

Investigation of the use of a VLE group discussion facility by East Asian Postgraduate Students.

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Abstract

East-Asian post-graduate students at UK institutions of Higher Education often find difficulty taking part in academic discussions. We have attempted to help students with this by making use of the group discussion facility of our university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

However, use of the VLE needs to be self-directed and as it has often been pointed out that some students from East Asia may consider education to be essentially a passive process, something that happens to them, not something they have to do for themselves, we felt it was necessary to investigate how they made use of such an activity. Studies were carried out to determine the students' perceptions of the task as well as their actual success in taking part in the activity. In this paper, we report on some of our findings, concentrating on the students' attitudes to the task and the quality of the interactive language used. We discuss the relative success of the activity and how the activity is to be modified for the upcoming year.

Introduction

The University of Hertfordshire Internal Bridging Programme prepares international students with a first degree for post-graduate study in the UK. These students already possess the appropriate academic qualifications for post graduate work but their English competence is considered to be inadequate. It is a one-year programme and the students take several different modules, the largest of which is English for Academic Study (EAS). This consists of 16 hours per week of class contact in Semester A and 7 hours per week in Semester B.

The main aim of the Semester B course is to improve the students' command of academic English by consolidating their language skills, particularly their critical and independent learning skills. Two important outcomes are the ability to produce a substantial piece of critical researched writing and take part in discussions, seminars and tutorials.

The ability to engage in discussion, both orally and in writing, is an essential part of being a post-graduate student. One reason for this is that discussion, both formal and informal, is believed to be beneficial for the learner (Pica & Doughty, 1985; Topping, 1996; Tan, 2003). Many international students, though, especially those from East Asia, find this difficult and do not participate well in these interactions (Jones, 1999; Leki, 2001; Basturkmen, 2002). For this reason, participation in discussion is one of the objectives of our course. For several years, we have included a face-to-face discussion of an academic article, whereby one student introduces an academic article to the class and then leads a discussion on it. With the recent introduction, though, of StudyNet, our in-house VLE, and our strong belief that effective use of a VLE must begin with integration of the VLE into the programme of study, it was decided to extend this aspect of the course to include an on-line discussion using the StudyNet group discussion facility. We hoped this would be beneficial to the students as much research has shown that on-line discussions produce more student interaction (Dysthe, 2002). They also allow quieter students, including international students, to participate more as they have time to think about their contributions and plan in advance. It has also been reported that international students have increased motivation to use the target language and therefore produce more language (Bump, 1990; Beauvois, 1992; Kern, 1995; Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995). Students also use a wider variety of language (Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996), which is syntactically and lexically more complex (Warschauer,

1996) and this structured use of the VLE benefits students with different learning styles from a wider variety of backgrounds (Pennington, 1996).

Thus there is evidence that group discussion is beneficial in education and that on-line discussions can be particularly valuable, especially for international students. However, how our predominantly East Asian students would deal with such a discussion was an important question. It is often pointed out that their view of education is that it is essentially a passive process, something that happens to them, not something they have to do for themselves, something that is mainly the job of the teacher (Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Catterick, 2004). The purpose of this research, therefore, was to investigate whether such students would undertake the task in the manner set, whether they regarded the activity as being advantageous to them, whether they would see the underlying reasons for such a task, what they felt they were learning and how well they would do.

Part 1 (2003/2004)

The programme had about 120 students in 2003/2004, divided into 9 groups for teaching purposes. As part of their EAS module, they were given the task of discussing an academic article on-line. This took place in the first four weeks of the second semester (February). The students were given very clear instructions about what exactly we required them to do and their contribution was assessed, in order to encourage full participation. The on-line discussion element was worth 2.5% of the total marks for the module. The assessment consisted of a combination of the quantity of contributions to the discussion and the quality - ideas, interaction and language. After the students had completed the activity, they were then asked their opinions of the activity and what they had learned from it. This was done via a questionnaire, given to all the students in class. 112 completed questionnaires were received.

First is the question of how well the students undertook the task. This was measured by looking at the number, frequency, style and length of their contributions to the discussion. The assessment period being over 4 weeks, 35% of the students made one contribution a week, 23% twice a week, while 36% of students contributed three times a week or more (Figure 1). It was clear, therefore, that most students were contributing more than the minimum and therefore taking the activity seriously.

