

ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSION: ENHANCING STUDENT PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

The existence and boom of internet use among the net Generation highlights the benefits of asynchronous online discussion (AOD) in higher educational context. The convenience to learn at anytime from anywhere as well as building collaborative learning has led many experts to suggest AOD as a promising tool in extending language teaching learning. Regrettably, in this era of internet and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) popularity, the implementation of AOD in language teaching learning are still limited in number. Even, in this infancy stage, many educators simply apply AOD to bricks mortar classes without optimally structure, which results in lower student participation. In addition, most of the contributions by students were in surface level of knowledge construction and in serial monologues. To address these issues, this article offers a view on the need of integrating AOD in teaching learning language and an instructional strategy called Starter Wrapper technique to structure and manage online discussion for the purpose of generating more student participation.

Keywords: Online discussion, asynchronous online discussion, Starter Wrapper technique

INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, with the existence and boom of the internet and technological era, the digital world is no longer a novel term for people nowadays. People like to be online these days for information gathering, buying things in cyber world, staying update on social concerns and national issues, and even merely engaging in social media.

According to the Internet World Statistics (2017), the number of internet users in Indonesia has surpassed a hundred million and are continuing to increase year by year. The online magazine eMarketer (2014) estimates, by 2018, nearly half of the world's population or 3.6 billion people will access the internet. The widespread use of the internet and the advancement of CMC have brought us to this new way of life. Even, for the net Generation, who were born into a world of information technology and has grown up with this technology making their laptops and mobile phones an integral part of their day.

Integrating CMC in the education field has been developed in recent decades including higher educational context (Hiltz & Wu, 2004). Many educators over the world have applied these kinds of technologies into their teaching learning and found fascinating results (Hiltz & Wu, 2004; Corich et.al, 2004; De Wever et.al, 2009; Nguyen, 2011; Shih, 2011; Wasoh, 2014).

The promise of flexibility to learn anytime and anywhere, generate higher level of student participation as well as building collaborative learning would lead students to have better knowledge construction (Hiltz & Wu, 2004; Marden & Herrington, 2009). This highlights the use of AOD in bricks and mortar classes. Barss (2012) investigated the impact of CMC on learners' interaction outside the classroom. He found that it provides learners a less-threatening and useful platform in extending their communication in the target language. CMC environment is considered to be a solution for one common issue framed in the nature of EFL learners. Compared to ESL, EFL learners have little opportunity to interact with the target language

outside of the classroom. Learners learn their L2 while living in their L1 environment (Barss, 2012). Thus, it implies the significance of maximizing opportunities for L2 outside the classroom.

Ironically, in this era of internet and CMC popularity, the implementation of AOD in language teaching learning in developing countries is still very low. Only a few higher education institutions embraced this technology and implement it into the classroom. In this highly preliminary stage (Shana, 2009), many educators simply extend the traditional discussion to a virtual platform without the optimal structure needed for best results. As a consequence, most of contributions by students were in surface level of knowledge construction. They provided or retrieved factual information without reasoning and supports. Only a few of them actively responded to the discussions while others merely contributed only to fulfill the requirement. Moreover, most of students only attempted to answer the teacher's questions and built one way interaction (Pawan et al., 2003).

To address these issues, the writer feels there is a conceivable need to offer insight about the importance of integrating AOD in language teaching learning and the instructional strategy called Starter Wrapper Technique for the purpose of structuring and managing this process for optimal results.

THE NEED TO INCORPORATE ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSION

Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1978) placed the social context at the heart of the learning and communication process. Learning is assumed basically as a social rather than an individual phenomenon (Tehrani & Abdullah, 2011). Knowledge construction is built in a process of actively exchanging the ideas, experiences and perspectives between students and teacher, students and environment, and students among themselves. Rather than simple acceptance or reception of transferred information (Mohr & Mohr, 2007), learning should focus on students in which learners can participate and interact in activities that help them to construct the knowledge and discover principles for themselves.

