

# MANAGING ENGINEERING UNDERGRADUATES' LANGUAGE ANXIETY: INSTRUCTOR ROLE IN ONLINE THREADED DISCUSSIONS

S. Indra Devi<sup>1</sup>, B. Subatira<sup>1</sup>, H. Noraini<sup>1</sup> and S. Bharanidharan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Languages and Human Development,  
Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka, Hang Tuah Jaya, 76100 Durian  
Tunggal, Melaka, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>College of Engineering, IT and Environment,  
Charles Darwin University,  
Darwin, Australia.

Corresponding Author's Email: [1indradevi@utem.edu.my](mailto:1indradevi@utem.edu.my)

**Article History:** Received 16 January 2018; Revised 17 June 2018; Accepted 15 October 2018

**ABSTRACT:** The advancement of communication technologies has revolutionized language classrooms via the instrumentality of computer networks and its text-based nature has brought about applications such as online threaded discussions. This paper firstly aims to determine whether the engineering undergraduates of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are affected by the psychological aspects of language learning as well as explore how they interact in online threaded discussions. Besides, it also investigates the instructor's point of view on instructor intervention in the activity. The Language Profile Forms and the focused group interviews indicate that they lack confidence and are affected by language anxiety. The postings of the 15 LEP undergraduates which were analyzed for emerging themes reveal that they mainly asked questions. Even though their discussions lacked substance and were akin to 'educationally less valuable talk' (ELVT), the activity has provided them with the motivation and autonomy to socialize and interact, thus reducing their anxiety. The instructor being the main content provider in the discussion has played an important role in facilitating and enhancing cognitive processing besides keeping the learners engaged.

**KEYWORDS:** *Language Anxiety; Engineering Undergraduates; Instructor Role; Online Threaded Discussion; Asynchronous*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Second language learning is a lengthy process that demands the mastery of language structures, vocabulary, pronunciation as well as other respective skills. The monumental role of English as Second Language has been increasingly felt in all fields of study [1] including engineering. The nature of the engineering profession as well as the demand for international interactions necessitate the need for the engineering students of today to master a variety of language skills so as to be effective users of the second language [2]. The desperate need to use English in the outside world requires the learners to genuinely master the language. This pressure on the learners to perform well in the second language causes them to experience anxiety. Anxiety is indeed a complex phenomenon and classroom related anxiety occurs due to several reasons which include the learners' erroneous beliefs about language learning, the inability to achieve native speaker standards set by language instructors as well as classroom practices [3]. Thus, it is crucial that language instructors give due consideration to the issue of anxiety among second language learners by revolutionizing language pedagogy in sync with the waves of technological innovations that is part and parcel of the learners' lives.

Online threaded discussion, also known as computer-mediated conferencing is one of the most common means of asynchronous communication. It has been defined as a great classroom tool as it keeps students engaged in discussions, enable them to complete assignments collaboratively and enhance their language learning process [4], generate learners' excitement and enthusiasm [5], are positively linked to the well-being of learners who are stigmatized [6].

Online threaded discussion offers learners a high-quality learning environment as it encourages collaborative and cognitive learning [7]. This is because this kind of electronic method of communication offers a forum to reserve students to develop and voice out ideas, encourage in-depth answers and reflections, encourage peer collaboration as well as provide opportunities for more interactions with the instructor as well as with their peers. Countless course designers and researchers acknowledge on the value of online discussions but it has been stressed that keeping the discussion threads lively and informative is a challenge.

Learners who participated in threaded discussions tended to collaborate with their peers in a very "academic", less personal and less motivating tone hence resulting in the missing of the element of

community [8]. On the contrary, there are studies which point out that for many students of today, presenting publicly has become a means of self-expression and management of self-identity [9]. In line with this, a brunt of research that had focused on learners' participation posit on the benefits of online discussions to shy and introvert learners as they need not fear of making mistakes and are anxiety-free when they communicate in a less-threatening or intimidating environment [10-11].

Limited English Proficient learners are those whose first language is not English and who hail from environments where a language other than English is dominant. Hence, they have a significant amount of difficulty in speaking, reading, writing or understanding the English language. As for Limited English Proficient students in the context of English as Second Language, their limited L2 proficiency may prevent them from interacting in the classroom and most often they face difficulties in acquiring language learning skills. Hence, they need to be supported in the language learning process [12]. They could be kept engaged in communicative activities that are contextually rich and meaningful and their language acquisition skills could be enhanced via the use of technology which enables these learners to conceptualize meanings [12].

The effectiveness of a threaded discussion and the learners' level of participation are dependent on the selection of questions and topics by the language instructor who may decide to reply to the students' postings, control the interactions or motivate them to interact with each other. Discussions require management strategies and the learners can be exposed to various skills and strategies of questioning and answering, e.g. by supporting opinions or criticizing ideas with facts [13].

