

Learners' Perceptions Toward Group Discussion via Face-to-Face and Online Forum in Reading Comprehension and Learning Ethic

¹Maimun Aqsha Lubis, ²Maslawati Mohamad,
³Supyan Hussin, ²Zaini Amir and ¹Rossen Din and Hamdan

¹Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

²Centre of General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

³Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: Online forum is a teaching method that capitalizes the rapid advancement of information technology to aid the learning process. This study aimed to compare group discussions conducted via face to face with the online forum. Specifically, this study was done to identify whether the group discussion activity will facilitate the students' reading comprehension and ethic learning. In order to carry out this study, the students were asked to read some reading materials relevant to the topic discussed in the group discussion. Since these students are adult learners who have obtained a Diploma in their respective discipline and are also practitioners, they demonstrated the ability to relate their discussion and reading with their experience. These adult learners are distance learners who enrolled in a reading course which adopted the blended approach. They only attended twelve hours of face-to-face lessons. Data were collected through interviews to elicit the learners' views on both channels of group discussions. They were also given a questionnaire to corroborate the data from the interviews. Their threaded discussion via asynchronous forum was also analyzed. The paper discusses the difficulties faced by students when they participated in the group discussion activities.

Key words: Adult learner • Group discussion • Asynchronous forum • Reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, education is relative and it responds to demands and needs constantly. Therefore, adult learners do not have any options but to try to adapt themselves with the new course requirements [1]. That is, when they learn new knowledge, they have to go through an adaptation process which they accommodate the new acquired knowledge and their existing knowledge. As a result, more in depth knowledge can be developed and enriched; consequently, it leads to better reading comprehension whether the learners are involved directly and interactively in the learning process. Adult learners especially distance learners should try to solve the difficulties faced during reading on their own. Therefore, the online lessons should engage the learner-centred approach whereby learners should not be passive readers. In addition, the learners should be given the opportunity to determine what they want to read as it is integral to the understanding they develop [1] [2].

For that reason, reading courses with blended approach should be based on constructivist theory. What is constructivist theory? Many cognitive constructivists believe that there are a few stages of psychological development in a learning process [1]. Bruner [3] in [4] who adopted Piaget's idea explained that learning involves three processes:

- Knowledge acquisition, in which the learner asks, "Does this challenge my previous knowledge?"
- Knowledge transformation, in which the learner asks, "What other things can this knowledge do now?"
- Knowledge review, in which the learner asks, "Is the knowledge relevant?"

In terms of reading, learners are the ones who initiate and become mentally active in their own reading [5]. The knowledge in the text is not absorbed passively but developed actively by the learners. Initially, the learners need to understand the basic phenomenon.

Through active and discovery activities using the three processes (explore, derive meaning and extend their own understanding), they are able to relate their existing knowledge with the knowledge conveyed in the text and later develop in depth knowledge of the learned area [6].

As the learners go through the three processes which are mentioned above, they use three sources of knowledge during their reading [6]. Anderson and Lynch [6] state that reading comprehension depends on three main sources of knowledge which are schematic knowledge, contextual knowledge and systemic knowledge. These three sources of knowledge interact with each other to arrive at reading comprehension. A reader could make better inferences if he is able to relate the content with his previous knowledge. The reader is capable of cutting down possible meanings thus making his guesses more accurate. A second language learner especially an adult learner has extensive schematic and contextual knowledge. In order for him to make effective inferences, he is more likely to exploit relevant schematic and contextual knowledge to overcome his systemic weakness.

Jonita [7] also asserts that learning must be an active process. The ability to relate the existing knowledge to the current ones can also be reinforced when the learners are actively doing and completing meaningful tasks. While learners are completing a task, they develop their comprehension by relating it to their existing knowledge new knowledge in order to incorporate the new ideas. Additionally, the tasks should be designed as realistic as possible to the learners' experience. The tasks should also allow the learners to apply the new knowledge them to their real life situations. Therefore, parts of the lesson should involve simulation of the real situation, using real life cases.

Rogers [8] adds that learning is not influenced by external stimuli but learners create their own learning through their interaction with the physical and social environment. They could expand their knowledge through experience or exposure which would normally be conducted during the pre-reading and post-reading activities.

A few scholars claim that constructivists believe that knowledge is constructed, not transmitted [8] [9]. That is, knowledge is not an object that can be inherited or passed down from one individual to another. Learners, however, can be assisted and stimulated to gain knowledge. Learners do not depend solely on teachers to impart knowledge but are actively involved in obtaining

the knowledge on their own or with little assistance from their respective teachers. With regard to hypertext reading, David *et al.* [9] mentioned that after this stage, learners learn to merge, adapt and synthesize new knowledge which is displayed in the forms of objects and ideas in the hypertexts with their existing knowledge.

According to constructivists, meaning making often begins with a problem, a question, a discrepancy, a curiosity, wonderment and puzzlement. Authentic problem solving activities can result in authentic and collaborative learning [10]. If they solve the problem or task individually, they utilize the cognitive constructivist theory. However, if they work collaboratively in a small group, they are engaging the socio-constructivist learning principles.

