Language Learning and Language Acquisition in Online Forums

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ABSTRACT

Innovations in computer technology have made possible new platforms for supporting and building shared knowledge in meaningful and creative ways to enhance language learning and acquisition. Platforms like web forums, webinars, and bulletin boards in most Learner Management Systems (LMS) provide the additional platform for learning but are seldom utilized effectively to promote student interaction in language learning and acquisition. This paper reports on English Language Studies (ELS) students' voices of how they participated and benefitted in online forums (OLFs) during their language courses. Findings from the focus group interviews with undergraduate students showed that they are more than ready to adopt OLFs as a learning platform in addition to classroom interactions. However, better effort on the part of the instructors is needed for OLFs to be beneficial. The issues that emerged in the utilization of these forums will propose future directions in the implementation of OLFs to enhance learning and acquisition among ESL students.

Keywords - online forums, language learning, language acquisition, interaction, virtual learning

INTRODUCTION

The virtual environment of teaching and learning characterized by technological advancement has increased the opportunities for interaction between teachers and learners, and among learners regardless of time and space (Masputeriah, 2006; Pramela and Wong 2009; Supyan Hussein 2006, 2007, 2008) using synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery. It has also transformed the conventional delivery of education where educators, teachers and linguists have seen pedagogical changes from a teacher-centered teaching and learning environment to a more learner-centered one, which inspires a positive impact to language learning.

Nevertheless, there are also potential disadvantages or limitations of virtual learning. Previous studies have identified some of these challenges, such as learner frustration, anxiety, and confusion (Hara and Kling 2000; Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives 2001) ; higher student attrition rates (Frankola 2001; Ryan 2001; Laine 2003); the need for greater discipline, self-motivation, and commitment towards online learning (Golladay, Prybutok, & Huff 2000; Serwatka 2003); and decrease of interaction time for learners to be engaged in "real learning" as compared to traditional classroom (Laine 2003).

One of the online facilities created in the virtual environment that can be exploited by teachers in their language classes is the online forums (OLFs). Unlike face-to-face discussion in the classroom that is limited by space and time, OLFs allow teachers and learners to interact with one another beyond the four walls and specified time. With OLFs, the learning process does not stop after the class meeting is over but can be extended beyond class hours. The discussion in the class can also be conducted outside the class in online forums. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that learning occurs within a social context, and that interaction between learners and their peers is a necessary part of the learning

process. Vysgotsky1978) introduced Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which he defined as the distance between the "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Vygotsky believes that when a student is at the ZPD for a particular task, providing the appropriate support or assistance (scaffolding) will give the learners some motivation to accomplish a given task. Once the learners master the task, the scaffolding can then be removed, and the learners will be able to complete the task on their own (Galloway 2001). At the initial stage, a little coaching and scaffolding from a "more knowledgeable" person can help learners to succeed in the given task that would otherwise be too difficult for the learners.

For students who are shy about participating in onsite classroom discussion, uncertain how to express their opinions or ideas verbally, or do not have sufficient time to contribute to the class discussion, the online forum may provide a safe entry point for them to express themselves in a more organized manner. When online forum inputs are related to class lectures, class assignments, and class management, OLFs could be an alternative for them to participate and to be engaged in a more fruitful learning process (Porter 2004). Learners need to understand that their participation in online forum is designed in such a way that they are not only accountable for their own learning but also responsible to contribute to the success of the course objectives. It is during the series of discussions in OLFs, learners will go through the thinking processes as prescribed by Bloom's Taxonomy. While searching for information in the Internet to answer the given questions posted by the instructor in the forum, learners need to read, identify, select, classify, compare and contrast, analyse, and synthesise the information, and later reconceptualise and reconstruct ideas or views that are meaningful to them and share their writings with the forum members.

