

Participation In An Online Forum: A Case Study Of UTM Students

Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor & Shalini Srika Bala

Fakulti Pendidikan,

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Abstract : Virtual world or environment such as Online Forum is one of the predominantly text-base asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools. Since early 1990s, Online Forum has generated much interest among second language researchers. However, to date, not many studies have focused on Online Forum as a platform for language learning. For the purpose of this study, in UTM, a fully-fledged virtual forum called MyLine, was chosen and analyzed to benefit students in their language learning and communication skills. This study began investigating on the nature of interaction among students in online forum, the factors that influences students' participation and language use within the electronic medium and finally on the reasons for their participation. Data were gathered through online observation and questionnaire. Content analysis was also done on the messages posted. Through the data collection, it was found that there are some patterns of interaction between the students. Besides that, there are a few factors that influenced students' participation such as accessibility of Internet, speed of access and their computer skills. There are a few patterns of language used in online forum which influence the students' language use. In particular, most of the students participated in online forum because i) the topics discussed are interesting, ii) coursework mark given by lecturer and iii) online forum motivate them to communicate by improving their language. Thus, MyLine forum is an affective medium to provide equal opportunity to second language learners with different levels of proficiency to participate without hesitant.

Keyword : online forum, case study of UTM students

Introduction

This study aims to analyze the participation of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) students in MyLine online forum. In general, the study aims to elicit information on the nature of interaction among the students in the online forum. The nature of interaction is analyzed in terms of roles played, patterns of interaction, total number of users, frequency and quality of participation when they are using the target language to socially communicate with others. In particular, the study also aims to investigate on how the electronic medium influences the students' participation and the students' language use, to interact more in the language. Besides that, the purpose of this study also is to examine the students' reasons for their participation in online forum.

Statement of the problem

As far as this study is concerned, UTM graduates must not only be proficient in their own fields of study but they must also possess communication skills which could be used globally. Therefore, they must be proficient enough in the English language in order to successfully interact with others both in the local and the global settings.

The problem remains that UTM students, under 'normal' circumstances, do not have sufficient motivation to interact in English (Wan Fara, 2006). This might result in UTM students not achieving 'world class' quality in their communication skills. Thus, there is a need for a medium which can be utilized by UTM students to enhance their English communication skills.

The tool or medium itself must not be intimidating to students towards the learning of English in general. Thus it should provide opportunity to them to interact in second language.

Technology is now rapidly affecting various parts of our lives. The communication technology has reached a level where people are now able to discuss virtually through the Internet. With the use of Computer-mediated communication (CMC) assisted with the technology of virtual reality, we might be able to solve some of the problems that cannot be solved by the traditional discussion activities. Traditional classroom discussion serves limited opportunity for language learning and communication skills which is mostly dominated by vocal students and does not help the weak and shy students. Moreover, through informal observation it has been found that many undergraduates face great difficulties to communicate and write in the target language (Ranjit Kaur, 2008). Research conducted in recent years; Jonassen et al. (1999:7) and Trim (1988) shows that discussion through online forum could be an essential alternative to replace the traditional discussion activities. Countries like Canada, Australia and United State are using virtual discussion as part of their education process have proven the fact that virtual discussions enhances language learning.

Apart from that, the medium should encourage the students to produce output in the English language and should sufficiently motivate the students to continue using it and thus further develop their interaction skills in English. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the participation in an online forum (virtual environment) as a proposed tool or platform to provide the medium to simulate face-to-face interaction, i.e. using the target language for interaction with other students.

Objectives of the study

Firstly, the objective of this study is to find out the nature of interaction among the students in the online forum. Secondly, the study aimed to investigate on how the electronic medium influences the students' participation and the students' language use. Finally, the study aimed to determine the reasons for their participation in the online forum towards learning and producing English.

Significance of the Study

Since the launching of Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the education system is a field that directly benefits from this project (Berhanuddin, 2006). In the past five years, specific focus has been given for the development of smart schools and cyber campus. Internet is now encouraged widely to be used in campus for learning and teaching purposes. Technology of Internet and the facilities provide language teachers an opportunity to apply computer-assisted language learning approach for teaching and learning purposes. The applications of CMC give students an opportunity for more liberalized language learning because it serves as a medium of communication. Moreover, through online forum language learners are given more opportunities for communication and exposure to the target language.

This study can provide a conducive environment for UTM students to practice the English language with fellow students and lecturers, thus promoting competency in English communication skills. Accordingly, this study can also foster an active virtual community of English language learners among UTM students, as well as increase students' motivation in learning.