In fact, in most traditional language learning classrooms, teachers always direct the learning process while students rather just become recipients of the teacher's knowledge and wisdom, somewhat merely passive learners (Chen, 2007). The students have rare opportunities to practice their target language and communication skills which actually are the foundation of language acquisition. Even in traditional face to face discussions, many students solely become "hush and listen" learners (Shana, 2009). They seem reluctant to engage in conversation. The reasons might come from the feeling of shyness, afraid of making mistakes, and time constraint to think as well.

Furthermore in the context of EFL where English exists as a foreign language, learner interactions in the target language (L2) rarely occurs beyond the four walls of the classroom. They learn their L2 while living in their L1 environment (Barss, 2012). In such teacher centered learning settings, EFL learners might not have enough language interactional opportunities to develop their communicative competence. These issues, thus, emerge the urgent need to shift the teacher dependent base learning to the student centered approach which encourages active participation of language learners and provides them platform in which possibly augment their L2 use outside of the classroom.

Offering a convenience in time and location (Holmes & Gardner, 2006), the implementation of AOD (which also is commonly referred to as "discussion forum") in the instructional design of language learning brings a breath of fresh air to the traditional classroom in which typically has passive participation. AOD offers the flexibility in learning which is not bounded by brick and mortar class solely. Teacher and learners do not have to be physically in the same location. They

can access this virtual classroom at a time and place convenient for them provided they have the computer and internet connection.

Online discussion forums are one of asynchronous tools purported by So (2009) and Barss (2012) as the simplest CMC that can be easily integrated into teaching and extend discussion beyond classroom contexts. According to Bakar, Laiff, & Hamat (2013), asynchronous online discussion forum is an interactive communication platform that helps learners to communicate and interact with their teacher and peers outside the classroom. It is a discussion area where participants can engage in an ongoing conversation by posting written messages done in a delayed fashion. In addition, these posted messages are accessible at any time and remain visible until they are deleted. Prasad acknowledges that these forums store a permanent record of interaction that is easy to archive, search, and evaluate (2009). Learners can trace back to the last discussion and reread the material or resources stored in this asynchronous tool.

Hirvela (2006) reports the positive “distancing effect” of asynchronous CMC increases the learner’s desire to express oneself in the target language since it minimizes the pressure caused by the face to face communication in a foreign language. Students have more opportunity to prepare carefully what they intend to share before contributing to the discussions. Thus, through this way, students feel more confident to participate in and at the same time promote their critical thinking (Orvis & Lassiter, 2007).

THE CHALLENGES TO GENERATE STUDENT PARTICIPATION

In spite of the prominence, online discussions also encounter some challenges (deNoyelles et al., 2014). It is apparent that just making discussion forums available does not guarantee that effective learning is bound to happen. In a number of cases, forums were excitedly created but ended up in a digital dissatisfaction (Shana, 2009).

In the pilot study (Veranika, 2013) conducted by the writer in Tanjungpura university, extending teaching learning to virtual class using AOD does not always generate high student participation. The writer analyzed an asynchronous discussion board supplemented to the third semester of the English Language Education Program course called Teaching Learning with ICT I. It discovered that students seem reluctant to engage in this platform. Only a few of them actively responded to the discussions while others merely contributed to fulfill the requirement. As consequences, most of their contributions were in surface level of knowledge construction. Based on the data, the majority (80%) of the students’ postings were classified as responding and informative statements. They merely provided or retrieved factual information without reasoning and supports. Moreover, there were some students who just presented the same idea or information that had already been stated by their peers and simply posted the repetition from the previous messages. In short, these students engaged with superficial thinking. Additionally, the flow of the discussions was one way interaction which most of the students only attempted to answer toward the teacher’s questions.

In pre assumption, the low level of student participation might be due to the structure of the discussion. The instructor applied free format and open discussion with no specific structure. Instructor sent questions then students were responsible to answer it. This kind of format showed little success in enhancing student participation in discussions. It created one way interaction in which most of the students only tried to answer the teacher’s questions while almost none of their responses attempted to deeply explore the main topic of discussion. In other words, this kind of free format was not able to push the class to have a student centered feel.