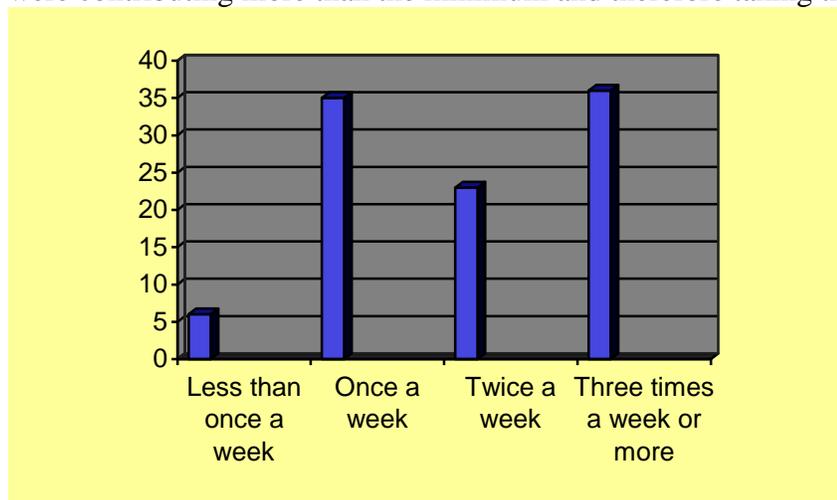


Figure 1: Frequency of contribution

We would have expected students who took the task seriously to have read all or most of the previous contributions prior to adding their own point of view. Figure 2 shows that 48% of students claimed to have read more than 5 previous contributions, while 22% of those students had read more than ten. Surprisingly, though, 10% of students claimed not to have read any contributions before adding their own views.

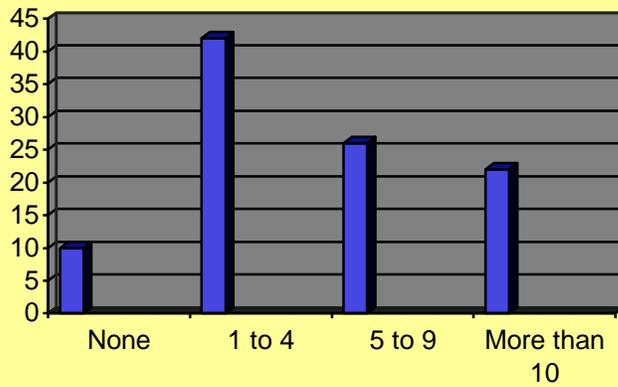


Figure 2: Contributions read prior to contributing

Regarding the length of their own contributions, 42% stated they had written a paragraph, while the rest either equally wrote a few sentences or more than a paragraph. The students were expected to write at least a few sentences so in this respect it can be seen to be successful.

It was felt that the level of participation would depend to some extent on whether they had enjoyed the exercise. As can be seen from Figure 3, less than 2% said they hated it. Almost 50% chose 'OK' and 29% said they had enjoyed it. It was pleasing to note that 12.5% stressed that they had enjoyed it very much.

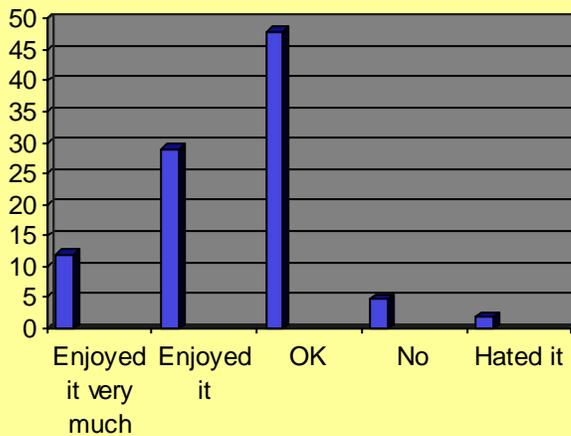


Figure 3: Degree of enjoyment

Secondly was whether or not the students found the exercise advantageous or useful. More than 50% of the students responded affirmatively (Figure 4), while only 6% of students did not find it useful. No one considered it to be a waste of time.

