Fostering Student Engagement in online forums for language proficiency and knowledge enrichment

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Abstract-**Computer technology has created platforms for supporting and building shared knowledge. Platforms like web forums, webinars and bulletin boards are freely available in most Learner Management Systems (LMS) but are seldom utilized to promote student interaction in language learning. This paper will report on students' voices of how they perceive the participation in online forums in their language courses. Findings from the focus group interviews showed that students are ready to adopt this as a learning platform. However, more effort on the part of the instructors was needed for online forums to be beneficial. The issues in the exploitation of these forums will identify future directions in the implementation of virtual forums to enhance English language and knowledge enrichment among tertiary students.**

Keywords- online forums; language learning; interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher learning Institutions are challenged with the new reality world characterized by technological advancement and to keep abreast with the best practices available to help deliver education to all. The virtual environment has increased the opportunities for more interaction between teachers and learners and among learners regardless of time and space (Masputeriah, 2006; Pramela, 2006; Pramela and Wong, 2009; Supyan Hussin, 2006, 2007, 2008). It has also transformed the conventional delivery of education where educators, teachers and linguists have seen pedagogical changes from a teacher-centred teaching and learning environment to a learner-centred one and a learning centered mode which inspires positive impact to language learning. This paper will share student experiences of participating in online forum during their English courses.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no doubt that online forums have made it possible for language learners to integrate independent learning experiences with opportunities for interaction and collaboration. Thisn 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, 2006). According to Anuratha and Pramela (2010) the teacher's presence throughout the interaction will be to stimulate the learners to be critical and also ensure that the discussion support 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.

Hammond (2000) strongly believes that online discussions done in small groups are more effective as opposed to online discussions done in medium sized or large groups. According to him, 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, 2000:252). Hammond says that learners appreciate online discussions because they could change their views in text anytime and have a control of what they are presenting to others. Apart from that, personal communication that takes place in the online forums strengthens the members' bond with one another and creates a learning community. Hammond (2000) reflects that communicative approach in online forums does not happen instantly but requires time and is impossible without the contribution of members of the group. He suggests that tutors play an important role in cultivating communicative approach among forum's members. A tutor has to provide clear explanations regarding the topics posted while learners need to be willing to take risks of expressing their views and learning to others.

According to Jones (2003) language teachers have found that students at many different levels 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 (2004:78). Synchronous communication is said to help learners in enhancing their interaction skill while asynchronous communication is useful to learners who are living in different time zones. Forming stage is important as it builds up 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. Overall, McInnerney and Roberts (2004) state that the sense of isolation among online learners can be reduced if online

courses are given planning and proper structuring by the educators.

Zuwati (2009) confirms that through online forums, her participants have managed to increase their level of confidence in using English to communicate with one another, something that they could not achieve through face-to-face communications. This is because online forums, unlike face-to-face communication, manage to reduce their level of anxiety as well as embarrassment in using English freely. The learners also confess that their consciousness in making mistakes is not as great as it is when they are involved in face-to-face communication using English. Despite these positive feedbacks obtained, many of the participants do not agree that online forums have helped them to use English. It is true that online forums have encouraged communication between the participants but according to Zuwati (2006), her observation shows that learners repeatedly use their mother tongue to communicate instead of using the target language, English. This issue arises mainly because the participating learners are all form the same ethnic group, thus the use of mother tongue is more than English. She concludes that although online discussion forums do encourage communication between its participants, it does not entirely help in learning a language unless participants come from different ethnic groups.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample

All 18 respondents interviewed were in their final year of study. The rationale for inviting third year students is that they would have had the much required exposure in the online discussion forums.

B. Instrument

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed based on the review of related literature and the experiences of conducting online forums. The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview data is analysed and discussed according to the themes below:

A. Course requirement

The majority of respondents think that it is a good idea to include online forum as a compulsory course requirement for English language courses. Respondents also felt that by making online forum as a compulsory course requirement, they would be able to enhance their English language proficiency as well as enhance their understanding and learning the subjects taught because of the additional homework that an online forum would require.

B. AnxietyFree

12 respondents admitted that they did worry about making mistakes when participating in online forums. A small number of them said that this anxiety was due to the fact that they are English language students, thus they are expected to deliver proper and grammatically correct English.

C. Feedback

A good half of them agree that their lecturers provided prompt feedback while the other half commented that their lecturers did not. 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.

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

D. Participation in online forums

A total of 11 respondents admitted that they discussed with their coursemates before and or after participating in the online forums. One of the respondents (R15) said that she discussed the issues raised before posting something online to ensure that she answered the question posted online. She argued that although her answers might be similar with that of her coursemates, her format or presentation of the answer would be different.

E. Language proficiency and knowledge enrichment

In terms of language, four respondents admitted that online forums help them to improve their language proficiency especially in their vocabulary and sentence structures. They widened their vocabulary knowledge by reading their peers' postings as well as learned to construct proper sentence structures from their coursemates' postings.

