	Online EFL Discussion Forums in Communication Strategies and Writing Strategies Course
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Abstract:

In the past few years a growing number of EFL courses incorporate digital or online components in their syllabi. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that technical obstacles are gradually becoming easier to overcome as the students' digital aptitudes become more highly developed and widespread. As a result, there is great potential for educators to expand the learning environment beyond the conventional classroom. This paper focuses on the integration of weblogs and online discussion forums into the EFL classroom. The writer suggests that this asynchronous text-based communications tool increases both the exposure and use of the target language in all four language skill areas, thereby promoting overall linguistic competence.

The writer will present the background, rational, classroom application and subsequent observations of utilizing online discussion forums in elementary and low intermediate level EFL classes. It is hoped that this short paper will assist teachers in their preparation and application of this tool in their own courses.

1. Background:

Both teachers and students are becoming increasingly adept at using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools in various facets of their lives. The diverse variety of these applications include such examples as conventional e-mail, social networking services such as Mixi, Twitter and Facebook, online chat, wikis and various online weblogs or discussion forums. For educational purposes, weblogs and/or online discussion forums have been gaining popularity for the past decade. A brief list of seven other popular weblogs and online discussion forums are listed in **Appendix A**. For the contexts described in this article the term "online discussion forums" will be used.

It seems natural that some of these tools can be productively integrated into the language

classroom to promote linguistic and pragmatic interaction. Online discussion forums provide an asynchronous communication space where learners can share ideas, reflect and respond to others' opinions, while developing their writing skills outside of valuable class time. They offer students the opportunity for equal participation without the real-time pressures of face-to-face interaction. While online discussion forums come with various features, configurations, and styles, this paper will describe the online discussion forum component in the Moodle learning management system (LMS). It is a free open source software tool designed to help educators create effective online courses and/or online components that can be integrated into conventional course formats. The online discussion forum component offers a flexible format where both teachers and students can incorporate hyperlinks, video, and audio content to augment their text content with relative ease. This paper will outline the rational, application, procedures, and observations for the implementing online discussion forums in both EFL writing and communication strategies courses.

2. Online discussion forum rational:

One of the basic benefits of incorporating an online discussion forum into EFL writing and communication courses is that it allows instructors to utilize the in-class time more effectively. Students can engage in this asynchronous communication outside of the classroom at their own pace. In the case of the author's students, the actual writing was done outside of class either on the students' individual PCs or in the universities' computer labs. The instructor constantly monitored the learners' interaction and initiated follow-up discussion and feedback, both in and outside of class, on the content of their weekly writing.

Another impetus for incorporating this type of activity into writing and communication strategies courses was to increase the students' motivation to proactively contribute to the lesson content (i.e. topics and themes) that could be collaborated on with other learners. Creating an environment where there was interaction between learners was another way to help develop the learners' ability to express agreement or disagreement with others' opinions. This enhanced the overall language learning goals in the courses (Chen, 2005). Finally, the online discussion forums offered students three other additional benefits: exposure to multiple literacies, providing an authentic writing space and engaging students in collaborative work (Shoffner, M. 2007).

3. Classroom applications of online discussion forums:

As mentioned, this teacher incorporated online discussion forum components in both

communication strategies and writing strategies courses.　Each of these courses met once a week for a 90-minute class lesson and typically required the students to do about 120 minutes of class preparation between lessons.　The student-generated online discussion forum topics generally focused on current events and student lifestyle.　In both cases this student-centered activity was a weekly component of the outside of class study requirements.　Each week three or four students were assigned to post new discussion topics while the remainder of the students were instructed to comment or reply to previously posted discussion topics.　The assigned student roles (posting new discussion topic or posting comments/replies) were done by rotation.　In this way the variety of new discussion topics was constantly being refreshed and students had the opportunity to contribute postings in both roles.　The instructor monitored the student postings through the courses' Moodle LMS website.　Each week active or popular topic postings were used for in-class expansion.　Students were strongly encouraged to maintain weekly participation in the forums as a core requirement for both courses.　Sample discussion topics and a sample posting exchange are found in **Appendixes B and C**.

3.1 Communication strategies course application:

The objective of this course was to help students improve their listening and speaking skills for the purpose of communication.　The main focus of this course was on listening and speaking, but all four language skills were integrated into the curriculum.　The in-class activities primarily engaged the students in pairwork and small group discussions on themes ranging from daily activities to various intercultural topics.　The online forum required students to post either a new topic or a reply to a classmate's topic a minimum of once a week.　Each posting was a minimum of 150 words, but the majority of postings were closer to 200 words.