Finally, with the existence of MyLine online forum, this will provide opportunities for the lecturers and students to establish healthy and professional relationship. Furthermore, when

students interact within the MyLine online forum, they may actually enhance their knowledge and skills in their respective fields of study.

Scope of the study

The scope of this study is the students of UTM who are involved in the MyLine online forum. MyLine is an online forum used by the English Language Unit (ELU) with the collaboration of all the universities in Malaysia to promote extensive use of English. The participants are required to answer the online questionnaire and online interviews which will be posted in the forum.

Research Design

This study analyzes the participation of UTM students in MyLine online forum. The online forum is similar to the traditional discussion group where it shares some similarities with chatroom. Participants usually initiate different topics or topic also can be raised by the ELU to help participants become familiar with the environment and discuss on the topics that they are interested in. Those who are interested sent their opinion in a way to respond to the topic. In this study, the participation of the students on online forum was observed and analyzed. Then, the postings to the forum were saved, printed and read. Questionnaire was also distributed through online forum to the participants while online interviews are also conducted. Finally, the data collected were analyzed qualitatively

Participants of the study

Eleven participants from MyLine online forum were selected as the sample of the study and these students are from UTM. The participants must have participated in the online forum and posted messages at least three messages in the forum to be selected as samples. Participants were not informed officially about the study to keep the natural environment. Moreover, the participants were very familiar with the concept of posting messages in the forum but do not know each other very well. These participants or samples were from different year of study and from different courses such as Engineering and TESL. To ensure confidentiality, this report refers to the participants by the initials of their names only.

Procedures of the study

Free accesses to network ready computers are available at each UTM faculty's computer lab and library. Hence there is no need to provide any special network access. It is not difficult to gain access to network since many students have their own network service connected to their PCs and laptop. This enabled participants to access into the MyLine at any time at their own pace. Furthermore, the researcher wanted to maintain the real environment for the virtual forum.

As mentioned earlier, eleven students from UTM who are involved in MyLine forum and posted at least three messages were selected as the sample of the study. This is because at least three messages were analyzed and interpreted to gain insights on the language used by each student. The topics discussed in MyLine forum are; messages from the Minister of Higher Education, academic/university matter, career and professional development, economics, general, hobbies, language, social issues, sports and university life. The study began from January 1, 2009 and continued until February 3, 2009.

The participants participated in online discussion and exchanged opinions in MyLine online forum. The researcher saved and printed out the messages posted by the participants.

After that, questionnaires were sent to the participants through their personal e-mail by briefly explaining the motive of the study. The entire data (postings and questionnaire) sent by the sample were collected and read by the researcher. Data were collected through online observation, content or textual analysis, and questionnaire. (Figure 1)

