere in online learning. Students can learn online through this platform and still feel the authentic classroom atmosphere.

Students can enter and exit the virtual classroom, move to the front of the class, discuss in groups in a private classroom, and walk around the school. The learning process at Gather Town is the same as on other platforms; instructors and students must register using their Google accounts. The results of the distributed questionnaires also indicate a positive perception of the use of Gather Town in lectures. With the new features, easy accessibility, and positive student perception results, Gather Town can be an attractive alternative medium for online lecture activities.

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