Moreover another interesting fact that might cause student participation at low levels was limited teacher presence. It was indicated from the teacher’s messages contributed in the discussion. Only six to eight postings (about 5 %) were identified as the teacher’s engagement

during one semester. Whereas, literature reported that teacher presence is a key element in the teaching learning process, including the online class (Mandernach et al., 2006; Garrison et al., 2000; Jaggars et al., 2013). Developing a connection to the teacher is of critical importance to students. When the students lost the feeling of teacher presence, they would often feel isolated and like they had to teach themselves, resulting in a decrease in motivation to learn. Mandernach, et al. (2006) claims that active participation of teacher in online platform promotes increased student participation which in turn creates a positive attitude in the discussion, establishes meaning through dialog, and ensures content competence.

Zhu (2006) also asserts that teacher presence and role have greater impacts on student participation in online discussion. When a teacher never posts or participation in the discussion is minimal, the students have a tendency to contribute to the discussions with lower level of thinking because they think that the teacher is not present. On the contrary, when the teacher reads and evaluates every single message in the discussion, the discussion would be more teachers centered with students replying much more than to their peers. Such teacher domination would limit student exploration, engagement and interaction (Bonk & Dennen, 2006). It is vital for teachers to manage their engagement in the discussions.

In short, the challenges discovered in the pilot study pointed out that low quality of student participation might be due to the structure of discussion and lack of teacher presence.

STRUCTURING ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSION: STARTER WRAPPER TECHNIQUE

Putting students together in an asynchronous medium does not automatically result in effective interaction or collaborative learning (Weinberger et al., 2005). De Wever et al. (2009) argued, to bring about strong positive learning effects, it is important for the teacher to focus on embedding a certain amount of structure. Following the claim, Anderson et al. (2001) suggest assigning specific discussion roles to engage the students in a more student centered discussions which will motivate and generate them to have a higher knowledge construction.

Starter Wrapper Technique is proposed as ideally suited for role assignments for online forum environments (deNoyelles et al., 2014; Shin & Bickel, 2012; Shan, 2009; Bonk & Dennen, 2006; Pawan et al., 2003; Hara et al., 1998). The empirical evidence of facilitating online discussions using a form of starter wrapper template was found in the study of Pawan et al. (2003). They examined and compared the patterns of engagement and interactions of the students in online discussions from three different online graduate-level language teacher education courses. They discovered that online discussion, which applied Starter Wrapper technique were more interactive and raised the student participation and critical thinking more than the two others classes which applied free form discussion.

Similar results were also found by Hara et al. (1998) in their research on online conference supplemented class discussion within a traditional graduate course. Using the starter wrapper approach, in this course, students were signed up into some roles: starter, wrapper and participants. The starters acted as a jump-start of the discussion (Bonk & Dennen, 2006). They summarize the weekly readings and issues for a particular week before offering questions. Meanwhile in the wrapper role, these students reflect on issues and themes discussed during the week or on a particular unit. Those who are not starters or wrappers were required to contribute to the discussions by answering the questions or making comments on their peers' responses. Taken from content analysis, the data showed interesting electronic participation. Besides lengthy and cognitively deep post by students, it revealed that students dominated the discussions which indicated that a student's centered environment was successfully built. The roles of the starter and wrapper helped promote student responsibility for each discussion. Hara

et al. (1998) claimed that students would become more engaged and comfortable with the conferencing system in forcing students to take roles of teacher and discussion participants.

