



ESL Distance Learners' Participation in an Online Forum: The Interplay of Contextual Factors

Sadhna Nair-Prakash
SMK Bukit Rahman Putra
Jalan BRP 7/1, Bukit Rahman Putra
47000 Sungai Buloh, Selangor
E-mail: sadhnanair@hotmail.com

Siti Hamin Stapa
School of Language and Linguistic Studies
University Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor
E-mail: sitihami@ukm.my

Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.4n.1p.100

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.4n.1p.100>

Received: 01/12/2012

Accepted: 05/01/2013

Abstract

This paper highlights the findings of a study examining the contextual factors that mediated distance learners' participation in an online forum (OLF). Contextual factors are elements that emerge as a result of distance learners' interaction with their social environment. The study drew on a sociocultural perspective that encompassed the concepts of communities of practice, mediation and dialogic interaction. These concepts advocate that both learning for knowledge and language learning are processes of social interaction. The participants of the study were adult ESL learners enrolled in a distance learning institution that employs a blended learning pedagogy. Multiple sources of information comprising semi-structured interview, text-based interview and informal chats were used for data collection purposes. Data was analysed using the constant comparative method. Through this approach, contextual factors mediating distance learners' participation in the OLF were uncovered.

Keywords: ESL Distance learners, Participation in online forum, Sociocultural perspective

1. Introduction

Distance learning which has gained popularity in the last few decades is seen as a potential solution for people who want to carry out formal learning in order to remain competitive in a changing environment, for those who want to enhance their career opportunities without having to interrupt their employment, or for those in remote areas (Moore & Kearsley 2011; Merriam et al. 2007). In fact, researchers (Hisham Dzakiria 2004; Fahy 2003) content that the two long-acknowledged goals for distance learners is learning and socialisation.

Distance learning in Malaysia was first introduced in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in the 1970s. Then, in 1990 Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) started to introduce distance learning in order to cater to the overwhelming demand for tertiary education. In the period of 1993 till today, there has been a significant increase in the number of institutions that offer distance learning. This comes about as a result of the Ministry of Education's new policy that encourages the introduction of distance education in Malaysian universities for the purposes of providing lifelong learning opportunities, meeting higher education aspirations using flexible, accessible and affordable system, as well as helping the government in the democratisation of education (Mansor Fadzil & Latifah Abdol Latif 2009; Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad & Mansor Fadzil 2002). Hence, today, a large number of adults are pursuing tertiary education in Malaysia via the distance learning mode (Guan et al. 2011).

In distance learning programmes, learners and teachers are in different places for all or most of the time that they learn and teach. Being in different places, they depend on some kind of technology to deliver information and give them a way of interacting with each other (Moore & Kearsley 2011, 2005). Hence, distance learning institutions exploit an impressive range of technologies to enable tutors and distance learners who are geographically separated to communicate with each other. In Malaysia, most distance learning programmes employ a blended learning approach which is a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning. In such an approach, instruction occurs both in the classroom and online in which the online component is perceived as a natural extension of traditional classroom learning (Hilton et al. 2010; Nor Aziah & Nik Suriyani 2005). A common mode of online learning used in distance learning institutions is the online forum (OLF) which stands as a promising educational platform particularly for academic endeavours involving discussion of ideas (Chang 2012; Chan 2011; Balaji & Chakrabarti 2010).

