

» Choices in Asynchronous Communication for Postgraduate Teaching Students

Patricia Henry, Deakin University, Australia
Xiaoyan Li, Yangzhou University, China

Most research concludes that asynchronous activities increase the amount of student participation and improve the student-centred learning atmosphere. This raised concerns when students didn't access discussion sites as part of their postgraduate teaching of English language studies. This study focused on the perception of a group of on-campus and off-campus postgraduate TESOL students (both native and non-native speakers of English) towards two different kinds of asynchronous activities: email and online discussion. The result showed that students preferred the email to the discussion though a large majority of both NS and NNS supported the use of online discussion as a learning tool. The reasons given included time as well as privacy, which, unexpectedly, was an issue raised mostly by native speakers of English.

The rapid development of computer technology makes on-line and distance learning a new way of education for people returning to study. Many universities offer on-line courses to meet the needs of the increasing number of learners, particularly those studying in off-campus mode. In this context, we have investigated student response to one major role of online delivery, computer mediated communication (CMC) between student and student and between student and lecturer.

Teachers of English to speakers of other languages form a group for whom CMC is particularly relevant. With the increasingly important role of English in economic and political development internationally, the English as a foreign language teaching profession today faces a global shortage of qualified teachers (Liaw, 2003). Therefore, there is an increasing demand for professional development for English language teachers, a high priority for China. Attempting to fill this need, universities and private and government providers of English language teaching are looking to distance education, particularly online distance education.

Moreover, it is particularly relevant that TESOL training involves CMC as increasingly teaching practices in English language teaching are in electronic mode. Some education

students have been teaching or will teach online, while some others will use CMC to enhance face-to-face contact. Their perspectives towards on-line learning become critical in their future teaching practice. As a consequence of the increasing use of online technologies in teaching their subject, and because the teachers themselves often live remotely from universities, using online technologies in their own studies is important.

Computer Mediated Communication

There has been an increasing use of CMC by universities since 1994 (Morse, 2003). There are perceived advantages in flexibility in time and geography, and both quality and quantity of student participation. CMC can provide better communication access than face-to-face contexts if learners do not have the sociopragmatic communication skills or confidence entailed in face-to-face conversation. Access is also increased if the CMC is realized through a discussion site where communication flows not from one person to many, but across more participants. CMC provides the learner with access for review, a benefit particularly for someone who is not confident of his/her second language competence. Although some research findings show some problematic aspects of CMC, such as the lack of the social cues, more studies have found that CMC produced immediate benefits for distance learning and that students and instructors were in favour of the use of CMC in their instruction (for a summary, see Leh, 2001). Wu & Hiltz (2004) concluded that the benefits of CMC included convenience, place-independence, time-independence, and the potential for users to become part of a virtual community.

CMC and NNS

English language teaching involves learners in crossing cultural boundaries. Some education students are moving from a Western Anglophone culture into another, non-English speaking society, while some are **teachers** from non-English speaking cultures. Teaching students using CMC in their studies are influenced by the cultural differences.

There is a strong belief that many non-Western learners have a different experience of formal learning situations and have developed different ideas of what learning and knowledge are (for a summary, see Morse, 2003). **Much study has been concerned with the differences** between Western educational practices and the practices of Confucian Heritage societies (Scollon, 1999). **A central difference between the two learning groups is the preference of the West for Socratic approaches to teaching and learning, approaches that encourage the construction of knowledge by learners in interaction with each other.** In second language classroom, this has supported the development of communicative language teaching strategies whose cultural relevance has been challenged.

Teachers from Western and non-Western countries come together in online distance education courses for English language teaching. Given the culturally different background understandings about knowledge and education, CMC in their studies may be perceived differently. Morse (2003) in a study of students from diverse cultures using an online asynchronous discussion site found that students from high context cultures, typical in Asian countries, identified e-discussion as supportive because it provided time to prepare one's own contribution. Students from low context, Western cultures, appreciated more the

flexibility of time and place as an advantage of e-discussion. In summarizing, Morse reported that his low context students focused on the participation environment provided by the discussion, and high context students on work/effort and/or personal skills in the e-discussion. As well, high context students reported missing the opportunity to get to know their classmates as they would in face-to-face meetings.

