

Exploring the Interactions and Perceptions of EFL Instructors in the Saudi Online Learning Environment

Ali Hussein Alamir

Faculty of Languages and Translation
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

With the proliferation of online teaching and learning in Saudi tertiary education, the role of the instructor during students' second language (L2) interaction has been seen as crucial in the online environment. However, it is yet to conclude how to promote L2 interaction between EFL instructors and their students when they interact in instructor-student online exchanges. The aim of the current study is to examine and understand the interactions and perceptions of EFL instructors to help enhance their interactions with their L2 students in the Saudi online environment. Three EFL instructors interacted online with their Saudi EFL students for a whole semester to discuss argumentative topics in the discussion forum. Data were collected through the transcripts of online interactions and one-to-one structured interviews. A content analysis approach was employed and a template for analysing online interactions was developed during the study. Qualitative and quantitative methods were employed for data analysis. The findings show that the three instructors played different interactional roles when they interacted with their students in the online discussion forums. Instructors observed that their students paid attention to linguistic errors and improve their L2 output when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges. Instructor online presence and language corrective feedback given by instructors appeared to influence Saudi students to pay attention to the linguistic accuracy of their interactions and improve their language in the online environment. Some implications for EFL instructors have been pointed out by the researcher to help foster online L2 interaction between EFL teachers and Saudi students. More research is needed to help understand how to promote L2 interaction between EFL teachers and L2 students in the online environment.

Keywords: content analysis, discussion forums, EFL instructors, instructor-student interaction, online learning, perceptions, Saudi students

Cite as: Alamir, A.H. (2017). Exploring the Interactions and Perceptions of EFL Instructors in the Saudi Online Learning Environment. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol7no1.11>

Instructor-Student L2 Interaction

Several L2 studies have investigated teacher-student interaction in the L2 context (e.g., McNeil, 2012; Mercer, 1995; Swain et al., 2011; Zhao & Bitchener, 2007). For instance, it has been pointed out that scaffolding occurs in 'teacher-student L2 interaction' and is seen as useful for second language acquisition (Swain et al., 2011). The assistance provided by the teacher as 'the expert' is evident in L2 contexts and has been found essential for language learning (e.g., McNeil, 2012; Mercer, 1995; Zhao & Bitchener, 2007). Zhao and Bitchener (2007) found that there were more reactive form-focused episodes (FFE) in teacher-learner interactions than in learner-learner interactions and they attributed this to the fact teachers were observed to be more active than learners in responding to learners' linguistic errors. Zhao and Bitchener (2007) stress that "[i]t is more often the teacher than other learners who realizes that learners are making systematic errors on a given form and who responds accordingly, either in the form of explicit or implicit feedback" (p. 433). This shows that the role of the instructor during students' L2 interaction is seen as central for L2 development. Conversely, students in Zhao and Bitchener's study were found to engage more frequently in pre-emptive FFEs in learner-learner interactions than in teacher-learner interactions. Zhao and Bitchener (2007) explain that "learners were more likely to ask questions of each other than of their teacher" (p. 444). This indicates that L2 students may feel reluctant to interact with the teacher frequently and this may be because of the status of the instructor as the knowledge authority. Based on their results, Zhao and Bitchener (2007) suggest that L2 teachers should try to provide L2 learners with more opportunities for attempting incidental FFEs but they "are not advocating that teachers regularly focus on form if there is a risk of it inhibiting language fluency" (p. 445).

The Role of Instructor in the Online Environment

The role of the instructor during students' L2 interactions has been seen as crucial in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments (e.g., AbuSeileek, 2007; Alwi et al., 2012; L. Lee, 2008; Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Nor et al., 2012; Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2009; Salaberry, 2000; Sotillo, 2000; Stockwell, 2010; Yang, 2011; T. Zhang et al., 2007) and thus this role is also examined in the present study. For instance, instructors play a major role in facilitating students' L2 interactions in CMC (Sotillo, 2000). They engage with L2 students by reframing questions, scaffolding, and providing implicit corrective feedback through modelling. Sotillo (2000) found that the role of the instructor was essential for promoting the efficacy of students' L2 learning in CMC. She argues that the role of the instructor can "affect the learning outcomes and effectiveness of the students' language learning experiences" in CMC environments (p. 106). Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2009) lend support to this argument by observing how instructor supports students' online interactions and they point out that learning in the discussion forums originated from the interaction and collaboration between instructors and their students. In the L2 literature, the instructor has been seen to play a central role in promoting students' L2 learning in instructor-student CMC interactions (e.g., Alwi et al., 2012; L. Lee, 2008; Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Nor et al., 2012; Salaberry, 2000; Sotillo, 2000; Stockwell, 2010; Yang, 2011). However, how EFL instructors interact with their students in instructor-student online interactions has not been fully explored. The present study sought to answer the following questions to examine and understand how EFL instructors interact with Saudi students in the online environment.

- 1) Do EFL instructors show different quantities and qualities of their interactions when they interact with Saudi students in the online environment?
- 2) How EFL instructors perceived and viewed the interactions of Saudi students in the online environment?

Method

Three non-Saudi EFL instructors interacted with their Saudi EFL undergraduate students (N=130) in the university Blackboard. The participants were sourced from the Department of English in a prestigious university in the Southern region of Saudi Arabia. The instructors were Arab EFL speakers of PhD holders in linguistics and applied linguistics. Their age is ranged from 37 to 50 years old and their EFL teaching experience is ranged from 10 to 20 years. The mean of their online teaching experience is 2.5 years. Instructors usually use online discussion forums when they teach their students in the university Blackboard.