For language classes, OLFs provide a new environment in which learners can use the language as well as interact with non-native and native speakers of the target language. According to Nadzrah Abu Bakar, Hafizah Latif & Azizah Ya'acob. (2010), blogging, an online tool similar to online forums, has promoted collaborative learning activities among students and contributed towards new knowledge. Their findings also showed that students applied various L2 skills and expressed confidence.

revious studies (Nadzrah Abu Bakar et al. 2010; Zuwati Hashim 2006; Supyan Hussin 2007, 2008) have looked at the learning experiences of students engaged in English language proficiency courses. Thus the objective of this study was to investigate how students majoring in English Language Studies (ELS) utilized the online forums in their learning during the courses. Therefore, the main question of interest here is "To what extent do the online forums help ELS learners to improve their performance in language courses?

RELATED LITERATURE

There is no doubt that OLFs have made it possible for language learners to integrate independent learning experiences with opportunities for interaction and collaboration. This requires considerable self-direction, motivation, and initiative on the part of the learners. In the absence of body language and other cues of the face-to-face contexts, the instructor who has to be a multi-tasker stimulates and sustains discussion to help learners build a sense of community learning online (Pramela and Wong 2006). According to Anuratha and Pramela (2010), the teacher's presence throughout the interaction in weblogs helped to stimulate the learners to be critical and also ensured that the discussion promoted a positive learning environment. They believed that the discussion among students is not only influenced by the content of the task but the ability to manage the conversation by the group members.

Online discussions done in small groups are more effective as opposed to online discussions done in medium sized or large groups (Hammond 2000). According to Hammond (2000), small groups give members opportunities to employ themselves in collaborative tasks as well as replicate each other's experience effectively. He also cites Perolle (1991) who claims that online discussions in small groups create a "high sense of presence" and a "growing sense of community" (Hammond 2000, p.252). Hammond says that learners appreciate online discussions because they could change their views in text anytime and have control of what they are presenting to others. Apart from that, personal communication that takes place in the OLFs strengthens the members' bond with one another and creates a learning community. He suggests that tutors play an important role in cultivating communicative approach among forum members. A tutor has to provide clear explanations regarding the topics posted while learners need to be willing to take risks in expressing their views and learning to others. It is suggested that through the integration of constructivist pedagogy in OLFs students' communicative competence could be developed and enhanced.

According to Jones (2003), language teachers have found that students benefit from the extra writing done in discussion forums and from its use to communicate meaningfully in real contexts. McInnerney and Roberts (2004) introduce three protocols to assist online social interaction. They are the use of synchronous communication, introduction of a forming stage and the adherence to effective communication guidelines (2004, p.78). Forming stage is important as it builds a sense of belonging and community among its participants and they can be introduced to guidelines in using online discussion forums by the educators. Effective and clear communication guidelines are vital because it helps in preventing misunderstanding among learners and educators play an important role in structuring the proper guidelines towards the success of online courses. McInnerney and Roberts (2004) also believe that the sense of isolation among online learners can be reduced if proper planning and structuring of online courses are given by the educators to create "an online sense of 'self'" for learners throughout their E-learning process.

Zuwati Hashim (2006) confirms that through OLFs, her participants have increased their level of confidence in using English to communicate with one another, something that they could not achieve through face-to-face communication. The learners also confessed that their consciousness in making mistakes is not as great as it is when they were involved in face-to-face communication using English. Despite the positive feedback obtained, many of the participants do not agree that OLFs have helped them to use English. Her observations show that learners repeatedly use their mother tongue to communicate instead of using the target language, in this case, English. She concludes that participants must come from different ethnic groups for better results. Supyan Hussin (2006, 2007, 2008) concluded that (1) learners could benefit a lot from both classroom and OLF in terms of in-depth understanding of the lecture contents and class assignments; (2) OLF is more meaningful to members when the OLF has focused group, a focused theme, and a form of incentive (3) since writing in OLF has an audience, students with low self-esteem and low self-concept were afraid to participate; and (4) OLF would be more dynamic if the teacher posted questions in the forum and moderated the discussion. Then again the findings discussed here were with non ELS learners. They were students from other disciplines of study and doing English language proficiency courses.

THE STUDY

This qualitative study was carried out at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and involved eighteen undergraduate students from the School of Language Studies and Linguistics majoring in English Language Studies. The rationale for inviting final year students was because they would have

had more exposure to the OLFs and the researchers ensured that only students who had the experience of participating in OLFs during their first and second year of study were selected.