Morse was not the only one to find that NNS of English have responded well to asynchronous CMC because of the opportunity it provided for revision of their language. Cho and Shin (2003) found in their study that the difference of participation between NS and NNS, while statistically significant in in-class discussion, disappeared in on-line discussion. On-line discussion boards helped NNS reduce their anxieties about voicing their opinions and enhance their academic confidence (p10). Language issues were more important generally to NNS in the online discussions studied by Biesenbach-Lucas (2003). In Biesenbach-Lucas' study, and the studies of Kahmi-Staein (2000), Lamy (1999), and Weasenforth et al (2002), asynchronous discussions were evaluated positively by NNS as it was seen as an opportunity to learn English from their peers. **They also felt that their understanding of course content was enhanced by online discussion more than their NS peers did.** Both Biesenbach-Lucas and Cho and Shin found that NNS participation increased in online discussion when compared to participation in face-to-face contact.

Options of Asynchronous Communication in Online Learning

Email and online discussion are regarded as two of the most important tools in CMC and both have been the focus of research. Surveys conducted revealed that email could be used for the exchange of information between instructor-students and students-students. According to Wang (1998), email was used for exchanging information, discussing opinions and socializing with people, increasing students' confidence especially in their writing ability in the process. Liaw (2003) sought to obtain information about whether cross-culture email correspondence could accomplish its intended goal of fostering reflectivity. The result showed that not only were the old notions of culture and language learning and teaching challenged through email dialogues, new knowledge was also constructed. When referring to the email exchange between the instructor and students, Downing et al (1988) found that students asked more challenging and more thoughtful questions in the exchange of email with the instructor, and the instructor's response to these questions were often of higher quality than those they provided in face-to-face interaction (Wang, 1998).

Asynchronous discussions have also been evaluated positively in many studies, most finding that online discussion forums promote cognitive engagement and critical thinking. Wu and Hiltz (2004) studied 116 students in two undergraduate courses and one graduate course which were all mixed mode courses, i.e., asynchronous online discussions were added to face-to-face class meetings. Students reported that online discussions benefited their learning skills and improved their learning quality. Students enjoyed the flexibility of online discussions. (p.147). Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) indicated that "asynchronous discussions allow students, in groups, to collaborate with each other in an exchange of opinions, experiences and interpretations of course content. This enables them to become problem-solvers rather than just memorisers of facts ... Through exposure to group members' perspectives and through joint evaluation of topics, students can arrive at a more

complete understanding of course content than they might through teacher presentations and delivery only (p.26)."

However, not all concluded that asynchronous discussions enhanced learning. As Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) states, "some studies have also concluded that having students discuss course issues after class through an asynchronous medium is not sufficient for increasing their critical thinking skills and for influencing classroom group dynamics" (p. 26). And some students have reported that the electronic discussions are an added burden to their study. Therefore, many researchers relate the success of asynchronous discussion to how the technology is integrated into the curriculum, the course work, and the instructors guiding of the discussion (Aviv, 2000, cited in Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003). Stephens and Hartmann (2004) made some structural adjustments in a two-year online teaching program in an attempt to increase online participation from one year to the next using a model from Riel and Levis's (1990) framework for evaluating the network community in the second part of the experiment. Unfortunately, the discussion forum still received little significant use by the participants.

In summary, previous studies suggest that most CMC activities increase the amount of student participation, improve the student-centred learning atmosphere, and are received positively by students. CMC reduces the pressure on language competence for NNS. It is an important medium for extending professional development for teachers of English. In our experience, the education students with whom we worked were, however, did not use CMC as we had hoped. They were using email contact, but avoiding discussion groups established for units in the postgraduate courses. This study focuses on the perception of a group of postgraduate ESOL students towards two different kinds of asynchronous activities, and the difference between native speaker students and their non-native counterparts. It seeks to determine if there was a preference for one kind over another and reasons for the preference. Ease of access and experience with CMC were considered as underlying conditions, and responses from native and non-native English speaking students were compared. It was also hypothesised that NNS would prefer email communication because of the privacy it offered.