All courses were taught in a blended way (face-to-face and online classes). The online interaction was regarded as a part of the students' total course assessment (30% of total course assessment). Instructors interacted online with their students by discussing some argumentative topics on the discussion forums of the Blackboard and the online interactions between instructors and students lasted for about five weeks. The online interaction was open during the period of study for both instructors and students and there were no restrictions of time, numbers of posts and turns, or length of contributions.

The present study was qualitative in nature and data were collected through transcripts of online interactions and one-to-one structured interviews. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse the participants' online interactions and interviews.

An Approach for Investigating Instructors' Online Interactions

The present study investigated the interactions of the instructors and their roles by applying a template for analysing the transcripts of their online exchanges (see Table 1) and conducting one-to-one interviews.

Table 1. A Template for Analyzing Instructors' Online Interactions

Analysis Level		Explanatory Level	Observations	Data Method	Analysis Method
Content Analysis	Linguistic	Interaction Function	Discourse Negotiations Feedback Opinions Questions Agreements Emotions Compliments Suggestions Greetings	Online interactions transcripts	Qualitative analysis

	Participatory	Interaction Rate	Number of posts Number of words	Online interactions transcripts	Qualitative analysis
--	---------------	------------------	------------------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------

As can be seen in Table 1, this analytical template has two analysis levels (i.e., linguistic and participatory) and looks at discourse type and interaction direction and rate. It is hoped that by applying this analytical template the role of the instructor and his or her interaction can be more deeply understood. Individual interviews were also conducted to examine the perceptions and experiences of the instructors to add to this knowledge.

Analyzing the Transcripts of Instructors' Online Interactions

The transcripts of the three instructors' interactions were analysed to investigate how they displayed their role when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges. It was deemed useful to examine how the instructors interacted because they were observed to differ from one another in terms of the manner of online interaction and participation rate. The online interactions of instructors were coded according to the analytical template (see Table 1 above) and they were analysed qualitatively using descriptive and narrative methods. Table 2 presents some examples of coding the discourse functions of the instructors in the current study.

Table 2. Instructors' Interaction Discourse Functions—Coding Examples

Explanatory levels	Discourse Functions	Coding Examples
Interaction discourse function	Negotiation	If you are looking for published material, you have to pay for that to access it on the internet, but you can get it for free from a traditional library. What do you think?
	Feedback	Panda and Al-Goneim are not malls. A mall is a shopping center where you can find a lot of stores and areas where you can find restaurants and coffee shops like Aseer Mall.
	Opinion	I think one should go shopping once a week. In order not to waste your time, it is a very good idea to prepare a shopping list.
	Question	Is it time consuming? Do you think traditional ways of learning are better?
	Agreement	I agree with you. Al Andalus is a very good shopping center.

Emotion	I hope you will get the chance to go abroad.
Compliment	Good Mohammad. I appreciate your opinion.
Suggestion	It is better to drink fresh fruit juice.

Instructors' Interviews

Before conducting the study, instructors were given a questionnaire of 11 questions that sought to gather their EFL background information (see Appendix A), to obtain their EFL online teaching background and ensure that they have good experiences about using discussion forums in their EFL context. At the end of the study, the three instructors who participated in the present study were individually interviewed by the researcher in a conference room at the faculty to investigate their perceptions and experiences of instructor-student online interactions. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes and was voice recorded by the researcher using a small digital voice recorder. The interviews consisted of structured open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Instructors had the choice of being interviewed in Arabic or English to give them the opportunity to clearly explain their feelings about their online interactions and the roles they played when they interacted with their students in the discussion forums. Instructors in the present study primarily used Arabic language but they sometimes switched to English language when they described the performance of their students.

Results of Instructors' Online Interactions

Table 3. Instructors' Discourse Functions in the Forums—Frequency Scores

Analysis Level	Discourse Functions in the Forum	Instructor Ibrahim	Instructor Adel	Instructor Omar
Linguistic	Negotiations	1	23	5
	Feedback	1	10	14
	Opinions	4	3	3
	Questions	5	36	5
	Agreements	2	1	3
	Emotions	1	2	2
	Compliments	0	2	24
	Suggestions	4	0	3
	Greetings	0	0	0
	Total		18	77

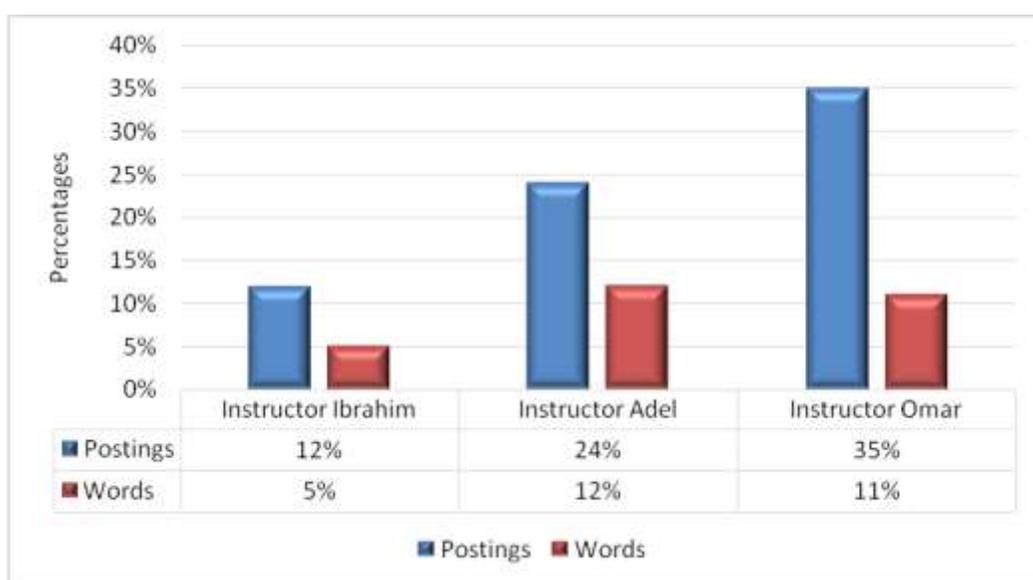
According to Tables 3 and 4, from the linguistic and participatory results, it was found that there were differences in the frequency scores of instructors' online interactions in terms of discourse functions and rates of participation. This indicates that the three instructors interacted differently from one another and they played different roles when they interacted with their students. It can be argued that because of the individual differences of the instructors in the present study, it is possible that they showed different roles.