A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was designed based on the review of related literature, experiences of conducting OLFs by the researchers and discussions with two other lecturers who regularly conduct OLFs in their courses. The interview questions were piloted with three students (one focus group) and then revised. The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

FINDINGS

The interview data were compiled and analysed based on the objectives of the study.The majority of respondents agreed that online forums should be made a **compulsory course requirement** for English language courses. The respondents felt that by making online forums a compulsory course requirement, language students would be able to enhance their English language proficiency as well as their level of understanding of the subjects taught as OLFs would usually require them to be involved in additional homework or online activities. The respondents believed that this activity would help students familiarize themselves with the operation of online forums and long distance communication is made possible to these students. Respondent 8 (R8) felt positive towards this implementation, because through online forums, lecturers can participate in the discussion, and grammatical errors made by students during this virtual communication would get instant corrections from their lecturers. The majority of these respondents did not view that participating in the online forum is an additional burden. They were of the opinion that it was an additional platform for learning.

Only a few students viewed participation in OLFs as a burden, and the following reasons were given:

…if lecturers and tutors fix a strict timeline for the posting …. this fixed timeline will cause anxiety among students especially if a number of assignments are in queue. (R3)

….if every subject contains online forums and postings. (R7)

….when it is made compulsory by the lecturers. (R10)

…when marks are allocated for the participation in online forums. (R13)

On the other hand, there were 4 respondents who shared different views. R10 felt that the online forum would serve as an additional burden or homework to language students since language students of UKM are evaluated mostly through ongoing assignments and projects. Aside from that, she agreed that academic based OLFs do not attract students' attention and interest as much as social networks do, thus limiting their participation in OLFs. As these students were majoring in ESL, they admitted that they worry about **making mistakes in their English writing when participating** in OLFs. More specifically, they felt that they are required and expected to write in clear, or "grammar free" English in their discussion.

…the fact that you are writing to your lecturer. So we try to use, whether you like it or not, perfect English, no grammatical error. (R8)

…because I purposely put it (comments) there because of my lecturer ask me to do that, so it's for my lecturer. It's not for my friends only. So I worry about my grammatical structure, everything. (R17)

Although English competency might appear to be a concern for some respondents, R11 had expressed in contrast that she did not worry about her grammatical errors at all but put great concern in the information and the content of her comments and views. She emphasized that she did not want to share the wrong information or repeat the information that had already been contributed by others.

However, she says that she might face discomfort if the participating lecturers, constantly correct the students' grammatical errors. R10 felt that he did not worry about his language errors because he believed that other members of the forum would understand his viewpoint but made sure that his content is beneficial and useful to the members of the forum.

Free-writing too contributes to the lack of worry among the respondents interviewed. One of them (R3) said:

> There's like no particular format or specific ways of writing the forum. Another way is that we are not bound to the formulas and formats of the writing. So it encouraged us more to write.

However, R4 expressed that even though an online forum involves free writing, there are still conventions of writing that should be followed in terms of the language used (formal versus informal). Another respondent (R1) said that unlike face-to face classes; OLFs encouraged her to write because she did not have to face the lecturers while expressing her opinions. She said the presence of lecturers only virtually reduced her anxiety and worries in giving her viewpoints through OLFs.

Lecturers often do not give their feedback. R9 commented that this depended on lecturers because every lecturer has his or her own way of teaching:

> …. maybe they want us to discuss first and after that, they will evaluate from our discussion. They give us space to discuss first.

Respondents agreed that **prompt feedback** was necessary to encourage them to go online and they unanimously agreed that lecturers play a very important role in this. This is so because the lack of feedback from lecturers resulted in disappointment and discouraged continuous participation by the students.

> Whenever our tutor gives feedback, it's like; it encourages us to do more.

They felt strongly about the necessity of lecturers' participation because as R5 said:

> I feel whatever work I have done is necessary for me for the lecturer to comment on it. Gives value to it.