The online communication forum was used to stimulate in-class warm-up conversations. The online forum posting was done at the learners' own pace and allowed them the time for reflective thought as they participated in the asynchronous communication with their classmates.　As the topics were generated by the students themselves, they often had a high interest level among the majority of their peers.　The ease of adding graphics or hyperlink video content from online broadcasting services such as YouTube often stimulated conversation and more enthusiastic participation in group discussions.

This feature, along with the chance to formulate their individual opinions during the writing step, enabled the students to more smoothly engage in ensuing in-class discussions.

Considering the premium placed on the limited lesson time, the outside-of-class topic preparation lead to more productive communicative interaction in the classroom. Therefore it was felt that the fluency practice generated in this two-stage activity was successful from a pedagogical perspective. The additional preparations encouraged less confident or reticent students to be more active and expressive during the in-class discussion. The asynchronous online communication provided a less stressful and more comfortable means for shy students to engage their classmates in idea exchange before the traditional face-to-face discussion (Hansen, 2001). Often reticent students were more willing to express their personal opinions in-person after they had received some affirmative replies from classmates through the online discussion forum.

From a time-management perspective, groups actively completed the in-class warm-up discussions in the first 30 minutes of the lesson. This enabled the students to complete other core speaking and listening activities in the remaining one hour of the class. Generally, this resulted in a large majority of the lesson being dedicated to active language production either with the warm-up forum discussions or the textbook speaking activities. There were other secondary benefits to incorporating the online discussion component into the communication strategies course. One basic feature is that it also integrated both reading and writing skills into the out-of-class preparation.

From a motivational point of view, it allowed students to proactively control their learning in terms of the level of difficulty of the discussion topics. The collaborative nature of the discussion topics allowed students to exchange knowledge, ideas and opinions that were authentic and relevant to their lives. While some topics resulted in only superficial discussion, the majority of discussions improved the classroom dynamics because the students' common interests accelerated the oral interaction.

Learning is enhanced by having the students interact with each other and benefit from the differences in their individual personalities, skill levels, perspectives and knowledge. For example, in this situation, students with higher reading skills could more quickly summarize the online forum postings on a selected topic. Students with more assertive or confident personalities could initiate the group discussion based on the summary of the forum postings. Since most of the topics tended to have relevance to typical student lifestyle, even the shy or reticent students generally expressed opinions on the selected topics. In addition, the students actively engaged in various discourse functions from asking questions, to expressing options at varying degrees, to turn-taking. Furthermore, it was observed that most of the group discussions stayed on-topic and on-task, perhaps due to the pre-discussion reflection

and online input by the students.　Of course, in some cases the students had previously posted their written comments on the same topics, so it was even easier for them to reiterate and expand on their opinions.　By and large, the quality and quantity of the discussions was often better than the regular textbook topic discussions because the students themselves had initiated the topics.

The overall benefit of using the online discussion forum as a stimulus for in-class group discussion gave the students an additional tool to utilize for their broader communication practice.

3.2 Writing strategies course application:

The objective of this course was to help students develop their writing skills for the purpose of communication employing the process writing approach and various academic writing activities.　The main focus of this course was on writing, but all four language skills were integrated into the curriculum.　While the core content focused on process writing skills and helping students improve their grammatical and lexical accuracy, communicative competence in terms of writing fluency was also an important goal for this course.　Supplementary content such as speed writing activities and the online writing forum were used to help students increase this fluency.

The online forum required students to post either a new topic or a reply to a classmate's topic a minimum of once a week.　Each posting was a minimum of 200 words, but the majority postings were usually closer to 250 words.

Although the conventional nature of the writing course focused primarily on individual performance, the interaction created by the online writing forum created a more efficient and active classroom learning environment.　The online writing forum provided a purposeful approach to writing.　It required students to be conscious of their audience when they introduced new discussion topics or commented on their classmates' topics.　Some of the more serious topics, such as diet and health, or career planning and job hunting preparation, supported collaborative learning with the students imparting authentic knowledge (Shoffner, M., 2007).　Intuitively, collaborative learning between students can motivate them to learn the material more deeply.

To reiterate, the core content focused on process writing skills and helping students improve their grammatical and lexical accuracy.　This was accomplished through the use of traditional writing assignments.　This content was also completed using PCs and supplementary online textbook activities.　The online discussion forum seemed like a natural extension

to the academic writing component. It gave students the opportunity to receive and offer written feedback with both students and the instructor in a more authentic context. This exposure helped the instructor to introduce a different type of authorship and message writing. As the context of the online forum dictates the meaning and pedagogy, students gradually improved the relevant grammatical and vocabulary forms in this area.