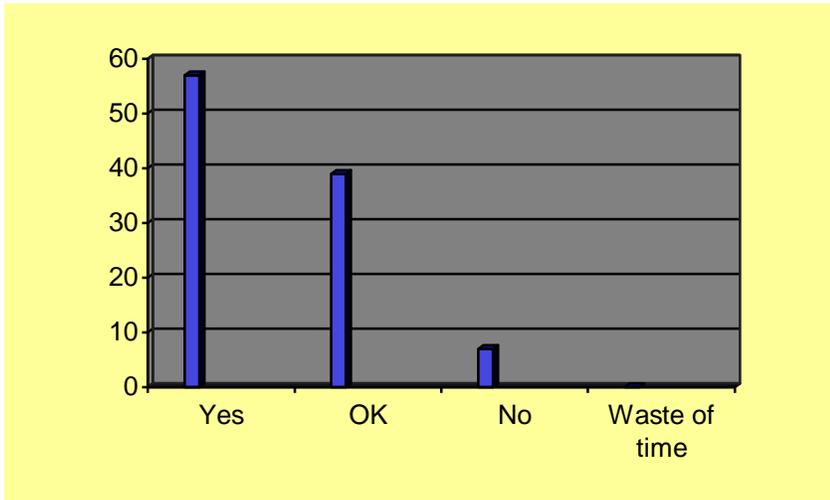


Figure 4: Relative usefulness

Thirdly, we asked the students why they thought we had used the on-line method for discussion. This elicited a large number of favourable responses. Chief among these, the students were of the opinion that it would improve their reading and writing skills. In addition they felt that it would allow them to analyse ideas more clearly and to think more independently. This may be linked to the time factor involved in being able to formulate ideas without pressure due to language ability and peer observation. This is particularly relevant to the quiet students who are often unwilling to be in focus in a class situation. They did consider that it would allow everyone more time and opportunities to discuss ideas and was particularly useful for the shy students. Often the amount of time for discussion in class is limited, so allowing students this extra time to debate is of great importance.

Lastly we wanted to see if the students thought they had learned something from the exercise. In this case, only 5 of 112 students said no, and 3 ‘not really, but it was good to practise.’ Thus the great majority were of the opinion that they had learned from the task. They decided that their knowledge, vocabulary and discussion skills had been developed by the task. Some also considered that the experience allowed them to share ideas better than in class, and allowed them to feel more confident to give their opinions.

Despite some criticisms, the students generally took part in the activity seriously and saw the usefulness of it. They were generally found to understand the purpose of the activity and felt they had learned from it. Thus, overall, when the activity was clearly seen to be related to the learning outcomes and integrated into the course, the verdict was overwhelmingly positive and the rationale understood.

Part 2 (2004/2005)

The students were told that a grade would be given for their contribution to this discussion, and that a good contribution consisted of demonstrating knowledge of the article and making a relevant contribution to the discussion in appropriate English. In early 2005 we decided to look at how successful they were. Students were told that:

a contribution could be:

- a question to a members of the group;
- their opinion about the articles;
- their agreement or disagreement with a member of their group;
- reasons for their opinions;
- invitations to other members of their group to contribute;

- asking other people about their opinions;
- supporting and encouraging other members of their group;
- writing about their experience of the topic.

when they replied to a contribution from a member of their group, they should:

- give the name of the person they were agreeing or disagreeing with;
- give a brief summary of what they said;
- and then their views.

they should make it easy for group members to know:

- who the student is/was talking to and;
- what they were talking about.

Students were told that their contribution should be in appropriate English. Perhaps, though, it is not clear exactly what is appropriate to this form of communication. Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore (1991) describe this on-line communication as “Interactive Written Discourse.” It is a newly emerging register, with many similarities with oral language. It lacks, however, a shared place and time, but it has more of a common place and time than print media. Writers know that their readers will be using computers and will have access to previous contributions to the discussion, which they may have read. The language used therefore has features of both speech and writing. It is more informal than written English and is focussed clearly on the message (Hammond, 1998). It also shows clearer discourse management functions than face-to-face communication (Condon & Cech, 1996).

This lack of a shared environment means, therefore, that the on-line language needs to be more explicit than spoken language. However, what needs to be spelled out explicitly in English can be implied in high context cultures such as China or Japan (Gallois & Callan, 1997, pp. 44-50). There are many reasons why people are not explicit. It is impossible (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. 17) and it is impolite. Lakoff (1973) notes that speakers often avoid saying exactly what they mean in the interest of social goals which they pursue by adhering to rules of politeness. In general it is polite to be indirect as directness imposes. Indirectness allows the possibility of more than one interpretation. Therefore it enables the speaker to avoid responsibility for having committed a particular act. And, more importantly, it allows the addressee more freedom to decide how to interpret the utterance. Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 71) point out that indirectness enables the speaker to avoid committing a face-threatening act and allows the addressee to appear cooperative if they decide to take up the implied meaning. “The preference for conventional indirectness appears to be motivated by the balance between clarity and consideration, and low processing costs to the hearer” (Kaspar, 2005, p. 56).