Institutions offering distance learning programmes in Malaysia provide OLFs as a platform for learners to communicate with their peers and tutor with the purpose of, reducing isolation, as well as, enhancing the teaching and learning process. However, the success of this endeavour is shaped by learners' participation which requires some form of written contribution. While research involving Malaysian ESL learners participating in the OLF has been conducted, many have focussed on campus-based undergraduates (Chan 2011; Pramela 2011; Roziana Rosli 2010; Habibah Ab Jalil et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, with the increasing number of adult ESL learners pursuing distance learning in Malaysia, further research is needed on their participation in the OLF. This is because distance learners have prior learning experiences, different learning styles and preferences as well as coping strategies (Hisham Dzakiria 2008). They are learners borne out of the existing didactic teaching and exam-oriented educational system (Nor Aziah & Nik Suryani 2005) who have a preference for listening rather than partaking in discussions (Kuldip & Zoraini Wati Abas 2004). For these learners a gap exists between their old thinking and the new knowledge they encounter (Lin 2008) and in making adjustments to reduce this gap, they may feel disconnected at some points in their learning, which can lead to disruptions in collaborative activities (Brindley et al. 2009), such as participation in OLFs. In addition, these learners are working adults who have several roles to play, as well as, many requirements and demands to meet at work places, homes, and in the community. Realising the complexities that distance learners face, scholars in the field of adult education (Niewolny & Wilson 2009; Merriam et al. 2007) maintain that the learning process for adults be understood in context as it is to a large extent determined by the society in which they live. Therefore, in order to obtain a better understanding of Malaysian ESL distance learners' participation in the OLF, this study intended to find out the contextual factors that mediated ESL distance learners' participation in the OLF.

1.1 Sociocultural Perspective

Understanding distance learners' participation in OLFs entailed nesting this study within a sociocultural perspective since participation in any learning activity is embedded in the context in which learning takes place. Participation entails that a learner becomes a member of a certain community, communicates in the language of the community, as well as acts according to the community's particular norms (Sfard 1998). The sociocultural perspective, encompassing the concepts of, communities of practice (Wenger 2009); mediation (Vygotsky 1978); as well as, dialogic interaction (Bakhtin 1981), has been critical in underpinning this study.

Communities of practice (CoPs) are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger 2009: 1). CoPs have three essential characteristics, which are, the domain, community and practice. Being a member implies a commitment to a shared domain of interest. As each member participates in activities and discussions of the community, such as in the OLF, they help each other, build a relationship and share practices with one another. The practice includes developing a shared repertoire of resources, such as, experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems. Hence, online CoPs can be viewed as mediation tools that assist members in learning. This view parallels Vygotsky's (1978) contention that all learning is mediated by signs and tools.

According to Vygotsky (1962, 1978), mediation provides a link between social and historical processes, on the one hand, and individual's mental processes, on the other. He believes that as learning environments change, the available mediational tools and signs that can impact cognitive functioning also change. In other words, interaction, with online CoPs, that is either in the spoken and/or written mode, as well as, with the collection of resources and strategies used within the communities has the potential of mediating learners' participation in the OLF. This interaction is what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as 'dialogic', which is explained through his concept of 'dialogism'. According to him, all language, spoken and written, is dialogical. This is because language is a part of social context and our understandings of words and how to use them are shaped by and developed through interactions with others. He adds that just as the social influences the individual, the individual also influences the social. Therefore, by placing learners within CoPs, contextual factors mediating participation in the OLF can be examined since Wenger (2009), Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981) believe that social experiences shape the ways of thinking and interpreting the world.

1.2 Participation in an Online Forum

OLFs provide opportunities for authentic communication in the target language, allowing for actual audiences to function as friendly collaborators. Researchers have found that participation in the OLF can be conducive to enhancing language learning outcomes (Roziana Rosli 2010; Amhag & Jakobsson 2009; Lim 2009) as it is an act that involves written contribution. Participation in the OLF brings about freedom for language learners to explore alternative pathways to find and develop their own style of learning (Kern et al. 2004). Reading the views of other learners and sharing opinions via the asynchronous exchanges enriches students' knowledge about the subject-matter and encourages them to be more critical in their thinking (Arend 2009; Vethamani 2006). In addition, the asynchronous nature of the OLF provides opportunities for learners to plan their discourse and to notice and reflect on language use in the messages they compose and read (Balaji & Chakrabarti 2010; Warschauer & Kern 2000). Due to these benefits, Malaysian researchers (Roziana Rosli 2010; Siti Hamin Stapa 2007; Tan et al. 2006) have suggested that the OLF be incorporated into English language literacy programmes in higher institutions of learning.