Hence, this study aims to determine whether the LEP learners are affected by the psychological aspects of language learning as well as to explore how they interact in threaded discussions. Besides, the study also investigates the point of view of the language instructor about instructor role or involvement in the discussions.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study involves 15 LEP engineering undergraduates from the Faculty of Manufacturing Engineering. These third year undergraduates who have a Band 1 and 2 in the Malaysian University

English Test (MUET) were takers of the course on English for Professional Communication. According to the MUET band description, candidates with Band 1 and 2 are limited users with a poor and limited command of the language respectively. This course which includes topics related to job interview, group discussions and oral presentations is meant to prepare them for their future workplace. The learners were required to complete a Language Profile form which was meant to retrieve information related to their English Language background as well as to identify their perception on their confidence and communicative ability, language use and attitudes towards language learning. Focus group interviews were also held to determine the problems that they faced in language learning.

A website was developed specially for these groups of students and they were required to communicate with each other by posting their comments to topics posted by the instructor. This supplementary out-of-class activity was conducted after the students had been exposed to topics on group discussions, interview strategies and oral presentations. The participants' conversations in the website were analyzed qualitatively according to themes that emerged. The instructor's points of view on the discussions were also recorded.

In the teaching and learning of topics on group discussions, job interview and oral presentation, the participants were involved in threaded discussions in the website. The questions were designed based on the application and interpretation type of question format. The questions are as follows:

- i. The problems I face when I participate in a group discussion and steps to be taken.
- ii. Ways to win an interview.
- iii. How can I improve my oral presentation?
- iv. Am I prepared for oral communication at the workplace?

### **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the language Profile form, it was evident that all the 15 learners had learnt English through formal classroom instruction. As for their communicative ability, 4 (26.7%) of them rated themselves as poor and the remaining 11 (73.3%) rated themselves as fair. All the 15 (100%) admitted that they had the Malay language interference when they communicate in English. In addition, all the 15 (100%) claimed

that they are not confident when they are required to communicate in English. The learners' responses in the focus group interviews indicate that all of them are affected by anxiety mainly due to their poor command of the English language. Generally, it was found that they were anxious, especially when they were required to speak publicly in class and when they were required to express ideas. Other reasons for their anxiety include the inability to remember the rules of grammar and poor mastery of vocabulary.

The analysis of the postings in the threaded discussions revealed some emerging themes that include asking questions, commenting on others opinions and advising. For example, in the threaded discussion on "How to win an interview" they were found to be practically asking questions only. They never attempted to advice or comment. This concurs with studies which have stressed that participants had a less personal and motivating tone [8].

In the context of this study, although the participants had been exposed to strategies on answering job interview questions, being LEP learners, they had not attained a level where they could advise, comment and be critically engaged in the discussions and therefore, the instructor had to intervene as in the conversation that follows:

Student 1: "...People say that first impression is important. How can I make a good impression at the interview?"

Instructor: "...Hi, Din. As I had discussed with you earlier, first impression is indeed very important. When you appear in front of the interviewers, you need to portray yourself as being very confident and enthusiastic. The way you act and sound, the answers that you give contribute to the impression."

Generally, although the participants had interacted by advising or providing opinions in several postings, their responses were in fact minimal and most often the postings lacked potential educational value and contribution to the knowledge of the subject matter. For example, in the threaded discussion on "How can I improve my oral presentation?" Student 4 questioned as follows:

Student 4: "...I'm not keen in making eye contact with girls. Is it okay?"

Student 6 replied, "Are you scared that the girl gets angry with you?"

The instructor intervened by explaining, "Eye contact doesn't mean that you look into their eyes. In fact, you just look at the audience as you talk to keep them focused on your content and to keep them engaged."

The instructor's intervention in the discussion was significant in gearing the students towards knowledge on the subject matter. It has been asserted that the above-mentioned type of talk which lacks educational value becomes the most troubling issue in threaded discussions and as such, strategies to achieve Educationally Valuable Talk (EVT) have been provided. To overcome this issue, the A.V.I.D. approach to question design has been introduced [14]. The four parts of this acronym refer to A (active), V (varied), I (interesting) and D (open-ended). Creating discussion questions based on this approach has been found to promote discussions that are engaging for participants.

According to the instructor's point of view, instructor intervention was necessary especially when there was a pause or when the discussion was less satisfactory. It was also stressed that instructor involvement is very crucial to motivate the discussion as well as to provide valuable feedback. The instructor had not implemented the 'laissez faire approach' as 'a guide on the side.' Instead, the instructor had been the content provider at most times as the LEP learners needed more assistance. The instructor's opinion parallels other studies which stress on the role of the instructor as a significant contributor in a discussion when there is minimal participation from the learners and when questions are not responded. In such circumstances, the instructor's role is very significant in order to keep the discussion in track [15].