Table 4. Instructors' Participation in the Forums—Frequency Scores

Analysis Level	Online Interaction	Instructor Ibrahim	Instructor Adel	Instructor Omar
Participatory	Number of posts in the forum	10	54	24
	Number of words in the forum	120	840	382

For instance, instructor Ibrahim held a high administrative position in the faculty and this may have affected his interactions as he participated with his students less frequently than other instructors during the experiment of the current study.

A cross-comparison analysis between the three instructors was conducted and the rates of their discourse functions and participation, in comparison with their students' rates in the forums, were contrasted by graphs.

**Figure 1. Instructors' Participation in the Forums**

In terms of participation rates, instructors were found to produce different rates of postings and words when they interacted with their students. As can be seen in Figure 1, instructor Omar was found to have the highest participation rate of postings among other instructors. This indicates that he interacted with his students more frequently than other instructors. Instructor Ibrahim, on the other hand, was found to have the lowest participation rates in terms of postings and words among instructors. This shows that he interacted with his students less frequently than other instructors. By looking at instructor Adel's participation rates, it can be observed that he seemed to have a higher rate of postings than instructor Ibrahim but a lower rate of postings than instructor Omar. Given that the three instructors produced different rates of participation, the present study further explored their online interactions in terms of

discourse functions to help understand their interactions and the roles they displayed when they interacted with their students as instructor-student online exchanges.

As can be seen in Figure 2, instructor Adel was observed to have the highest ratio scores of discourse functions among other instructors. This shows that he engaged in online interaction with his students more than other instructors. Instructor Ibrahim, on the other hand, was observed to have the lowest ratio scores of discourse functions among other instructors in the study. He interacted with his students less frequently than other instructors. Lastly, instructor Omar was found to have higher ratio scores of discourse functions than instructor Ibrahim but he had lower ratio scores than instructor Adel.

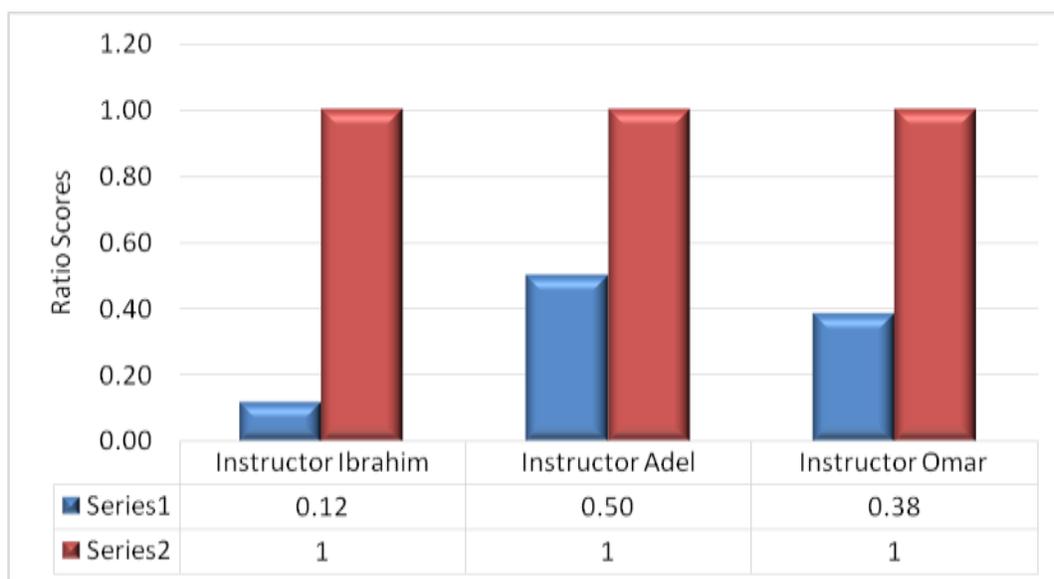


Figure 2. Discourse Functions among Instructors

To better understand how instructors differed from one another in the present study, their online interaction discourse functions were investigated individually in the following sections.

Results of Instructor Ibrahim's Online Interactions

By looking at the discourse functions of instructor Ibrahim's online interactions in Figure 3, it can be found that he mostly used to engage in directing questions, giving opinions, and providing suggestions when he interacted in instructor-student online exchanges. These functions show that he engaged in interactive online exchanges with his students although he displayed a small rate of participation (12%). Instructor Ibrahim seemed to express a moderate rate of agreements and this indicates that he was projecting his online social presence by showing his recognition to his students' contributions in the online forums. Engaging in negotiations, giving feedback, and expressing emotions were found to be the least frequent discourse functions displayed by instructor Ibrahim. Importantly, instructor Ibrahim was not found to exchange greetings or compliments with his students in the forum. This can explain why he had smaller rates of participation than other instructors.