4. Observations and conclusions:

As stated at the outset, students are becoming increasingly adept at using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools in various facets of their lives.   The integration of the online discussion forums into both the communication strategies and writing strategies course succeeded as a natural extension to the traditional methodology for both courses. Although the implementation had different pedagogical roles, the online discussion forums contributed to fulfilling the objectives of both courses.

It is said that the language, itself, should be meaningful to the learners in order to promote learning. The language required in the online discussion forum appears quite suitable for meeting the conditions of this type of learning environment. This content was both authentic and intellectually stimulating. In addition, it fostered the development of a socially supportive learning environment which could be cultivated further as the semester progressed (Becker & Ravitz, 1999).

At the same time, we can critically evaluate the actual pedagogical benefits of integrating technology in the classroom. While this instructor felt the linguistic and pragmatic content of the courses were enhanced with the online discussion forums in both oral communication and writing skill courses, he cautions that learning objectives and focus must constantly be reassessed to ensure these benefits. It is important that the students understand the educational purpose of their online activity and not only care about the quantity of their online submissions.

That being said, the writer believes that online discussions are a powerful tool for adding stimuli to the educational environment, by requiring students to proactively prepare content for their language learning.   In addition, the teacher has another avenue to communicate and interact with the students outside of the class time.   Teachers can read and comment on the individual submissions.   Ideally this will motivate the students to further reflect on their original content.

Empowering students to develop objective and critical assessment skills of both their work and the work of their peers improves classroom management and is also beneficial to

the students' own learning and autonomy.　In both the writing and communication strategies courses, the student interaction opportunities created by the weekly online forum activities lead to a more positive learning environment and integration of the individual students' knowledge, character and language skills.

Based on the writer's experiences and observations over the past four years of utilizing weblogs and discussion forums in various courses, here are some additional suggestions or guidelines for instructors to consider.

1. Provide the students with clear criteria for their participation regarding the course grading.
2. Provide the students with clear posting guidelines, including word count requirements and submission time deadlines (Deubel, P. 2007).　In this case, the instructor posted the weekly scores to each individual student based on their ability to meet these requirements.
3. Provide HTML editor instruction and support (Deubel, P. 2007).
4. Consider and protect privacy matters when constructing the format for the online forum.　Using the Moodle LMS, website security configurations, user roles and viewing and posting permissions are easily configured, so that only account holders could access the online discussion forum content.
5. Constantly monitor ongoing discussions for use in-class.
6. Monitor opinion exchange for inappropriate content in postings.
7. Monitor regular weekly participation by all students.　It may be necessary to remind or assist some students who neglect this activity.

In the past hand-written journals provided free, unstructured writing practice that could be assigned to be outside of the classroom, but offered very limited options for student interaction.　The online discussion forums provide time-efficient options that allow students to interact on a much larger scale.　They also provide another option to help students who have difficulties expressing themselves orally.

Overall, this activity also promoted learner autonomy and students' self-confidence to proactively interact with their classmates, thus improving the classroom dynamics (Mynard, J. 2008).　By being able to have some control over the content of class discussions, students were less reticent about engaging immediately in discussion.

While some may feel that neglecting to insist on accuracy and linguist form in the

language skills used in these activities is unproductive, it has also been said that grammatical and vocabulary form will naturally improve as students gain confidence in their communicative competence and fluency.　The online discussion forum enabled students to use English in an unintimidating manner of communication.　In addition, it encouraged the students to become more sensitive to their potential audience.　It also offered the flexibility of being used easily with students of varying levels, interests and goals.　It enabled students to individualize their studies to a greater extent and therefore become more independent language learners.

Student feedback through course surveys has indicated that this activity was a productive component in their EFL studies, as well as a practical opportunity for the students to improve their overall computer and information technology literacy.　While seemingly simplistic to those teachers with greater computer savvy, the student online discussion forum and their follow-up activities appeared to be a rewarding endeavor for both the students and their instructor.

5. Future considerations:

Based on casual word-count observations of individual recorded oral comments made by students and random word count checks of their written online forum submissions, there was a noticeable number of cases where students with shorter oral comments had submitted longer than average written online forum comments.　A more thorough analysis of this type of data and its possible implications is one related area for future investigation.

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Appendix A: The following is a brief list of some of the free self-hosting weblogs or online forum software applications that are commonly used in classroom environments.　Some also offer additional paid service features.