However, concerns with regard to participation in the OLF cannot be negated. Misunderstandings can occur and learning can be affected due to reduced non-verbal social cues such as facial expressions and voice reflections (Rovai 2002). Learners may also be hesitant to post due to feelings of anxiety as they are afraid of making themselves

vulnerable to criticism from their peers as well as tutors when they write (Chang 2012; Clouder & Deepwell 2004). As a result, even though the potential for active group participation and group interaction exists, learner participation in the OLF does not always take place (Kreijns et al. 2003; Harasim 1989). This situation has prompted researchers to study factors influencing participation in the OLF and numerous factors have been recorded, for instance, role of the facilitator (Pramela 2011; Puvaneswari & Thang 2010; Dennen 2005; Salmon 2004; Tsang et al. 2002); design of discussion activities (Vonderwell & Zachariah 2005; Aspden & Holm 2004; Lamy & Hassan 2003); learner characteristics (Gerbic 2006; Tsang et al. 2002) and assessment grades (Supyan Hussin 2008; Gerbic 2006). The findings of these studies have shown that it is important to consider the needs and perceptions of learners in order to understand their participation in the OLF.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative case-study approach as it allows for the understanding of human learning and thinking processes within a specified context (Wertsch 1991), and enables the interpretation of findings from the participants' perspective.

2.2 Research Context

The case study involved a small group of distance learners studying at one of the learning centres of Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia's first open and distance learning university. OUM practices a blended pedagogy comprising three important components: self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials and online learning (Abtar & Ansary 2006). The blended learning model entails that learners fulfil certain conditions set for each course they are registered in. They are required to engage in autonomous learning activity using a printed module; attend 10 hours of face-to-face tutorials per semester, usually every fortnight; and participate in the OLF.

Learners are accorded 5 % marks for the online discussions which is a part of the final grade. The OLF is divided into two main components, "General" and "Academic". The "General" component consists of a general folder which is meant for exchange of information on non-content related matters such as schedules, deadlines and learning resources. The "Academic" component encompasses the 'Assignment' and 'Tutorials' folders that focuses on content-specific activity such as the assignment and tasks for formative assessment. The crucial difference between the two components is that the former may be moderated by learners themselves, while the latter is more structured and requires the tutor's presence on a regular basis to ensure quality moderation. Marks are only allocated for messages in the "Academic" folders.

2.3 Participants

For the purpose of participant selection, purposive sampling was used based on two criteria. First, it was compulsory for the participants in the course "English for Written Communication," to make written contribution to the OLF. Second, participants must have access to the Internet. Six participants comprising four males and two females who were involved in the OLF discussions were selected. They were all adult distance learners with employment, family and social obligations. They enrolled in the distance learning programme, seeking education for life opportunities such as work-related requirement, career development and improving knowledge and skills. The participants were also non-native speakers and writers of English who studied English as a subject in school, since English is the official second language in Malaysia.

2.4 Data Source and Analysis

Data for this study was collected throughout the duration of the course which was one semester equivalent to a period of three months, using multiple data sources. In order to obtain participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied, an open-ended interview using semi-structured questions as a guideline was conducted. The semi-structured interview was the primary source of data. Secondary data sources consisted of text-based interviews and informal chats. The text-based interview was conducted after the semi-structured interview. During the text-based interview, transcripts of the online discussions were used as the external stimulus to obtain information about learners' motivation for writing a particular entry in the OLF. The text-based interview was open-ended in nature and enabled insights into participants' thought processes to be obtained in a more relaxed manner. The casual chats or "informal conversational interview" Patton (2002: 342) with the participants was held before each tutorial session began concerning their thoughts, opinions and feelings about their academic and social worlds.

In order to analyse the data, both the semi-structured interview and text-based interview that were audio-recorded were transcribed. Transcripts that were in Malay were then translated directly into English while ensuring the intended meaning remained intact. The constant comparison method was used to develop data driven categories from the transcripts of both semi-structured and text-based interviews. Apart from that, field-notes that emerged as a result of the informal chats were analysed and information that was not evident in other data sources were highlighted and added on to the particular category.