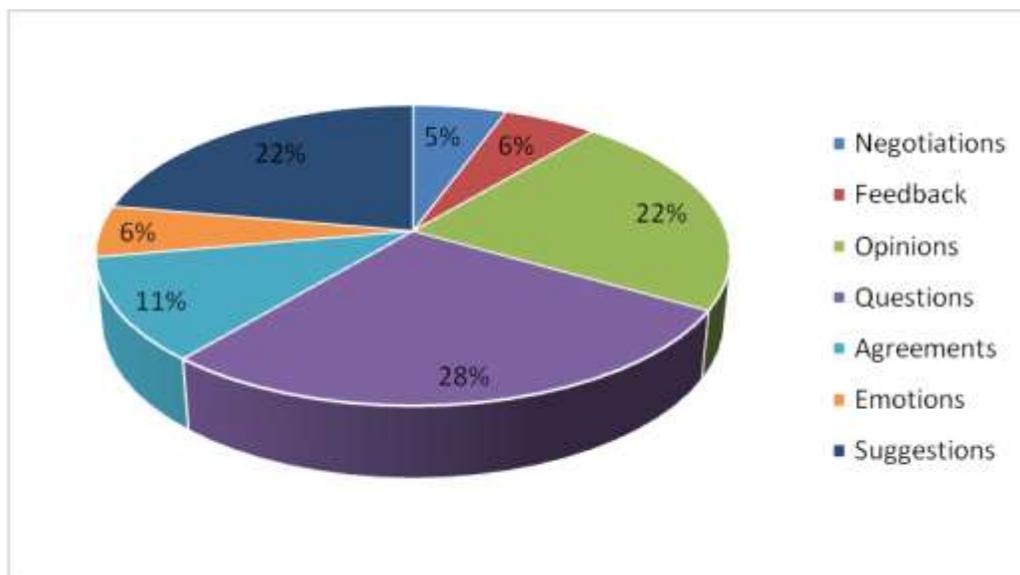


Figure 3. Instructor Ibrahim's Discourse Functions

Therefore, instructor Ibrahim, had the smallest rate of participation and the lowest rate of discourse functions as compared with other instructors. Because instructor Ibrahim's students were studying in the final year of their B.A. program, he might have avoided interaction with them frequently, so that they could benefit more from participation and interaction in their online discussion forum. The fact that instructor Ibrahim had a high administrative position in the faculty might have also affected the way he participated and interacted online with his students.

Results of Instructor Adel's Online Interactions

By looking at the discourse functions of instructor Adel's online interactions in Figure 4, his interactions were dominated by directing questions and engaging in negotiations when he interacted with his students. Directing questions amounted to about 50 percent of his online interactions. Exchanging questions and negotiations frequently can indicate that instructor Adel had online interactive participation with his students in the discussion forum. Instructor Adel had the largest rates of questions and negotiations among instructors. It can be noted that there is a relationship between the amount of instructor Adel's questions and his negotiations. That is, instructor Adel had a large number of negotiations because he directed a large number of questions to his students in the forum.

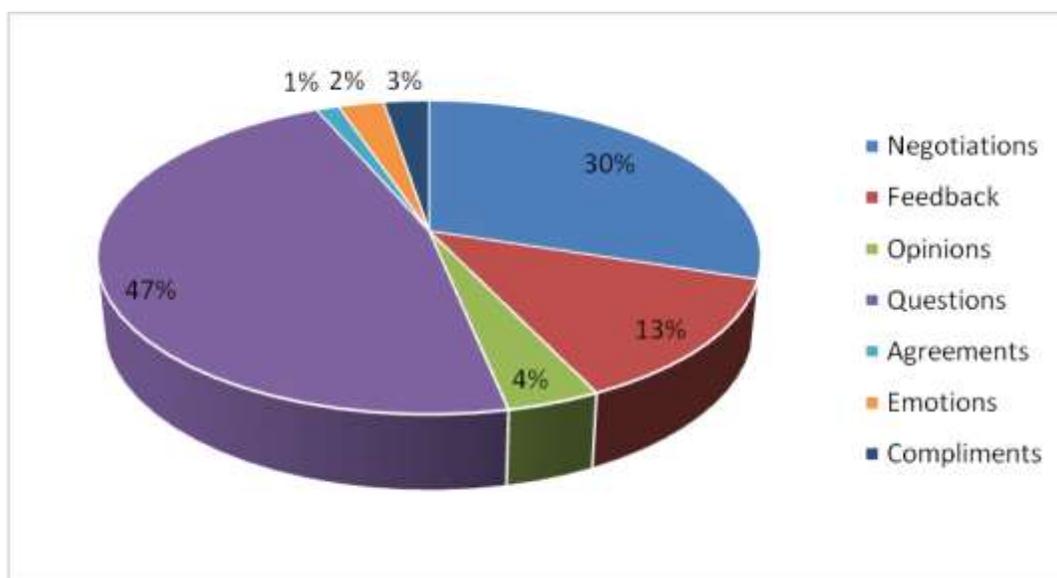


Figure 4. Instructor Adel's Discourse Functions

Although instructor Adel had the largest numbers of questions and negotiations among instructors, his participation rate with his students (24%) was lower than instructor Omar's (35%) but higher than instructor Ibrahim's (12%). This can indicate that he did not engage in other discourse functions as frequently as questions and negotiations. In terms of other discourse functions, instructor Adel's online interactions had a moderate rate of providing feedback and small rates of sharing opinions and projecting online social presence like expressing emotions, agreements, or compliments. Instructor Adel was rarely found to express agreements with his students. He avoided expressing his agreements or disagreements may be because of the large number of students' different opinions posted on the discussion forum. Another likely reason is that showing agreements with some students and not showing agreements with other students can discourage students from participation or interaction in the discussion forum. Because showing agreement is regarded as one of the social presence behaviours in online forums, it can be argued that because instructor Adel hardly expressed agreement with his students this contributed to the lower proportion of his social presence density.