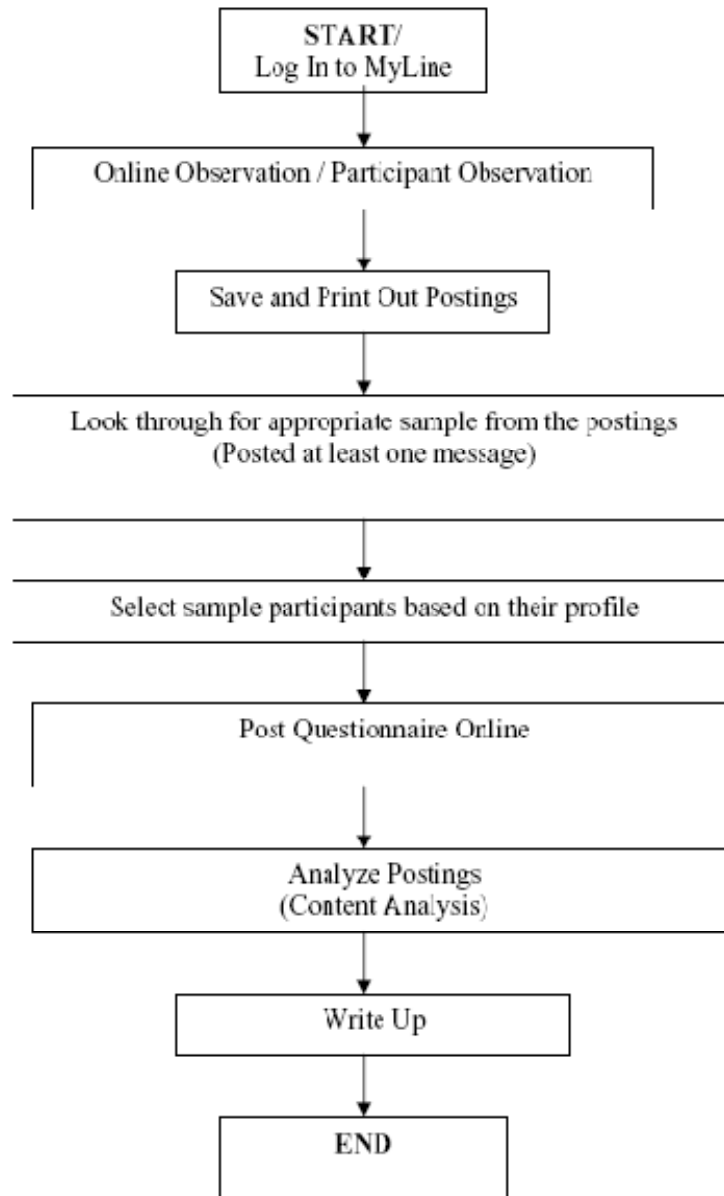


Figure 1: Procedures of the Study

Data Instruments

Several instruments such as online observation and questionnaire were used to gather the data. Content analysis was also done on the messages in the forum, which contained interactions of the participants.

Online and participant observations

Online and participant observations were necessary methods to be used in here due to the nature of the data. This is because only through these methods were the researcher able to observe the participants' participation in the online forum and perhaps prompting them to participate. This way the researcher was able to retrieve certain information such as which discussion topics they participated in. The participants were observed in discussion sessions where they discuss on the topic that they are interested in. Those who were interested in a topic sent their opinion in a way to respond to the topic. This observation was used to gauge the nature of interaction among the students in terms of roles played, patterns of interaction, total number of users, frequency and quality of participation. The researcher keep track on the eleven participants by using the profile function in MyLine. This is because this function provided information about messages posted by participants besides personal details of the participants. The information consists of number of messages posted by the participants, in which topic did they posted the messages and on what date they participated or posted messages.

Online Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to elicit information on "in what way the electronic medium influences the students' participation and their language use". Besides that, it was also used to find information on frequency and quality of participation as well as reasons for students' participation. This questionnaire was sent online to the participants' personal email by briefly explaining the motive of the study. The participants were asked to return the completed questionnaire to the researchers' email.

Content Analysis (postings)

Content Analysis or textual analysis is a research tool which is used to study the content of a communication. According to Ole Hosti (1969), he defines content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages". This is done by quantifying and analyzing the presence, meanings and relationships of certain words and concepts in the messages, then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time. Texts can be defined broadly as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, and any occurrence of communicative language.

According to Krippendorff, K (1980 and 2004), six questions must be addressed in every content analysis. They include:

1. Which data are analyzed?
2. How are they defined?
3. What is the population from which they are drawn?
4. What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed?
5. What are the boundaries of the analysis?
6. What is the target of the inferences?

The postings or messages in the forum were analyze in terms of the content to find out in what way does the electronic medium influence the students' language use. Furthermore, it also aimed to find out the patterns of interaction and quality of interaction which occur in the forum. Besides that, content analysis was also used to analyze data in online questionnaire.

Reasons for students' participation

In general, it is important to discover the reasons for students' participation in online forum such as MyLine. This is because it illustrates the motive or objective for their participation

in online discussion. To elicit answers from the participants, analysis was done on the opened questions in “Section C”.

1 Reasons for students’ participation.

Participant	Responses
Participant 1	Part of coursework marks..
Participant 2	Basically, to share experience, knowledge or information, to socialize, for fun, etc.
Participant 3	Some topics are interesting. Other than that, I sometimes like to share my opinions / thoughts/ comments/ suggestions.
Participant 4	Prompting from lecturers, free time, and interesting topics.
Participant 5	Online forum is a good way to interact with other students in the university and I can get information about many topics of my interests through the online forum (movie reviews, songs reviews, events) .
Participant 6	Personally, to get good grades for a subject, to improve my English acquisition, and to be able to share my opinions and views.
Participant 7	Frankly, I participate because my lecturer as me to. Bt, I do enjoy interacting and sharing a lot of ideas there
Participant 8	Firstly, I joined the online forum because of the coursework marks given by my lecturer which I consider as extrinsic rewards. Eventually, I feel interested to join the discussion further because there are a lot of advantages that I can gain through this participation.
Participant 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The topics are very interesting - I learn new stuffs. - I can expand my knowledge and my social networks. - I gain a lot of new information. - Having fun in there.
Participant 10	The topic is interesting and somehow related to things and matters that happen around me