Although the participants' postings lacked valuable 'substance' related to the topic, it is important to note that the threaded discussions have catapulted the LEP learners towards focused discussion and collaborative as well as comprehensible interaction. This has contributed to a reduction of their shyness and anxiety. They have had the opportunity to participate in conversations which they may not have felt comfortable if they were required to participate in face-to-face classroom interactions. This activity is indeed an added value as it indirectly enhances their interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence.

With exposures of this kind, the learners' anxiety could be well-managed and marshalled into a positive force. An evaluative case

study conducted in the past concurs with the present study as it highlights the potential benefits of asynchronous threaded discussions which enable learners to adjust themselves as well as keep them engaged in unfamiliar environments [16]. The findings of this study emphasize on the cruciality of the instructor's role in online threaded discussions, hence challenging existing conceptions on the depreciating role of the online instructor. The instructor's role has been paramount in facilitating knowledge generation and skills development among the LEP learners.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The online threaded discussions have enabled the low proficiency learners to construct and share knowledge as well as practice their language skills. As evidenced in the data, the participants' collaboration with their peers as well as their instructor has enabled them to advance their Zone of Proximal Development. Although the learners were not indulged in a vibrant discussion, the instructor has played a significant role in managing their anxiety besides motivating and enabling them to be responsive. In the long run, this kind of scaffolding by the instructor would be a potential vehicle for the development of deep learning and yielding of learning outcomes among the LEP learners. The findings of this study also suggest that EVT could be somehow achieved if instructors clearly define certain criterion such as quality of the responses, number of postings, level of engagement and academic richness of the discussion before embarking on an online threaded discussion activity.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Manufacturing Engineering and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) for the support and provision of facilities in conducting the study. We also wish to express our special thanks to the undergraduates from the Faculty of Manufacturing Engineering for their great cooperation and contribution as participants of the study.

## REFERENCES

- [1] N. Milosavljevic and Z. Antic, "Medical English genres- indispensable tool for effective academic and professional communication", *Scientific Journal of the Faculty of Medicine*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 771-781, 2015.
- [2] K. Rajprasisit, P. Pratoomrat and T. Wang, "Perceptions and problems of English language and communication abilities: A final check on Thai engineering undergraduates", *English Language Teaching*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 111-120, 2015.
- [3] R. Zhang and J. Zong, "The hindrance of doubt: Causes of language anxiety", *International Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 27-33, 2012.
- [4] K. Pramela and H. Supyan, *Online forum & language learning: Pedagogical consideration*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Selangor: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2015.
- [5] K.M.A. Churcher, E. Downs and D. Tewksbury, "Friending Vygotsky: A social constructivist pedagogy of knowledge building through classroom social media use", *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 33-50, 2015.
- [6] L.F. Pendry and J. Salvatore, "Individual and social benefits of online discussion forums", *Computers in Human Behaviour*, vol. 50, no. C, pp. 211-220, 2015.
- [7] R. Seethamraju, "Effectiveness of using online discussion forum for case study analysis", *Educational Research International*, vol. 2014, pp. 1-10, 2015.
- [8] L. Clarke and L. Kinne, "Asynchronous discussions as threaded discussions or blogs", *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 4-13, 2012.
- [9] J. Svensson, "Power, identity and feelings in digital late modernity: The rationality of reflexive emptiness displays online", in T. Benski and F. Fischer, *Internet and Emotions*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. London: Routledge, 2013.
- [10] H. Omar, M.A. Embi and M.M. Yunus, "ESL learners' interaction in an online discussion via Facebook", *Asian Social Science*, vol. 8, no. 11, p. 67, 2012.
- [11] N.A. Bakar, H. Latiff and A. Hamat, "Enhancing ESL learners' speaking skills through asynchronous online discussion forum", *Asian Social Science*, vol. 9, no. 9, pp. 224-233, 2013.
- [12] A.R. David, S.M. Tang and H. Azman, "Accommodating low proficiency ESL students' language learning needs through an online writing support system", *e-Bangi*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 118-127, 2015.



- [13] E.L. Bruce and A.K. Timothy, *Instructional strategies for middle and high school*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- [14] M. Pollak, "Designing and managing engaging discussions in online courses", *Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 76-80, 2017.
- [15] K. Lamara, "The role of forums in online instruction", *European Scientific Journal*", vol. 10, no. 10, pp. 256-263, 2014.
- [16] J. Jackson, "Asynchronous threaded discussions and intercultural learning: Student sojourner perspectives", *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 229-249, 2016.