Two of the respondents complained that one of the language issues that they faced while participating in online forums is insufficient vocabulary knowledge. One admitted that she code-switched English to Bahasa Malaysia while another respondent insisted on using a dictionary to arrive at the proper word. 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 others including their coursemates. Five others said that they forced themselves to make their language as formal as possible because they perceived their lecturers would not approve simple, informal language.

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 to a formal one in order to receive high scores.

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. Three other respondents identified all the courses had online forums and concluded that their lecturers did post relevant and appropriate topics for discussion. Another five respondents have a different point of view from those above.

One of them said that based on his experience, although the questions posted by his lecturers were relevant to his course, they did not encourage discussion. He pointed to questions that resemble defining terms as an example. His opinion is strongly supported by another respondent. She concluded that if lecturers did not structure the questions in an interesting manner, online forums might not be that effective.

Eight of the respondents agreed that students need to be given opportunities to come up with questions or topics for discussion. One of the respondents (R12) said that this is because students themselves knew about their weak points and by allowing them to come up with questions or topics; they would be able to answer. This will allow lecturers to view the weaknesses of their students.

Two other respondents said that through this, the environment in the forums would turn into a friendlier mode, and many students would feel more comfortable in participating in the online forums. However, another respondent (R2), although agreed that this is a good idea, still believes 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. Another respondent (R1) felt more comfortable posting his own topic in his blog due to privacy issue. He argued that *SPIN* (LMS) did not give the 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 on his blog. He too, together with two other respondents agreed that they preferred to post issues or announcements on social networks such as Facebook as opposed to *SPIN* because *SPIN* is more lecturer-oriented and students' participation is restricted. They suggested that *SPIN* should "integrate students and lecturers".

Four other respondents shared a completely different view. They believed that lecturers should continue posting topics and questions instead of the students.

They too thought that being students themselves, there are high chances of them being deviated to irrelevant topics which might not be useful in terms of learning. They concluded that if a coursemate suggested a topic or a question, fellow coursemates would not view it as a serious matter, unlike that of a lecturer's. One of them (R8) is recorded as saying "of course, because if a lecturer posts it, people will of course be serious towards it".

Overall, four of the respondents felt that more lecturers should start using *SPIN* in their subjects because it is "very effective, easy to use, user friendly". They too believed that online forums encourage students to write especially those who do not get chances to participate in face to face classes

due to time constraint. Through online forums, students are not restricted, and they are able to post as many comments as they like as well expressing themselves. 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 online forums in their teaching because to her, "online forums show that language has evolved".

Another group of respondents suggested that online forums are made as part of language courses from students of the first year itself so that participation in online forums becomes "a culture" and students would be "more disciplined". However, one of the respondents said that lecturers should encourage the participation of more students without penalizing them for language errors.

F. Constraints during online forums

Seven respondents were of the opinion that the technical infrastructure support provided by UKM for online activities are not satisfactory. Some of the respondents were unable to participate actively in online forums because they do not have internet connection at home. This limited their participation to only once or twice a week. Apart from this, respondents who were on campus, faced difficulty to access online forums during peak hours. This situation did not limit their participation, as the respondents prepared drafts ahead of participating in an online forum as a precaution. This means that while participating in the online forum, they copied and pasted their draft in the forum. However, due to this practice, they did not face any language problems because they were able to recheck their spellings and sentence structures as well as vocabularies using the many applications available, including electronic dictionaries. They too claimed that they did not face any language problems during online forums

Another respondent (R12) said that time is a constraint due to the on going assignments that are given to them, thus sparing time for online forums become a challenge.

Apart from that, one respondent (R14) blamed the students' mentality by saying that many students did not participate in online forums because they just did not want to spare time to do an additional work, thus the lack of their participation in online forums. Three of the respondents said that topics too become a factor that limits their participation in online forums.

Topics that are difficult as well as not captivating become a barrier that limited students' participation in the online forums. However, a respondent said that he read the comments of the others but did not participate in contributing to the comments column. They suggested that lecturers and tutors need to be more creative in designing questions for online forums in order to attract more students to participate actively. Another constraint that respondents faced is consciousness. Some of the respondents admitted that they were conscious of their posted comments because they worried if their inputs might disrupt communication.

V. PEDAGOGIC CONSIDERATIONS

The following considerations for effective participation in online forums are necessary:

- Reinforce the learning process via online forums.
- Participation in online forums should be graded as a form of extrinsic motivation.
- Language teachers or instructors need to understand best practices and rationale for conducting online forums.
- Language errors should not be highlighted as instructors need to give more focus to students' online participation.
- Constructive feedback form instructors and students in the online environment are crucial.
- Students must be made to understand that online forums are not for teaching but sharing and learning.

VI. CONCLUSION

Online learning has definitely played a role in language proficiency and knowledge sharing in the context of language courses as far as these students are concerned. However, simply making online forum available in the context of this research is unlikely to be enough to motivate students to make full of learning avenues and outcomes. The degree to which 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. The issue of technological support is a concern that needs to be addressed for online forums to go full force.

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