Students are told to make relevant contributions. Relevant means addressing the topic and taking part in the discussion. It therefore means, in our case, that they should have read the article and other students’ contributions. However, successful contribution means being aware of what is considered to be relevant in the particular culture in which the students are working (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003). As Hanna & de Nooy point out (2004), there are cultural differences in what constitutes a discussion and this is not necessarily the same on-line as in face-to-face. Students are told, in our case for example, to ask questions to members of their group; give their opinion about the articles; agree or disagree with members of their group; give reasons for their opinions; invite other members of their group to contribute; ask other people about their opinions; and support and encourage other members of their group. These speech acts, though, as Thomas (1983) points out, are realised differently in different languages. McKee (2002) examines misunderstandings that may take place in interracial discussion forums showing that what is perceived as a “violent attack” by one participant is seen as an attempt to educate by another.

In 2005, the programme had about 60 students, divided into 5 groups for teaching purposes. The on-line discussion again took place in the first four weeks of the second semester and the task was the discussion of an academic article, one which focussed on an area of the group's study, mostly business-related. Once more, the students were given clearer guidelines for their contributions and how they were to be assessed with the expectation that their contributions would demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the article, that their contributions would be relevant to the topic and that appropriate English would be used. Furthermore, in order to help them they were explicitly asked to provide the name of the person they were agreeing or disagreeing with, give a brief summary of that person's contribution and then to share their own views on the matter.

We wished particularly to assess the relevance of their contribution and the expectations thereof. In terms of relevance, this comprised checking to see whether the topic had been addressed, whether the article itself and other students' contributions had been read and how they took part in the discussion. Thus the students were assessed by determining the relevance and appropriateness of their contributions.

Looking at the results, though, the outcomes could not be considered successful. This is as a consequence of only 10 out of 210 contributions made having followed the instructions fully. 15 contributions did give the name of the person to whom they were replying, 15 used 'Re: name', 43 used no name or summary; all the rest were not replies and many did not even address the topic. The reason for the demand for explicitness is that with the online format used, it is not always possible to determine/infer the topic from the turn immediately before. For lecturers and other students to follow the thread was almost impossible. Replies were often days out of synch, and without the clear explicitness asked for in the guidelines, we were unable to comprehend how the students had managed to understand what was happening.

In order to discover why this had happened, we considered a number of possibilities. The students could have failed to read the instructions, either on-line or in class. We looked at whether the instructions were too complex and wondered whether they felt that such explicitness was unnecessary as they understood what it was they were discussing. A further area for consideration was whether what we were witnessing was a cultural phenomenon, as our students were mostly from East Asia. However, when this issue was brought up for discussion at the University of Hertfordshire Annual StudyNet Conference in May 2005, it was discovered that home students were using online forums in much the same way. This was felt to be partly a result of the students' frequent use of the language of text messages and e-mails.

Furthermore, the vast majority of contributions were not entirely appropriate in terms of language and content. They were often unclear, repetitive, paraphrases of previous contributions thus showing no individual thought. They tended to have no real conclusion or decision, contradicted themselves or were purely flawed statements which showed no connection at all to the article, or the contributions made.

After much discussion with colleagues, we decided that the requirements for successful completion of the task were to remain as they were. We were thus left with a decision as to what should be done to improve on the students' performance. To us, it seemed that the greatest likelihood was that they were unaware how inexplicit they were being, and that tuition to specifically point out the manner in which to approach this type of task was necessary if we were going to get students to complete it to the standards required of them.

Thus three items were addressed. Firstly it was decided that in order to highlight the importance of the task, it should be given a higher weighting, so the marks given for the task rose from 2.5% to 6.7% of the module mark. More lecturer involvement was essential, both from the perspective of the students, and in order to keep track of students' progress. Finally, having decided there was a need for instruction, worksheets were made in order to guide students. These worksheets have been used with classes in 2006 and appear to have made a considerable difference. Detailed examination of their contributions has not yet occurred, but the in-class feedback has been most promising. Thus it appears that with explicit teaching, online discussions have the possibility of success.

Conclusion

Post-graduate international students at UK institutions of Higher Education often find difficulty dealing with discussion. An attempt was made to help students with this by utilising the group discussion facility of a university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). However, as most of the students were from East Asia, who may consider education as essentially a passive process, it was felt necessary to investigate whether they would undertake such an activity seriously and how well they would do. Our studies over the last two years clearly show that as long as the on-line discussion is clearly integrated into the course structure: aims, objectives and assessments, East-Asian students understand the purpose and take it seriously – like all students. The students do, though, need explicit teaching and help in using appropriate and relevant language. This is not something that is specific to our East Asian learners, but something all students need. We see here a new role for EAP.

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