Teaching and learning process can be done by direct or indirect method and this process become easier with the implementation of ICT. According to Ivana study, the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM), The University of Hradec Kralove (UHK) is the leader in the ICT implementation process. The most activities in FIM either in educational or administration process have been related to the implementation of ICT since 1993 [12]. Online discussion forum is one of the learning processes through ICT implementation which give students opportunities to share opinion and experience. In other study, it is reported that an online discussion forum make students sharing opinion when they are actively reviewed the posting about what they learned during the lectures. However, she also said that the success or failure of online forum is influence by the composition of the students [13].

One of the many issues to consider when doing online group work is the aspect of learning ethics. In this study although no specific guidelines were assigned, some learning ethics should be exercise such as (i) giving credits to the resources one quote in their discussion, (ii) online presence if one is not actively contributing to the discussion and of course (ii) online etiquette as one would practice in a regular face-to-face discussion [14]

In this study, the course required the students to solve the assigned problems through group discussion activities via asynchronous forum and face-to-face discussion. The group discussion questions require them to understand the content of the hypermedia that they have read. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the adult learners' perception toward group discussion activity via online and face-to-face and to find out the conduct of ethics by the participants.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The adult learners which are the respondents in this study have been registered as distance learners in English for Life Sciences (ELS) course at one public university in Malaysia. This course is intended for first year students. The discussions are based on their reading of life sciences hypermedia from diverse sources namely books, journals, newspapers, websites and magazines. Besides group discussions via face-to-face and asynchronous forum, there are other assessment that is oral presentations, online quiz and final examination. Majority of the respondents are adult learners who have at least a few years of working experience in health related organizations.

The students had limited face-to-face classes with their facilitators and fellow classmates. They only attended face-to-face meetings during the initial two weeks. They underwent self-directed learning activities until Week 15 after which they gathered at the campus to sit for the final exams. The face-to-face group discussion evaluation was carried out during the first two weeks while the discussion via asynchronous forum was conducted when they were at home during the following twelve weeks of the semester when they studied at home. It is hoped that the findings in the study could guide and facilitate the teachers or the course designers in carrying out group discussion activity via online or face-to-face.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, document analysis (online threaded discussion) and questionnaire as the research instruments. Five respondents namely INTRA, INTLI, INTAM, INTFARH and INTFA volunteered to be interviewed. They were interviewed individually and each was interviewed twice. The data from the survey questionnaire is used to corroborate the data derived in the interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and content-analyzed using NVivo software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Face-to-Face Group Discussion: It is interesting to note that all the respondents rated the face-to-face group discussions as one of the most helpful elements to accomplish reading comprehension and learning ethic. in comparison to other course activities, evaluations and reading materials (reading comprehension questions, individual presentations, online quiz, final exam, the designed website, prescribed websites, language notes and film) in their blended learning.

They felt that they were able to gain a lot of benefits from the group discussions. One of the major benefits is they were able to further understand the teacher's instructions through the group discussions. By having better understanding, they could complete the assignments given to them more effectively. The group discussions also served as a platform to improve their speaking ability in the English language and dressing ethic. During the discussion, the students felt motivated when the classmates discussing in English. Hence, gradually, they developed the courage to speak in English although initially they felt embarrassed and afraid to speak. However after they looked at their classmates' attempts, they felt the urge to learn.

Another contribution of the group discussions is in terms of ideas whereby the respondents' ideas were stimulated through listening to their classmates' ideas and responses. Furthermore, they felt more comfortable when they worked in small groups. The episodes below which have been quoted verbatim capture the respondents' views on this point.

Interview Excerpts

INTAM: I rated group discussion as number one because this activity helps even the weak ones. The weak ones, they will also learn to speak.

INTLI: I rated group discussion as the highest, since I am able to gain a lot of ideas from my friends. They also have almost the same proficiency level as me. Therefore, I feel less embarrassed to speak, for example to start a discussion. By listening to them, we could learn a lot from them.

My class is divided into smaller groups. We are able to gather the strengths of each group member and develop social interactions and ethic. Some of them are also my colleagues and this makes me feel comfortable.

INTFARH: We meet each other to get feedback on the contents of the articles. We also learn the strategies to answer the questions.

INTFA: In my opinion, it helps me a lot; hence, I rated it as number one. It helps everybody, not only the weak ones. Those who could not speak will try to speak when they saw other people try to speak.

We need to add more time. Previously, I was not interested in learning English, but this attitude changes when I work. There should be extra classes on discussions and presentations that focus more on speaking skills.

From the discussions, I learn to speak. I'm able to develop my self-confidence.

INTRA: The face-to-face group discussion helps me to further understand what the teacher wants us to do. It also helps me to complete the assignments given to us.