Participant 11	First, its because I want to improve myself by sharing opinion with others. Besides that, it's because of my lecturer. We need to participate actively since marks will be rewarded for our participation in MyLine online forum.
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From the Table 1 above, the responses show that there are few reasons for students' participation in an online forum. First of all, it's because the topics discussed in MyLine forum are interesting and able to attract the students' interest. In general, majority of them felt that the topics are enjoyable and a good tool to use in helping them with language learning. Topics which are suitable to the students' age and personal interest actually obtain more responses from the online learners. Besides that, Table 5.0 shows that Participant 9 posted quite a number of postings compared to other participants. This is because, the topics discussed are interesting and helped her to expand her knowledge as well as gain a lot of new information. For example she said that "the topics are very interesting, I learn new stuffs, can expand my knowledge and my social networks and I gain a lot of new information".

Besides that, students also participated in an online forum because of the coursework marks given which is consider as extrinsic award. This is because certain lecturers in UTM make it compulsory for their students to participate in the MyLine forum in order to obtain coursework marks and students just participated in order to get good grades in their subject. Actually, the lecturers' intention is to encourage the students to communicate actively in a virtual environment where students' responses to the topic discussed in MyLine forum. Students actually benefits from the MyLine forum because it provides them with an environment where they did not feel threatened and embarrassed to interact. Participant 1 in Table 5.0 posted less postings compared to other participants. This is because her participation in the forum was "part of [her] coursework marks". Thus, it can be concluded that she was not motivated at all to participate actively in this forum.

Students also participated in online forum because it helps them to improve their language. This is because they get the chance to correct their mistakes while looking at others writing. Out of eleven participants, ten participants realize their own mistakes by looking at others' writing. This finding is related to the prime intention of this online forum which aimed to promote language learning. For example, Participant 6 said that she participated "personally, to get good grades for a subject, to improve my English acquisition, and to be able to share my opinions and views". She did post quite a number of postings because of there reasons.

In general, as stated above, students participated in online forum because they felt that the topic discussed is interesting and online forum helps them to improve their language. In addition, their participation was also influenced by the coursework marks given by their lecturer.

Summary of Findings

Although the period of the study was not that long, a wealth of information was obtained. For example, in an online environment based on the observations, it was found that there are some patterns of interaction between the students. Students, especially in online forum are more interested in General topics compared to other kinds of topic. They prefer to interact in this area because they find it interesting and it gives them opportunity to connect with their experiences. Through the postings, it was found that patterns of interaction in an online forum consist of three main categories or responses as stated by Rourke, L (2001); Affective, Interactive and Cohesive.

These responses make group interactions appealing, engaging, which in turn instigates and sustains critical thinking. Thus, the online forum especially MyLine has provided students with a rich interaction experiences in English.

Findings further showed that there are a few factors that influence students' participation and their language use within the electronic medium. First, from the study it was found that students' participation were influenced by the accessibility of Internet, speed of access and their computer skills. An important aspect of interacting online in MyLine would certainly be unlimited and uninterrupted access to internet. Students can participate more often in the online forum if the Internet connection is good and when they can access to it easily. Besides that, their computer skills determined their success as online learners (Moore, 1991). The more competent they are in computer skills the more dialogues would emerge as a result of higher interactivity between the students through technological mediums such as online discussions, e-mails, chats and computer conferencing (Bonk et.al.1998).

As what has been discussed earlier, there are few a patterns of language used in the forum such as short-form, slang, punctuation marks, non-standard English and Standard English. This unique pattern is something which we seldom found in the conventional classroom discussion. Apart from that, the use of Standard English by some students in the discussions would help other learners to correct their errors in English language. Added to this, majority of the participants agreed that their interaction within the MyLine forum has helped them improve their language use and interact effectively with their peers.

Another interesting finding in this study includes the reasons for students' participation in online forum. Majority of the participants claimed that they participated in online forum because the topics discussed are interesting and motivate them to interact. Meanwhile, some of the students participated because of the coursework mark given by the lecturer. Finally, some of the them claimed that MyLine forum has motivated them to communicate in English in real world besides providing them a platform for online learning where they can collaborate with each other for more effective interaction.

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