Tool	URL	Additional Note
Blogger	https://www.blogger.com/	Multilingual (the system's administrative interface is localized based on individual user settings)
B2evolution	http://b2evolution.net/	Multilingual
MyBlogSite	http://www.myblogsite.com/	
Moveable Type	http://www.movabletype.org/	Multilingual
Nucleus Blogging Software	http://nucleuscms.org/	Nucleus also provides RSS and Atom feeds
WordPress	http://wordpress.org/	Multilingual
Xanga	http://www.xanga.com/	

Appendix B: Sample of online forum discussion topics

Appendix C: Sample discussion forum posting interaction

Let's Learn Together: Why we have to start job hunting from a Junior? – Mozilla Firefox
File Edit View History Bookmarks Tools Help
http://www.marksclassroom.org/moodle/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1105
Let's Learn Together: Wh···

Why we have to start job hunting from a Junior?
by bteng-KYOKO bteng - Monday, 18 October 2010, 09:50 AM

Hello, everyone. I am Kyoko from Fuji university and I am a sophomore now.

I want to add a serious topic today, however, to write serious topic might be difficult. So, I would make mistakes,but I try.

Most of students have to start their job hunting when they become juniors. "Junior" means the 3rd grade of university. Now I have heard that job hunting is in bad circumstances. Around me, there is a senior student who has already got a job. She said, she wrote over 60 entry sheets and she got just 2 unofficial decisions. I have felt uneasy about job hunting next year after I heard this.

But Why do we have to start it though we are in the middle of studies? ☺These days, I heard that the students in the US start job hunting after they study 4 years and they try to find what a thing is the most they want to do through a year after graduation. I think this is much natural than Japanese style. Of course I have a dream that I want to be after, but I think we can not get enough knowledge with only 2 years and a half studies .Even that we can not avoid it. I think we need to much longer time till to start job hunting.

What do you think about system of job hunting? I think it is too early to start it. Well, I don't know whether I could write about it good or not. I hope you understand. Thank you for reading.☺

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Re: Why we have to start job hunting from a Junior?
by bteng-misaki bteng - Tuesday, 19 October 2010, 02:32 PM

Hello, Kyoko! I'm Misaki, your friend. This topic is so serious that I want to avoid from thinking about that. However, we have to start job hunting next year! It is weird, isn't it?

By the way, I agree with you. It is too early to start job hunting from junior, the middle of studying. I thought it because of economical situation; however, the US economical situation may be worse than that of Japanese one.

In my opinion, it is no use trying to change. This is traditional institution; therefore, we had better accept it. Both styles have merits and demerits. I want to concentrate on studying; however, I wonder I can get a job after graduation. As you said, it is difficult to decide which one is good or bad.

If I were to become the Prime Minister, I would choose American system. For this, I want to concentrate on studying. In addition, it is said that our brain capacity tend to decrease. Students should study more before decreasing brain cells. We have to enjoy student life, both studying and playing! That's why I said starting job hunting from juniors was too early.

Done

Let's Learn Together: Why we have to start job hunting from a Junior? – Mozilla Firefox
File Edit View History Bookmarks Tools Help
http://www.marksclassroom.org/moodle/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=1105
Let's Learn Together Wh···

Re: Why we have to start job hunting from a Junior?
by bteng-YukaK bteng - Tuesday, 19 October 2010, 03:16 PM

Hi, Kyoko!! I am YukaK next to you in Mark's lesson.

Your topic is interesting because I finished job haunting these days as you know. In fact, it is hard for me to do job haunting in senior grade. Moreover, I transferred from junior college to FUJI, so I had to take many lessons than usual students of senior grade. Then, I always cared about job haunting and lessons. Besides, companies request many things for us. For example, I had to study SPI. SPI is achievement test, so they check whether students have foundation or not. Second, I had to write Entry seats. Entry seats are like original resume. Of course, each company requests various endowments, so I had to write various Entry seats, it took a lot of time!!! So, I always wrote Entry seats. Last year, I was robbed my precious time by job haunting. Therefore, I think this system is not good. Maybe, people around me think so, too. I think university students should enjoy. Certainly, I know it is hard for companies to manage because of depression, so they want to employ better students. However, is it good for university students?? I think they think only company. So, I wish this system change greatly!!

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply

Re: Why we have to start job hunting from a Junior?
by bteng-Mami bteng - Tuesday, 19 October 2010, 07:02 PM

Hi, Kyoko J I am Mami from Fuji. I thought same things as you! Japanese job hunting system is weird.

This summer, I traveled around the Europe, and I met many people who are from western country. Most of them had just finished their university or they are junior, and then they travel before their job or job hunting by using long summer vacation. I also have heard many countries don't hire who are new graduated. However, here in Japan, many companies want to hire new graduates. I think that's why we have to start job hunting early, middle of university. The system of Japanese employ makes us earlier job hunting.

I am also wondering why many people are keen to graduate four years from university. I have heard Korean university students usually take one year leave. They can do what they want to do, like taking qualification, going abroad, and so on. However, most Japanese students don't do that. I think the reason is the cost of university. Japanese university's cost is expensive, so Japanese can't do this.

Done