

**LANGUAGE ENHANCEMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN
ONLINE FORUMS: UTILIZATION, ISSUES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS
AMONG UNDERGRADUATES AT UKM**

Pramela Krish

Supyan Hussin

Nackeeran Sivapuniam

**Pusat Pengajian Bahasa & Linguistik,
Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan**

ABSTRACT

Generally students at public Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) are weak in oral and written communication in English. They need to develop their communication skills as well as their confidence continuously. This can only be done through consistent practice in a non intimidating environment. One of the avenues for students to practise their communication is through online forums. Lecturers at UKM are using the online forum provided by the *SPIN* which has a custom made Learner Management System (LMS) for enhancing language learning and language acquisition. However, the usage of the forum and its contribution towards improving the students' communicative ability has not been investigated and documented widely in Malaysia. This study attempts to carry out an in-depth study among the B.A ELS (English Language Studies) students as to how they perceive the online forum and how they use it in the language learning and language acquisition. This study involves lecturers who conduct online forums in their courses and students who participate in these online forums. A set of questionnaires will be distributed to selected lecturers, and semi-structured interviews will also be carried out to gather in-depth understanding of the current practice. A total of 100 students at School of Language Studies and Linguistics will also be asked to respond to the questionnaires. Apart from that, focus group interviews with 30 students will be carried out and students' postings in online forums will be analyzed. From the data collected, the researchers will study the emerging issues, constraints and problems related to online forums. This will

finally aid the researchers to formulate instructional guidelines to conduct effective online forums for English language courses at tertiary level.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The English language proficiency among students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) is average. Most of these students find it difficult to write and speak in English competently as the opportunities to use the target language either orally or written, is limited by time and space in their courses. It is a known fact that students need sufficient practice to develop these skills. This can only be done through continuous practice in a non intimidating environment. However, at tertiary level it is extremely difficult to provide adequate practice opportunities during the tutorials due to time constraint.

With the advancement of technology, such opportunities to use the target language especially in discussions can be conducted in a virtual environment, i.e. through online forums. 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, 2006, 2007, 2008; Supyan Hussin & Azhar Jaludin. 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 a continuous learning process. Online forums promote peer to peer networking and buddy learning, where students can help each other outside the formal learning environment.

There is no doubt that online forum has made it possible for language learners to integrate independent learning experiences with opportunities for interaction and collaboration. It 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 too has a crucial role to play. The instructor has to stimulate and sustain discussion and help the learners build a sense of community

learning online. He or she is required to be an effective facilitator, placing the learner at the centre of the learning process Jones (2003) says that “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”.

At the moment Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) and especially at UKM due to time and space constraint the language programmes do not cater for maximum language utilization in the tutorials. Therefore the online forums provide the much needed platform for authentic use of English. On the other hand although these platforms like web forums webinars and bulletin boards are freely available in most Learner Management System (LMS) and web portals like *SPIN (Sistem Pengurusan Pengajaran & Pembelajaran Interaktif)*, they are seldom utilized to promote student interaction in English. This study will look into some important aspects of how to enhance language learning via such interactive means.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

At the moment many lecturers are encouraged to use the online forum provided by the *SPIN* which is custom made LMS. However, the usage of the forum and its contribution towards improving the students’ language ability has not been investigated and documented widely. Hence this research attempts to carry out an in-depth study among students pursuing a bachelor degree majoring in English Language Studies (B.A.ELS) as to how they perceive the online forum and how they would like it to be used. The study will also investigate some pertinent information from the lecturers as to the use of online forums and language enhancement.

The main purpose of this research is to investigate to what extend this new platform of communication is utilized by our students in extending academic discussions in English beyond the conventional classroom. The research will also focus on current issues in the exploitation of these forums and identify future directions in the implementation of virtual forums to enhance English language usage among students in UKM and the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia.

This study embarks on the following objectives:

1. To investigate the current practice of online forums for English courses at UKM.
2. To identify interactions, language use and related issues in conducting the online forums for English language courses.
3. To formulate guidelines for effective management of online forums to enhance English language usage.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

A set of questionnaires will be distributed to all lecturers at *Pusat Pengajian Bahasa & Linguistik* (PPBL-FSSK), UKM. A total of 100 students at PPBL will also be asked to respond to the questionnaires. Apart from that, focus group interviews with 30 students will be carried out and students' postings in online forums will be analyzed. From the data collected, the researchers will study the emerging issues, constraints and problems related to online forums. This will finally aid the researchers to formulate instructional guidelines to conduct effective online forums for English language courses.

The following procedures have been met:

Preparing the Research Instruments

Draft copies of student and lecturer questionnaires were prepared and after some amendments these instruments are ready to be administered. Both this survey documents contain questions using likert-scale and some open-ended questions.

Administering the survey

The questionnaire for the lecturers at PPBL has been successfully distributed via lecturers' mail boxes. Once the completed questionnaires are collected, they will be analysed.

Due to time constraint, the student questionnaire will be administered during at the beginning of the new semester. Focus group interviews will also be carried out at the beginning of the new semester. The questions for the focus group interview are open-ended in nature. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

CONCLUSION

Our preliminary inquiry indicates that very few academic staff uses the online forums in their language courses. The few who use it also do not have clear objectives for using the forums. The findings of this research will be used as a guide to structure the forums in a manner that would enable our students to develop their language skills without apprehension and fear of intimidation. This study will attempt to provide guidelines on initial postings, community building, and forum management. New forums would be developed according to this structure and its effectiveness will be evaluated through student and teacher feedbacks.

REFERENCES

Jones, R.G. 2003. EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES Blogs and Wikis: Environments for On-line Collaboration Language. *Learning & Technology* 7(2) pp. 12-16.

<http://ilt.msu.edu/vol7num2/emerging/>

Masputeriah Hamzah. 2006. Use of computer –mediated communication to facilitate second language acquisition. In Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Abullah, Norizan Abdul Razak & Mohd Amin Embi (Eds). *Online Teaching and Learning in ELT*. Penang:Universiti Sains Malaysia, 159-176.

Pramela, K. 2006. Factors affecting the online delivery of English Language courses in a virtual learning environment. Universiti Putra Malaysia. Serdang, Malaysia. Unpublished PhD. Thesis.

Pramela K. And Wong, B.E. 2009. Malaysian Learners and their Perceptions towards Online English Language Courses. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*. 10(2)

Supyan Hussin. (Nov 2008). Creating a bigger Z.P.D. for ESL Learners via Online Forum. *The College Teaching Methods and Styles Journal*. 4(11): 1-9. ISSN 1548-9566

Supyan Hussin. 2007. Online Forum in ELT Training Programme: Constraints or Problems? <http://tc.oum.edu.my/2007/issue16/index.php?op=view&page=5>

Supyan Hussin & Azhar Jaludin. 2008. The prospects of online forum at tertiary level. Dlm Norizan Razak & Abd Ghafur Ahmad, *E-Learning at Institutions of Higher Learning* (108-122). ISBN 978-963-2975-2. Bangi: Center for Academic Development UKM.

Supyan Hussin. 2006. Online forum in ELT Training Program: Constraints or Problems? Proceedings for 6th Annual SoutEast Asian Association for Institutional Research SEEAIR 2006 Conference: Transforming Higher Education for the Knowledge Society. Langkawi 5-7 September 2006. Malaysia. ISBN 983-3588-54-9.

Supyan Hussin. Plenary speaker. Revisiting online forum in language teaching. *Paper presented at 5th AsiaCALL 2006 International Conference: Learning Environments: Congruence of Skills, Information and Technologies*. 26 – 28 Nov 2006. Universiti Putra Malaysia.