Methodology

Students enrolled in a postgraduate course in the Master of Education TESOL in Deakin University could choose to do the course as either off campus or on-campus. The majority of off campus students were native speakers of English; the majority of on campus students were non-native speakers of English. All enrolled students were provided with a CD-ROM with software needed to participate in the course. They also received an introduction to Deakin Studies Online (DSO) and WebCT. The DSO site delivers off campus university courses electronically. Using WebCT, it provides both input material, continually updated, discussion sites for every university unit, and links to sites relevant to the unit content. The CD-ROM included appropriate software for the units being studied, and with the software needed to use WebCT. As well, many units included a CD-ROM with material to supplement the paper materials sent to students in the unit package. The paper materials for on campus students were either duplicated or replaced by the material that was available on the unit website through DSO. The Unit Guide for the course which they received

requested them to make email contact with the lecturer teaching the course. Forty-nine of 50 students enrolled made contact and became part of a class email list.

During the semester, enrolled students had access to the DSO site for the course. As well, when students wrote emails to the lecturer asking any questions about learning issues, the answers were copied anonymously to those on the class email list. Students were asked to indicate when they did not want the response copied. At the end of the semester, an email telling students of the survey and the reasons for it was sent prior to the questionnaire being sent out.

Participants

The participants in this study were 36 graduate students who enrolled in a core course of the program of Master of Education (TESOL/LOTE) in Deakin University in Australia; these represented 72% of the course enrolments. Seven were on-campus students while 30 were off-campus ones. Among them 24 were native speakers of English, and 12 were non-native speakers from a variety of language backgrounds which included Greek, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Persian (see Table 1). The gender of students was not considered in this study.

Table 1: Participants in the study

On-Campus Students		Off-Campus Students	
Native Speakers	Non-Native Speakers	Native Speakers	Non-Native Speakers
0	7	24	5

Procedure

At the beginning of the academic term, on and off-campus students received course materials. The unit guide provided contact information for the lecturer and the learning and communication tools students could use including information for using Deakin Study Online (DSO). All the students were informed that they could use either DSO or email to contact their lecturer and other students. In order to contact them in an easier way, the lecturer set up a group email list. Synchronous activities were not required for the reason that off-campus students were living in different continents, and hence many different time zones.

At the end of the term, a questionnaire was sent to all the enrolled students by email. Thirty-six students replied out of 50, 24 respondents NS and 12 NNS, and 7 on-campus and 29 off-campus. The anonymous questionnaire included yes/no, polar and open-ended questions. The replies of the questionnaire were collected by the lecturer (one of the researchers in this study) and then forwarded to another researcher. Any information which would identify a particular student was erased from the forwarded replies and the data analysis was carried out on the basis of these replies.

Analysis & Discussion

Access to E-Communication to Study

More than 90% of subjects reported that it was easy for them to get access to the Internet either in their work place or at home for their study. On-campus and off-campus students reported similar access, though two off-campus students mentioned difficulty due to being dependent on dial-up remote access and consequent slowness and/or expense. The result shows that access to technology did not inhibit on-line and distance learning.

Experience with CMC

All the students in this study had experience with asynchronous communication. Both on-campus students and off-campus students used email to contact the lecturer. One student was dependent upon a spouse for technical help. Students used email either to clarify the requirements, or to ask for help to their studies, or just keep in touch with the lecturer. Eighty-nine percent of the students (N=32) reported that they had read all the class emails. Two NS admitted that they just scanned these emails and two other students (one NS and one NNS) read them sometimes.

The majority of students (75%, N=27) knew of DSO. However, 8 off-campus students and 1 on-campus student did not know how to use DSO. Sixty-seven percent (N=24) of students had used DSO in other courses they had done, while 33% (N=12) had no experience of using this online tool in previous learning. Among those who knew the function of DSO, only 10 out of 27 used it in their studies. This shows that students seemed reluctant to use this option of CMC even though they had knowledge of it.

When it came to the discussion site on DSO for this particular course, the portion of students who knew the site dropped to 69% (N=25) while that of students unaware of DSO rose to 31% (N=11) (9 off-campus students and 2 on-campus students). Six of 25 went on the discussion site during the whole semester, while the majority of students (19 out of 25) never accessed the site during the course.

Preference of Options of Asynchronous Activities

Students preferred email to online discussion. All students had contacted the lecturer by email and read the emails sent by the lecturer. Ninety-two percent (N=33) of students admitted that email was easier to get access to than the online discussion site. Only one student complained that both were difficult to him and another student reported no difference.