As can be seen in Figure 4, instructor Adel rarely displayed his online social presence when he interacted with his students because expressing agreements, emotions, and compliments were found to be the least frequent discourse functions in his online interactions. Greetings and suggestions can be seen as social presence indicators (c.f. Garrison et al., 2000) but instructor Adel did not exchange them with his students in the forums. This may have contributed to his low degree of social presence. It can be argued that the perception of social interaction between the instructor and the student might have influenced instructor Adel to avoid projecting his online social presence frequently when he interacted with his students. In terms of avoiding using greetings with students in instructor-student online exchanges, from an Arabic cultural perspective, instructor Adel might have believed that students should greet him first because it is a cultural norm that the student (the younger) has to start greeting his instructor (the older) in social interactions from the Islamic tradition in Arab world.

Because instructor Adel had the largest number of discourse functions among instructors it can be argued that his online interactions (particularly questions and negotiations) seem to be helpful for students' L2 learning because they can trigger students to engage in L2 interaction

and promote their language output in the discussion forum from the perspectives of SLA interactionists.

Results of Instructor Omar's Online Interactions

By looking at Figure 5, it can be observed that instructor Omar produced several types of discourse functions when he interacted with his students in the online discussion forum. Instructor Omar had the highest rate of participation (35%) with his students as compared to the other instructors. This rate of participation is reflected in using various discourse functions. As can be seen in Figure 5, the online interactions of instructor Omar were dominated by expressing compliments. This indicates that he displayed a large degree of social presence by complimenting his students and showing recognition of their contributions in the forum (c.f. Garrison et al., 2000). This may be because instructor Omar wanted his students to have confidence and use their language when they interacted with their instructor in the online forum.

As compared with other instructors, instructor Omar had the highest degree of social presence as he expressed the largest frequency of compliments when he interacted with his students in the online forum. This may be attributed to the fact that he was the youngest instructor in the present study.

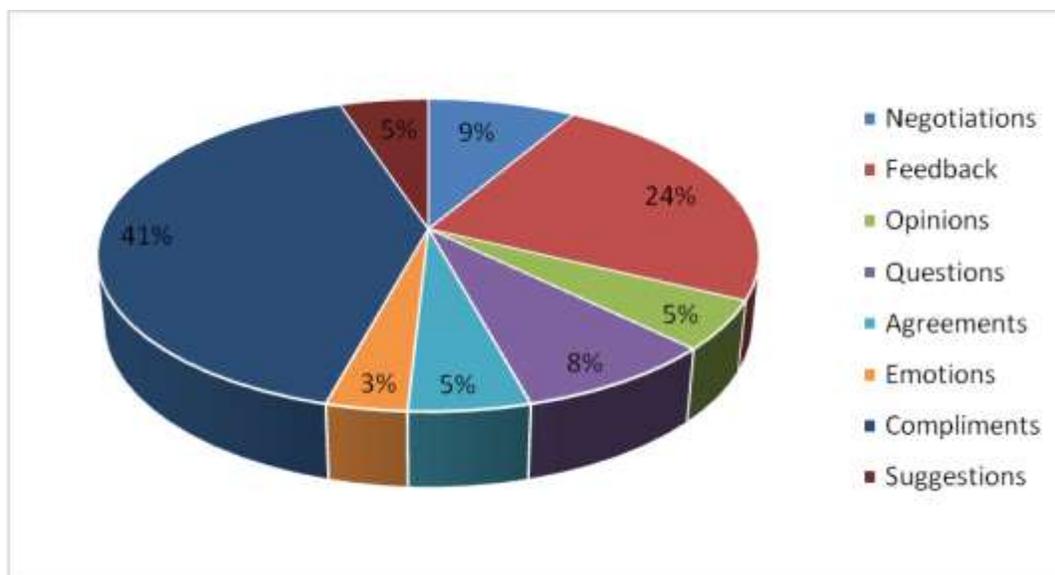


Figure 5. Instructor Omar's Discourse Functions

The second predominant discourse function in instructor Omar's online interactions was providing feedback. Instructor Omar had a larger rate of feedback (24%) with his students than instructors Ibrahim (6%) and Adel (13%). Instructor Omar might have found it important to provide his students with feedback, so that they could have support from their instructor in the forum. In terms of other discourse functions, as can be seen in Figure 5, instructor Omar had similar small percentages of using questions and negotiations as well as opinions, agreements, and suggestions when he interacted online with his students. Instructor Omar did not engage frequently in these discourse functions because he was busy with his teaching load during the course of the current study and he had many courses and large numbers of students as found in his interview.

The only thing that I was not happy with is that I could not argue with my students a lot because I did not have enough time. I had several courses and large numbers of students in each course and this made it difficult for me to interact frequently with my students in instructor-student online exchanges.