They perceived lecturers and tutors' comments as a guideline for self-development in language as well as an encouragement to actively participate in the forums. Another respondent (R3) said that since an online forum invites varying views and comments from participating members, a lecturer is needed to facilitate, evaluate, monitor and "tell if students were on the right track or not".

All respondents believed that the comments and the responses provided by their course mates helped in their courses. Four respondents said that the feedback provided by their course mates helped them with the content which contributes a new form of knowledge and eventually helped them to understand topics discussed better. This was especially true for topics that had been discussed by lecturers during face-to-face tutorials. These respondents' comments have provided evidences that online discussions could contribute to more productive learning by strengthening learners' understanding of subjects taught. Furthermore, another two respondents said that different learning styles and writing styles of their course mates were well exhibited through postings on OLFs and through this they were

able to observe and learn from each other.

> Their writing style will be very different. Maybe we can at the same time observe and learn from them and we try to apply how others write. (R6)

In terms of language, four respondents admitted that OLFs **help them to improve their language proficiency especially in their vocabulary and sentence structures**. They widened their vocabulary knowledge by reading the postings of their peers as well as learned to construct proper sentence structures from their course mates' postings. One of them (R11) said:

> …in terms of language it helps me a lot because there are my friends who are better than me in English. Sometimes the structures of the sentences are very good. So from there, I can learn something new and put in my own skill.

Two of the respondents complained that one of the language issues that they faced while participating in OLFs is insufficient vocabulary knowledge. One of them (R17) said:

> Sometimes we have the ideas but not enough words to explain. How to express ourselves…

Among the two, one admitted that she code-switched from English to Bahasa Malaysia while another respondent said she used the dictionary to look for suitable words. Four other respondents said that writing in English is not a problem to them as they believed they are proficient learners. However, they faced the issue of plagiarism when they found that their sentences and content were copied by their course mates. Five other respondents said that they forced themselves to make their language as formal as possible because they perceived their lecturers would not approve simple, informal language. One student (R12) said:

> maybe because, all of us have the perception that the lecturers will read it and give a bad impression about us, so we make it as formal as possible.

The same respondents believed that this has made the online environment unfriendly. Another respondent (R11) said that topics given were always related to academic field, thus the students tend to alter their use of language from informal to a formal one in order to receive high scores.

> we are afraid that the tutors evaluate us the wrong way if we use the inappropriate language.

Nine out of the 18 respondents agreed that the topics posted by their lecturers were relevant to their course. One of them (R8) stated that her lecturer posted topics regarding students' ongoing assessment of websites which offer language learning materials. This becomes an added avenue for learning, and helps many of the students in their assessments. 3 other respondents identified that all their courses had OLFs and concluded that their lecturers posted relevant and appropriate topics for discussion. Another five respondents share different view from the others.

R9 expressed that based on his experience, the questions posted by his lecturers were relevant to his course but they did not encourage them in the discussion. He pointed out that the questions posted by their lecturers were not suitable. This is further supported by R10 who argued that if the lecturers do not structure the questions in an interesting manner, OLFs might not be that effective.

Eight of the respondents agreed that students need to be given opportunity to come up with questions or topics for OLFs. One of the respondents, R12, suggested that some of the students might be able to understand about their weak points and learning needs. By allowing them to come up with questions or topics for OLFs, they might be able to help each other to improve their learning or understanding of subjects/topics taught. This will also allow lecturers to chart students' development and improvement throughout the semesters.

R10 shared the same opinion.

> Because sometimes the lecturer don't know what the students want to know, what the students problem, what the students do not understand, so if the students are allowed to post the topic, we will have more understanding about the topic

In this way, the environment in the forums would turn into a friendlier mode, and many students would feel more comfortable in participating in the OLFs. However, another respondent, R2, insisted that the lecturers should have a final say in the topics and questions posted. She said that students can suggest topics to lecturers but the final decision is up to the lecturers concerned. R1 felt more comfortable posting his own topic in his blog due to privacy issue. He argued the LMS provided by UKM did not give one privacy because one's full name is displayed; while in blogs, the true identity is hidden. Due to this specific reason, he felt more comfortable in posting his own topics in his blog. R1 and two other respondents agreed that they preferred to post issues or announcements on social networks sites such as the Facebook. Four other respondents shared a completely different view than those above. They believed that lecturers should continue posting topics and questions instead of the students. One of them (R7) said:

> I think if students post topics, I don't think other students would be bothered to reply.