In contrast, DSO was less attractive to them. Only 27% (N=10) of students had the experience of using it even though most of them knew it. When asked if there was anything they would like to have been made available on DSO, only 25% (N=9) of them gave an affirmative answer. A similar tendency was seen in the students' response to the usage of online discussion: 17% (N=6) of the students joined the online discussions, mostly to read rather than contribute to the discussion. The 19 students who did know of the discussion site still chose email as their preferred kind of CMC.

Reasons for Preference

The most frequently given reason for preferring email to online discussion was time. Several off campus students reported that time pressure generally was an important factor in their study. Email was much faster than DSO to access. A commonly expressed view was that email would be checked daily in any event, and it was easier to get course news or ideas in the normal course of activity rather than trying to make time to access especially. One student reported connections too poor to allow the additional time and that email was a quicker and more satisfactory given connection difficulties.

The majority knew of and some had used DSO, and most of these postgraduate education students agreed that discussion would be a good thing; the off-campus students saw it as replacing a face-to-face tutorial. Two, though, indicated that they did not value peer input provided online as it was not teacher-monitored and discussions were not clearly enough focused. Two said that online discussion was appropriate for undergraduates, but not of enough value for busy, working postgraduate students. Even those who believed that the online discussion was a good teaching tool admitted that they probably wouldn't participate because of **lack of time and being too busy**. **Several clearly indicated that they would not use a discussion site, but appreciated the contact provided by group email responses.**

We had hypothesised that NNS would prefer email to online discussion as their English language difficulties would be recognized in messages posted to the online discussion platform. Therefore, when one third of this group indicated that privacy was a consideration for them, we were not surprised. Unexpectedly, more than half of the off-campus NS group wrote that privacy concerned them. They were reluctant to attempt an explanation when they weren't certain that they had grasped a concept, or to show that they weren't up to date in the course reading. One student felt the public forum was not appropriate for mature age students. Another complained that the emailed question was copied in the anonymous group response.

The force of some of the comments was surprising. The issue that attracted the strongest comment was the use of online discussion in assessment. Students felt that it was a manipulative device that didn't support their learning and would force them to learn in a way that they would not choose to from inexperienced peers.

Conclusions

Participants in this study overwhelmingly chose email contact with the lecturer rather than online discussion as their preferred form of CMC. However, a large majority of both NS and NNS supported the use of online discussion as a learning tool, recognising that it would provide the exchange of ideas that normally occurs in group face-to-face learning. Participants saw online discussion as advantageous to their learning, but chose to not use it. Most cited time as the reason. The value of discussion in learning was not questioned by any NNS. As teachers, participants saw the benefits; as postgraduate, working adults, they admitted that they wouldn't access online discussion. All participants except for one did want the group emails to continue. Email required less time and accessing it was something that they did frequently in any event.

Non-native speakers of English were not concerned about privacy; their language competence would not deter them from using CMC. One participant saw CMC as a way to practice English language skills. Native speakers, though, were concerned about privacy, not wanting to reveal their understanding of course content publicly. These students are typically in a teaching role in a language classroom where the competence of teacher and student can be seen as quite different. At the same time, they are students; perhaps the change of role presents difficulties.

Clearly, CMC is valued and the preferred form is email. Since time is the major concern for busy postgraduate students, this needs to be addressed if online discussion is to be useful. There have been many anecdotal reports of difficulty with the slowness of WebCT, even the updated WebCT Vista program that Deakin University uses. The students from most developed area where broadband is readily available did not complain about speed of access, but were still concerned about having the time to take part in discussions.

Several students asked that participation in online discussion not be made compulsory. It needs, then, to be made more attractive for those many who felt that it would be useful but too time-consuming. The opportunity exists in TESOL courses to include online micro teaching which would introduce students to the possible later use of online learning in their teaching. As well, email contact as well as web announcements could be used to refer students to new additions to a course website. If online discussion as a learning support is to be useful to these teachers professionally, it needs to become useful in their own learning. Further studies into the reasons for the preference and strategies to encourage students to the online discussion would be valuable, since online discussion has been proved helpful for students learning process in most studies.

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