Instructor Omar gave compliments and feedback more frequently than other discourse functions because he may have been concerned with providing his students with confidence and the language support during their online exchanges.

On the basis of the findings above, it can be argued that instructor Omar's online interactions and feedback seem to be helpful because they can influence students to learn incidentally and improve their language from the perspectives of SLA interactionists and sociocultural theory. Because instructors produced different rates of discourse functions, participation, and social presence, it was deemed important to examine their perceptions and experiences when they interacted in instructor-student online interactions.

Results of Instructor Ibrahim's Interview

To start with, it was found that instructor Ibrahim positively perceived participation and interaction in instructor-student online exchanges.

I felt happy when I saw my students participated in the online discussion forum and interacted with me. My students appeared to feel comfortable to interact with me to the extent that they used to personally communicate with me via emails during the course of online interactions.

The instructor indicated that his online participation in the discussion forum helped students to interact with him online. This shows that the online presence of instructor might have influenced students' interactions in the online environment as to help them to interact online frequently.

Instructor Ibrahim noted his students putting more effort into their linguistic accuracy when their instructor than with their peers. The online presence of instructor might have affected students positively as to maintain a high degree of linguistic accuracy during their online exchanges with their instructor.

I noted that my students' language output improved when they interacted with me than with their peers. They produced correct grammatical sentences and sometimes post complex grammatical sentences.

However, some students were found to make some language errors and instructor Ibrahim described how he reacted when he saw their language mistakes in instructor-student online exchanges.

When I saw the grammatical errors of my students I used to give them language feedback by sending them emails or talking to them personally during the sessions of their FtF class.

It can be observed that instructor Ibrahim provided his students corrective feedback when he saw their grammatical errors and he used email and FtF class to communicate the language errors with his students. Providing corrective feedback via email and during FtF class shows that instructor Ibrahim did not want to embarrass his students by explicitly drawing their attention to their language mistakes in front of other interlocutors in their online discussion forum.

Given that students were found to receive corrective feedback from their instructors during instructor-student online exchanges, it can be indicated that this feedback was seen as helpful because it influenced students to take care of their language accuracy. This feedback accordingly contributed to the increase of students' level of linguistic accuracy in instructor-student online exchanges. For example, Ibrahim reported that he used to give his students corrective feedback in their FtF class.

I used to say please pay attention to the mistakes you make! These are some grammatical errors that you have to be aware of because you are going to graduate soon and be English teachers!

This indicates that the instructor discussed with his students their grammatical errors in the FtF class. Therefore, students' linguistic accuracy improved during instructor-student online exchanges. Not only did instructor Ibrahim provide his students with language corrective feedback, but he also encouraged them to visit online resources and develop their language grammar.

I also encouraged my students to visit YouTube and benefit from available lessons and materials such as how to develop English grammar and use English tenses correctly.

These recommendations or suggestions which were given by the instructor might have influenced students to refer to English internet resources and benefit from English grammar lessons to improve their language accuracy.

Concerning email communications, it was found that instructor Ibrahim communicated personally with his students during the course of online interactions. This shows that students felt comfortable to exchange private emails with their instructor and the online presence of instructor might have encouraged them to feel happy to exchange personal emails with their instructor.

Sometimes some students used to email me to discuss their own personal problems. For example, one student sent me an email to explain his English language learning problems and he asked me for some help.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that instructor-student online interactions benefited students' linguistic accuracy and solving their language problems.

Results of Instructor Adel's Interview

It was found that instructor Adel positively perceived the online interactions with his students in the discussion forum. He noted that his students showed a large range of interactions when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges. This indicates that students might have been influenced positively by the online presence of their instructor in the forum.

I felt comfortable and happy when I interacted with my students in the discussion forum. The students' online interactions were good and I saw my students' were very excited to the extent that they generated a large number of online posts. Some students' online interactions were more than expected especially from more competent students.

Instructor Adel observed that students paid more attention to the linguistic accuracy of their online interactions when they interacted with their instructors than with their peers. This observation supports the observations of instructor Ibrahim above as students were found to be

concerned with the linguistic accuracy of their online interactions in instructor-student online exchanges.

I noted that my students were more cautious about their grammatical errors when they interacted with me than with their peers.

Because of the presence of the instructor as the knowledge expert, students put more effort into writing accurate online exchanges. In terms of providing language corrective feedback, instructor Adel did not provide his students with any feedback.

I did not correct the errors of my students or provide corrective feedback to them when I saw their grammatical errors because I was more concerned with the content of their interaction than with their language errors. I neither provided them with language corrections in the FtF class nor sent them emails to draw their attention to their language errors.

Although students did not receive any language corrective feedback from their instructor this does not mean that they did not pay more attention to their language accuracy in instructor-student online exchanges. Importantly, the online presence of the instructor was seen as a major factor which influenced students to put more effort into maintaining linguistic accuracy. However, it can be argued that when the online presence of the instructor is coupled with the provision of language corrective feedback linguistic accuracy can be promoted more than when there is no language corrective feedback.

Results of Instructor Omar's Interview

It can be observed that instructor Omar positively perceived the online interactions of instructor-student online exchanges and observed that his students benefited linguistically from the interactions in the online forum.

My online interaction experience in the discussion forum was good. I benefited from it and so did my students because of the language input and output. Students benefited from their output to develop their input when in the online discussion forum.

Instructor Omar noted that his students paid more attention to their linguistic accuracy when they interacted with their instructor than with their peers.

I noted that my students were more careful about their linguistic accuracy when they interacted with their instructor than with their peers and I think this may be because that they were aware of the online presence of their instructor in the online discussion forum.