3. Findings and discussion

Analysis of the data yielded three main categories of contextual factors that mediated distance learners' participation in the OLF. They are self, peers and tutor. Each of these main categories consisted of several sub-categories. The findings have been summarised and displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Contextual Factors Mediating Participation in the OLF

Contextual Factors		
Category	Sub-category	Example from Learners' Quotes
Self	a. Grades as motivation	To be honest, writing in this forum one of the reasons is to get the five marks because ... may help me to pass in the final exam
	b. Opportunity for writing practice	When we write in the forum and colleagues reply, sometimes their sentence also not very correct in the sense of grammar ... we actually can learn from there. So indirectly can improve vocabulary and also grammar...
	c. Perception of the OLF	Because this forum... it's like well-organised according to topics ... if there's something new, it'll be written 'New' and highlighted. So we'll know there's something new...
Peers	a. Information-sharing collaborators	Sometimes people tend to put other information than what we have in the module. They took from the Internet and so it's extra information and I like that.
	b. Providers of socio-affective support	...they [peers] will encourage me to go to the forum ... during tutorial, or they will call or SMS.
Tutor	a. Tutor's active participation in the OLF	... she always monitors the forum ... it's like we are looked after by the tutor so we have the spirit to participate. Even though we interact with our friends but the tutor is monitoring. Sometimes the tutor intervenes ... because of this the tutor plays the most important role.
	b. Face-to-face facilitation skills	I can talk to the tutor about my problem with English ... I always see her after the class finish to ask about assignment question and she help ...

3.1 Self

Self consisted of three sub-categories which are grades as motivation, opportunity for writing practice and learners' perception of the OLF. While each distance learner had his/her respective goals, desires, and expectations to be fulfilled, these three factors were common elements that mediated their participation in the OLF.

Even though participation grades carried a small percentage, albeit 5% of the total course marks, they became a form of extrinsic motivation for the distance learners. They were motivated to participate in the OLF to ensure they obtained better final grades for the English course. The importance of grades illuminates what has long been a cultural significance amongst the Malaysian society, that is, the vital role that assessment plays in the Malaysian education system. This finding supports the argument that what is valued is that which is assessed (Nor Aziah & Nik Suryani 2005; Ramsden 2003). The significance of grades in encouraging distance learners' participation in the OLF has also been discovered by researchers investigating learners in a fully online course (Vonderwell & Zachariah 2005), campus-based undergraduate learners in a blended learning setting (Supyan Hussin 2008; Gerbic 2006), as well as with other distance learners in a blended setting (Puvaneswary & Thang 2010).

Another important factor discovered was the distance learners' belief that participating in the OLF provided them an opportunity for English language writing practice. Since they were compelled to present ideas or information coherently in a written form, they viewed participating in the OLF as a way to practise and use the language particularly with a focus on vocabulary, grammar and sentence construction. By contributing to the OLF, each learner was able to observe, reflect and apply the linguistic aspects that he/she had come to understand while interacting with the online learning community, similar to the claim advocated by Balaji and Chakrabarti (2010). Subsequently, this practice became meaningful either for personal or work purposes. Seen from this perspective, participation in the OLF encourages low stakes writing. Since the focus of low stakes writing is to generate ideas, not to express intact ideas in immaculate form, learners need not fear being wrong. This finding also conforms to Warschauer's (2007) claims that online writing is a way to get practice so that students can improve their real writing.

Finally, distance learners' perception of the OLF as a learning and communication tool also factored in mediating their participation. Learners were generally optimistic in their view of the OLF as an inexpensive and convenient learning and communication tool. As distance learners who did not meet on a regular basis, they found the OLF user-friendly. Additionally, they perceived the OLF as beneficial for academic and social purposes. They disclosed that communication with peers and tutor enhanced the learning process through the exchange of ideas and opinions related to the subject-matter as well as fostered social relationship. In this sense, learners viewed the OLF as a good medium to explore and develop their evolving relationship with the online learning community since the OLF became a platform for them to share concerns and solutions, as well as enthusiasms and fears.