Four of the respondents felt that more lecturers should start using LMS in their courses because it is *"very effective, easy to use, user friendly"*. They too believed that OLFs encourage students to write especially for those who do not get chances to participate in face to face classes due to time constraint. This is due to the fact that OLFs provide a learning space that transcends time and space. However, these respondents too felt that students who were weak in the language might feel embarrassed to participate in the forums since it involved written English. Another respondent expressed that lecturers should increase their usage of OLFs in their teaching because to her, OLFs show how they improve in terms of writing.

DISCUSSION

Responses on the issue of language varied among respondents. As the respondents were from the English language programme writing was not a main problem. However, there was some element of anxiety especially when lecturers corrected the sentence structures. Students also prepared their work on word documents and then pasted their drafts in the forum. Due to this practice, they did not face any language problems because they were able to recheck their spelling and sentence structures as well as vocabulary using the many applications available, including electronic dictionaries.

In other words, an online forum can serve as a zone where teachers can moderate the discussion more effectively. It can also be a zone for students to practice their language proficiency and acquire language input as well as content knowledge. The main concern was that they contributed or posted correct information in terms of content during the OLFs.

In brief, the language learning process is not limited within the classroom but may continue in a conventional setting where learners get together physically after class hours. Today, with the advancement of information communication and technology (ICT), the ZPD for students can even be extended and explored further during the learning process. If ICT is integrated well in the course, learners may be able to go beyond the prescribed learning zone. Span (2008) argue if we were to borrow Krashen's concepts of language learning and acquisition, then we can relate the potential zone as being

the environment within which acquisition would take place. Unlike learning which is conscious and formal, acquisition is subconscious and informal (Krashen 1981). Theoretically, the two processes, learning and acquisition may be separated but in practice they are not. The more active they are in the forum, the higher the tendency for them to learn and acquire new information and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The participation in OLFs is perceived positively by the ELS students in language learning and language acquisition. It implies that lecturers concerned should not just create a platform for students but be part of the platform to stimulate valuable discussions to promote learning. Besides the face-to-face interactions, OLFs can serve as a platform for a more dynamic learning process if optimally used.

To achieve this, the researchers believe several considerations for effective participation in OLFs are important. Language teachers or instructors need to understand best practices and rationale for conducting OLFs. Simultaneously, students must be further exposed to the growing potential of how OLFs could contribute to their learning process and must be made to understand that OLFs are not merely for teaching but sharing and learning. Perhaps grading participation in OLFs may be necessary as a form of extrinsic motivation for the students. Making online forum available in the context of this research is unlikely to be enough to motivate students to participate. The degree to which the ELS lecturers should participate in the online discussions as a strategy to encourage students to join in and stay in the conversation needs to be determined and clearly worked out through proper planning.

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APPENDIX A
Interview Schedule

1. What do you have to say about including online forums as a compulsory course requirement for English Language courses at UKM?
2. Do you believe that the online forums have encouraged you to write your comments, ideas and views without worrying about mistakes? Comment.
3. Do the lectures/tutors promptly respond to your online discussions? Why is this important?
4. Besides language proficiency, are there any other serious problems or constraints that limit your participation in the forums? Comment.
5. What you think about the technical infrastructure and support provided by UKM for online activities is satisfactory?
6. Do you discuss it with your course mates before and after participating in an online forum? Explain.
7. Do you feel that participating in online is an additional burden? Why?
8. Have the comments and responses provided by your course mates helped you improve your language proficiency and understanding of the topics discussed? How?
9. What are some of the language issues that you encounter in participating in the online forums?
10. In your opinion, are the topics selected for the forum appropriate and relevant?
11. Would it be a good idea to allow the students to post the topics for discussion? Discuss.
12. Other Comments?