What instructor Omar reported indicates that the online presence of the instructor might have influenced students to be more cautious about making language errors. This underscores that the presence of the instructor can be seen as useful for the improvement of students' linguistic accuracy during their interactions in their online discussion forums.

In terms of language corrective feedback, instructor Omar was found to provide his students with overt corrective feedback when making spelling errors. This in fact was seen evident in the transcripts of online interactions in the present study. It can be argued that explicit feedback provided by instructor Omar might have influenced his students to be more cautious about making language errors. This indicates that instructor Omar influenced his students by drawing

their attention to their linguistic errors which they made when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges.

Concerning using email communication, instructor Omar reported that he used email to communicate with his students during the course of the present study in this way.

I used email communications and so did my students. 40% of emails were sent as personal communications and 60% of them were sent as course communications. I sometimes used to send emails as a group communication when addressing or discussing the course content and I used to send email as a private communication if the issue was personal.

From the ways which instructor Omar used when using email communication with his students it can be deduced that he used to send his students corrective feedback. Therefore, it can be argued that language corrective feedback which students received on the forum, during the FtF class, and via email were seen as helpful because it might have influenced students to improve their linguistic accuracy in instructor-student online exchanges.

Discussion

The present study found that the instructors produced different rates of discourse functions and participation. This clearly shows that the three different EFL instructors differed from one another when they interacted with Saudi students in the online environment. This can possibly be attributed to the individual differences between the instructors in the present study. Instructor Adel produced a higher rate of discourse functions than instructors Ibrahim and Omar. On the other hand, instructor Ibrahim produced the smallest rates of discourse functions and participation among instructors in this study. He did not interact with his students frequently, maybe because he was busy with the commitments of his high administrative position in the faculty.

The three different EFL instructors exhibited different qualities in their interactions when they interacted with Saudi students in instructor-student online exchanges. This observation has been widely documented in previous studies (e.g., AbuSeileek, 2007; L. Lee, 2008; Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Yang, 2011). First, instructor Ibrahim produced the lowest rates of online interactions. He interacted less frequently with his students. His online interactions consisted mainly of the observations of sharing opinions, directing questions, and providing suggestions. However, instructor Ibrahim rarely negotiated with his students, provided feedback, or expressed his emotions. Instructor Ibrahim was not found to compliment or greet his students. Secondly, instructor Adel produced the highest rate of discourse functions and his online interactions were dominated by directing questions and negotiations. He directed questions and negotiated with his students more frequently than other instructors. This type of interaction has been seen as useful for L2 students and supports what have been found in L2 research (e.g., McNeil, 2012). It has been pointed out that referential questions which are directed by the teacher can “elicit students’ thoughts, reasons, experiences, and opinions” and they can also “prompt students to comprehend and produce target language that reflects their own thinking” (McNeil, 2012, p. 396). Instructor Adel engaged predominantly in posting questions and negotiating with students in the discussion forums and this supports previous L2 studies as well (e.g., Nor et al., 2012). It can be argued that directing questions appeared to contribute to the increase of the number of negotiations in the discussion forum which promote L2 interaction.

Furthermore, instructor Omar gave the highest rates of participation and his interactions were dominated by providing feedback and expressing compliments more frequently than the other instructors. It has been evident that complimenting EFL students and appreciating their contributions appeared to encourage them to post and exchange more in the discussion forum (e.g., T. Zhang et al., 2007).

With respect to the quality and quantity of instructors' online interactions, as in Sotillo (2000), it was found that EFL instructors in the present study rarely expressed emotions, humour, greetings, and agreements when they interacted with their students and this might have influenced the quality and quantity of Saudi students' online interaction (e.g., the degree of their online social presence in the forum). Another likely reason for this finding is that instructors reported that they could not argue and interact very frequently with their Saudi students because they did not have enough time.

Implications for EFL Instructors

On the basis of the findings of the present study, it is possible to make some suggestions for EFL instructors. The role of the instructor is seen as an essential one for promoting students' L2 learning in the online environment (e.g., Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Sotillo, 2000; Yang, 2011). It is important that the instructor should facilitate Saudi students' participation and L2 learning during their online interactions. The instructor should read students' online interactions, respond to their contributions, provide them with feedback, argue with them, and compliment them for their contributions (c.f., Nor et al., 2012; Yang, 2011). In particular, this role should be utilized whenever learning problems arise. To foster Saudi students' L2 interaction and learning in the online environment, EFL instructors should share their ideas, greet their students, express their emotions, use humour with them, compliment them and express appreciation of their contributions during their online interactions. They also should utilize their roles in a supportive way by considering why, when, and how to engage with students, provide them feedback, negotiate with them, scaffold them, and support their social presence.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be observed that the three instructors in the present study produced different rates of discourse functions, participation, and social presence when they interacted online with their students in the discussion forums. This indicates that they displayed different interaction roles with their students in the online environment. This can be attributed to several reasons which include instructors' individual differences, their administrative and teaching commitments in the faculty, and the perception of social interaction between students and the instructor. Therefore, these factors might have influenced the ways the instructors interacted online with their students in the present study.

On the basis of the L2 interactions of instructors in the present study, it can be concluded that exchanging questions and negotiations with students can be seen as helpful for students' L2 learning because they can trigger them to engage in L2 interaction and promote their language output in the online environment as believed by SLA interactionists (e.g., Ellis, 1999; Long, 1996; Mackey, 1999). Furthermore, exchanging agreements and compliments with students and providing them with feedback (i.e., scaffolding) can be seen as useful for students' language as they help them to acquire language incidentally and promote their engagement in the online environment.