Starter Wrapper technique is a strategy to structure the discussion into peer lead by assigning students into starter and wrapper roles for each theme discussion. These students have the responsibility of asking questions that challenge, connect, and extend information in the postings. The starter is required to initiate the discussion, to add new points for other students to build upon, and to give stimulus when the discussions reach a lull. The wrapper, who is also called as the summarizer, is expected to post temporary summaries during discussion and a final synopsis at the end, pointing out overlapping ideas, focusing on identifying apparent the debates and harmony between messages and drawing conclusion of the students (De Wever et al., 2009). Taken from Pawan et al. (2003, p.132), below are examples of starter and wrapper postings:

Starter :Healey presents a table on page p. 393 entitled "Settings for Autonomous Learning" that shows the relationship between content and structure in learning settings. Share your thoughts about the chart and tell whether it accurately reflects the setting in your classroom. What factors decided where you plotted your classroom?

Wrapper:As for the differences between online discourse and face-to-face communication, all of us agree that online communications lack of cues such as gesture, facial expression, tone, body language etc. However, there won't be problems of accents, pronunciation. Moreover, online discourse provides a relatively stress free environment for language learners. Of course, people don't need to worry about geographic locations via online communication -- just like us. ☺

(Taken from Pawan, et al., 2003, p.132)

Assigning roles to the students would create a teaching presence in a students' centered feel environment. The Teaching presence activities that was before perform primarily by the teacher such as initiating the discussion, adding new points for other students to build upon, giving stimulus, and drawing conclusion would now be carried out also by the starter and wrapper. At the same time, it builds peer facilitation which reduces the student anxiety. In this line of thinking, Lim, Cheung and Hew (2011) report that students may be more relax to engage in the discussion when it is led by an equal member of the class, rather than the teacher itself. Yet, the teacher contribution in the discussion is still crucial to monitor the discussions such as keeping them on topic, preventing them from being dominated by only a few individuals, and quickly addressing improper comments (Arend in deNoyelles et al., 2014).

Shin and Bickel (2012) in their initial research compared two implementation of one online TESOL methodology course. They found that in the first course in which only the teacher who had role to initiate the discussion and encouraged participation, the bulk of participants' posts were in the exploration phase. Students just shared information and played with the ideas which indicated that they engaged in superficial thinking and a strong critical community of inquiry was not built. In contrast to the second implementation, Shin and Bickel applied a learner centered approach using a form of the Starter Wrapper technique. Interestingly, it exhibited an increase in length and complexity of discussion threads, a decrease of serial monologues (46%-27%) and a rise in student cognitive engagement as well.

CONCLUSION

Supplementing AOD into the walls of the classrooms offers new and high possibilities to conquering typical barriers suffered by students such as; student passive participation and minimal target language interactional opportunities. A large number of studies grant positive evidences toward the use of this CMC tool in altering the traditional teacher centered class and promoting student interaction as well as generating their cognitive skills. On the other hand, extending teaching learning to virtual forum alone does not always bring about the high students

participation. It is crucial to manage and structure AOD so as to produce effective experiences where students become the focus and hence engage actively in the teaching learning process. Given that, this article offers a popular, effective and simple strategy to apply the called Starter Wrapper technique.

Along with the strategy, Pawan, et al. (2003) indicates the importance of providing students clear and specific guidelines in participating to the discussion wherefore to help students to shape their contribution and avoid potential confusion. The participation guidelines could describe the deadlines for initial contributions, required responses to others by particular dates, number of postings they should allocate, and the length of the posts. By the same token, presenting an evaluation rubric assists students to gauge the quality of their discussion. Students need to know the criteria of assessment and how their contribution will be evaluated. According to Gilbert and Dabbagh (as cited in Scott, 2010) an increase in the cognitive quality in the written response is as a result of providing clear guidelines and an assessment rubric. Additionally, Shana (2009) proposes the teacher to establish a stronger connection between materials covered in the class and online discussions to avoid biased student interaction in using both modes. It is assumed to help reinforce the use of asynchronous online discussion as a tool to support face to face teaching learning.

Initiated by the issues found in pilot study (Veranika, 2013), there is a call for future research to investigate how Starter Wrapper technique affects students' online discussion in university EFL context especially in the scope of Tanjungpura University. The data focuses on revealing the quantity and quality of student participation in online forum as well as their perceptions toward the implementation of the strategy.

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