Online Forum Group Discussion: The face-to-face discussion gave more benefit in improving speaking skills and developing idea. The findings of the study show that the respondents preferred face-to-face discussion comparing to the online forum discussion. However, the findings still indicate that both group discussion activities share similar benefits which are listed below:

- expand each other's ideas and confirm each other's understanding
- able to develop social interactions, learning ethics and bonding. With regards to the application of ethics it was found that the learning ethics was more visible in face-to-face discussion as compared to the online forum discussion.
- work collaboratively to solve each other's problems and difficulties
- gain a lot of information from a myriad of sources

However, the group discussions via the asynchronous forum are able to provide benefits which are not present in the face-to-face channel. The two benefits are:

- provide ample time to read extensively
- provide adequate time to compose

Provide Ample Time to Read Extensively: The asynchronous forum enables the students to have more time to read extensively before they sent in their entries on the plenary. INTFARH and INTA's responses indicate that they could read the designed hypermedia, suggested websites and other relevant websites at their own pace and place. This statement is reflected by INTFARH and INTFA's statements during the interview sessions, "... because... mmm... we need to manage our time lah. Mmm... sometimes, it is not necessarily we're free every day. We need to adjust our own time. Generally, it allows time flexibility" and "one advantage is no time limit lah, very flexible". Being given ample time, the students could read extensively and reflect on their reading as well ("Actually, online forum requires us to read and search for

a lot of information, then only we could post our ideas. So, we need to access many websites to add lah our ideas").

Some students especially the weak ones normally spending more time to read and reply the posting because they need to find the way to solve their vocabulary problems before they could comprehend their reading. From the researcher's observation, the low proficiency students made more attempts searching for the words' meaning from the printed dictionaries, online dictionaries, with glossary hyperlinks or sought assistance from other people. It is because generally, they would have much unfamiliar words than the high proficiency students. The observation proved that given ample time, the respondents normally posted their entries when they believed they had reached certain level of comprehension and confidence. They had sufficient time to read other people's postings which were useful to confirm their own comprehension. This is especially important to the low proficiency students who definitely needed more time to comprehend the hypermedia in comparison to the high proficiency students.

Therefore, this finding confirms Simon's [11] opinion which is the main objective of asynchronous forum is to provide opportunity to maximize an individual's learning experience by selecting his own time. In short, asynchronous forum is suitable for adult learners who could not afford to become full time students due to their lack of time to attend traditional lessons and face-to-face classroom interactions. Generally, adult learners' constraints are (see episodes below) due to their multiple responsibilities, namely family, career and study. The data from the episodes below have proven that the adult learners are so pressed for time.

Online-Forum Excerpts: FROM: ros1801 (01/30/09 7:10 AM GMT-06:00]

SUBJECT: treatment of schizophrenia

Today I have a little time to join the forum.

INTAM: One of the reasons I could not concentrate reading because I've a meeting at three.

FROM: WZF (01/07/09 9:32 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: treatment of schizophrenia

Hi How are you all doing? I'm so busy here. I think my boss take revenge of me.

Provide Adequate Time to Compose: The finding demonstrated that the students only posted their entries when they perceived that their compositions have included solid arguments and materials which they accumulated through their reading. The ample time allocated to them allowed them to read and digest other people's postings. When they read other people's postings, not only did they gather the content but they also learned about their classmates' writing style. It gave them the motivation to write and learn as claimed by the respondents in Questionnaire 1. In essence, as suggested by [15], they benefitted much from other people's postings. The respondents also explicitly mentioned that they corrected their sentences numerous times before they posted their entries on the plenary. They also revised the language notes in the hypermedia to minimize their errors. They put a lot of effort in producing their entries in order to avoid themselves from being ridiculed or laughed at by their classmates. This can be evidenced when INTRA uttered "I only posted my entry after evaluating my writing; is it valuable or does it sound like a joke. If I perceive my writing as valuable then I would feel excited. If it looks like a joke, I don't feel excited and makes me feel not motivated to join the online forum". Hence, it is safe to conclude that the asynchronous forum enables the students to have adequate time to read extensively and prepare their postings as expressed by INTFARH "Before we put forward our ideas to our friends, we must standby with the ideas on what to say and before doing that we must study the thing first". This opportunity is pivotal for the students in developing their reading, writing and problem solving abilities.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study show that both channels have their own strengths and weaknesses. In essence, group discussions are able to facilitate the learners' reading comprehension. Group discussions are able to motivate the adult learners to do extensive reading and to share their knowledge. Since some of the students seldom use English language at their workplace, group discussion is a platform for them to practice their speaking skills. The fear of speak in English is reduced as they gather the strength from other group members. Besides, the online forum also gave benefit to them especially their writing ability. They could see the importance of the language notes and did self-corrections using those notes. On the

whole, most of the learning ethics were practice as what can be observed in the face-to-face sessions with the presence of instructors' and also still able be develop in Online forum group discussion.

Based on the challenges faced during the implementation of the group discussions, few suggestions are discussed on how to improve the group discussion activity. Firstly, the students should be provided with guidelines on their roles in online discussion. Additionally, the face-to-face meeting should be carried out at least once a month so that the distance learners could be given sufficient guidance. Secondly, some students complained about the delayed responses in the asynchronous forum. A step to overcome this setback is by introducing synchronous forum via chat room or videoconferencing. Next, the students should also be given the liberty to decide the topic discussed with their group members. Finally, further training on basic computer literacy and navigational strategies for those who really need it should be organized prior to enrolling in the course.

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