Importantly, instructor-student online interaction can help students to pay more attention to their language errors and improve their linguistic accuracy because they interact with the expert as claimed by SLA sociocultural researchers (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain et al., 2011). More importantly, the instructors' online presence and language corrective feedback are seen as essential for students' L2 learning and acquisition in the online environment.

About the Author:

Dr. Ali Hussein Alamir is an assistant professor in applied linguistics at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. His research interests include computer-assisted language learning (CALL), computer-mediated communication (CMC), and second language acquisition (SLA).

References

- AbuSeileek, A. F. (2007). Cooperative vs. individual learning of oral skills in a CALL environment. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 20(5), 493-514.
- Alwi, N. A. N. M., Adams, R., & Newton, J. (2012). Writing to learn via text chat: Task implementation and focus on form. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21(1), 23-39. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2011.12.001>
- Ellis, R. (1999). Learning a second language through interaction. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a textbased environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, L. (2008). Focus-on-form through collaborative scaffolding in expert-to-novice *online interaction*. *Language Learning & Technology*, 12(3), 53-72.
- Loewen, S., & Reissner, S. (2009). A comparison of incidental focus on form in the second language classroom and chatroom. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(2), 101-114. doi: 10.1080/09588220902778211
- Long, M. H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of Second language acquisition*. (pp. 413-468). San Diego CA: Academic Press.
- Mackey, A. (1999). Stepping up the pace: An empirical study of input, interaction, and second language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 21, 557-588.
- McNeil, L. (2012). Using talk to scaffold referential questions for English language learners. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28(3), 396-404. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.11.005>
- Mercer, N. (1995). The guided construction of knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Nor, N. F. M., Hamat, A., & Embi, M. A. (2012). Patterns of discourse in online interaction: Seeking evidence of the collaborative learning process. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 25(3), 237-256. doi: 10.1080/09588221.2012.655748
- Paiva, V. L. M. d. O. e., & Rodrigues-Junior, A. S. (2009). Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment Handbook of Research on E-Learning Methodologies for Language Acquisition (pp. 53-68). Hershey, P. : IGI Global.

- Salaberry, M. R. (2000). L2 morphosyntactic development in text-based computer-mediated communication. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 13(1), 5-27.
- Stockwell, G. (2010). Effects of multimodality in computer-mediated communication tasks. In M. Thomas, H. Reinders & C. Ebooks (Eds.), *Task-based language learning and teaching with technology* (Chapter 5). New York : Continuum.
- Sotillo, S. M. (2000). Discourse functions and syntactic complexity in synchronous and asynchronous communication. *Language Learning & Technology*, 4(1), 82-119.
- Swain, M., Kinnear, P., & Steinman, L. (2011). *Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives*. Bristol; Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Yang, Y.-F. (2011). Engaging students in an online situated language learning environment. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 24(2), 181-198. doi: 10.1080/09588221.2010.538700
- Zhang, T., Gao, T., Ring, G., & Zhang, W. (2007). Using online discussion forums to assist a traditional english class. *International Journal on ELearning*, 6(4), 623-643.
- Zhao, S. Y., & Bitchener, J. (2007). Incidental focus on form in teacher–learner and learner–learner interactions. *System*, 35(4), 431-447. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2007.04.004>

Appendices

Appendix A

Instructors' Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Instructors' Background Information

Code.....Interview#.....

We really do appreciate your participation in this study. Please kindly answer the following questions!

- 1) How old are you?
.....
- 2) What is your nationality?
.....
- 3) What are your qualifications?
.....
- 4) How many years have you been teaching English language in general?
.....
- 5) Have you ever taught English Language to students in Europe? If yes, please specify.
.....
- 6) How many years have you been teaching English language in the Faculty?
.....
- 7) How many years have you been teaching English language courses using the mode of blended learning?
Before joining the Faculty:
After joining the Faculty:
- 8) Have you ever used email lists or online discussion forums in language teaching with your students? If so, where and when did you use it/them, and what was the name of the course?

- 9) How many English courses do you currently teach using the mode of blended learning?
- 10) Do you use any technology other than the Blackboard educational system when you interact and communicate with your students? If so, what are they and for what purposes do you use them?
- 11) If you would like to say anything about the study, the interactions in instructor-student online exchanges, or the blended teaching/learning mode please feel free to write it down?

Thank You Very Much for Your Participation! ☺

Appendix B

Instructor Interviews

A) Interactions in Instructor-Student Online Exchanges.

- 1) What was your experience like when you interacted with your students in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 2) What was the most interesting thing you found when you interacted with your students in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 3) Did you feel socially engaged when you interacted with your students in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? In what way? Give some examples please?
- 4) Did you feel a sense of being a part of one online social learning community when you interacted with your students in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? In what way?
- 5) Describe your reactions when you read your students' messages and posts in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 6) How did you feel about the interactions of your students in terms of language performance and the degree of their social presence when you interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 7) Please describe the grammatical complexity and linguistic accuracy of your students' interactions when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 8) Did you find that your students paid more attention to the linguistic accuracy of their interactions when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How?
- 9) Did they tend to write sophisticated sentences when they interacted in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How?
- 10) Did the discussion topics stimulate you and your students to interact in instructor-student online exchanges in this study? How? Give some examples please?
- 11) Did you have any difficulties during interactions in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?
- 12) Would you like to say anything more about your interactions in instructor-student online exchanges in this study?

Thank You Very Much for Your Participation! ☺