3.2 Peers

Peers played an important role in mediating distance learners' participation in the OLF. Analysis of findings revealed that assistance could be divided into two aspects which are information-sharing collaborators and providers of socio-affective support.

Peers were seen as information-sharing collaborators as they helped one another to cope not only with isolation but also with matters concerning the course. They played complementary roles by providing assistance and giving feedback when required, as well as, occasionally receiving guidance and support. Such assistance was made possible through the sharing of experiences and learning materials, answering questions and using one another as knowledge source. Moreover, the sharing of information was driven by the needs and interest of the distance learners, a finding also noted by other researchers in their respective studies (Amhag & Jakobsson 2009; Siti Hamin 2007; Tan 2006). To a large extent, the distance learners in this study displayed a sense of responsibility not only for their own learning, but also in helping their peers with their learning. Nevertheless, while peers constituted a valuable source of assistance that was essential for the success of the individual learner's learning experience, the quality of messages posted could have been better. While acknowledging their peers' contribution, these distance learners expected their peers to post messages that were beneficial with regards to learning because such messages would enrich their knowledge and enable them to be more critical, as postulated by researchers (Arend 2009; Vethamani 2006).

Peers also became providers of socio-affective support that emanated from either a single person or group of friends and took place either during face-to-face tutorials, via the OLF and/or out-of-class through telephone or short-messaging system (SMS). The dynamics of the peer group as a whole was a key factor in determining the extent to which socio-affective support was enhanced. The group of peers developed their friendship by sharing insights and concerns as well as helping one another to cope with matters related to the course. They alluded to the characteristics of CoPs put forward by Wenger (2009). While socio-affective support was created, learners also anticipated participation from all peers in the OLF to prevent monopolisation of the discussions by a single person or persons as well as to reduce boredom on having to frequently interact with or read responses from the same person. Moreover, having a wider participation may, result in more favourable discussions, and encourage healthier relationships.

3.3 Tutor

Findings of the study disclosed two significant sub-categories that mediated learners' participation in the OLF. They are tutor's active participation in the OLF and tutor's face-to-face facilitation skills.

The tutor's active participation was critical in mediating distance learners' participation, more so since the tutor was seen as 'the expert' in the subject-matter by learners. Learners relied on the tutor for information, help and advice in relation to the course material and course assignment. In this sense, the tutor, being the more capable person, was a mediating tool that facilitated the learning process by providing required assistance. The tutor's involvement in the teacher-led discussions during tutorials as well as participation in the OLF was valued. Questions put forth by the tutor in the OLF facilitated learner participation as the questions asked for their experience and opinions on written communication. These types of questions allowed learners to write and elaborate on something that they were familiar with. Furthermore, by responding to the tutor's questions learners were able to improve their writing skills especially as they referred to articles in the Internet and took note of the way sentences are constructed.

The tutor's involvement through prompt response and feedback to queries by learners encouraged them to participate to a greater extent in the OLF and this finding is widely echoed in the literature (Pramela 2011; Puvaneswari & Thang 2010; Dennen 2005; Salmon 2004). The distance learners in the present study seemed to find it crucial to obtain their tutor's validation to information and answers. Since these distance learners are products of the examination-oriented education system, accepting the authoritative word of the teacher, particularly in matters relating to the content and assignment was important as it involved grading. This finding demonstrates that the traditional way of learning, where learners absorb as much information as they can from the teacher (Zubaida Alsree 2000), is still prevalent among adult distance learners. Moreover, unlike previous studies that reported a shift in authority from the teacher to the learner (Dysthe 2002; Freiermuth 2001), the findings of this study showed that this change in authority is not something that can be taken for granted. Rather, such circumstances may be culture-dependent and may require a paradigm shift on the part of learners and tutors in terms of how they perceive the teaching and learning process in a distance learning programme utilising the OLF. In other words, mediation of learning by the tutor was vital to these adult learners.

Aside from that, the tutor's attitude and ability to inspire learners through words of encouragement during face-to-face tutorials, gave learners, particularly those with low English language proficiency, the confidence to interact in English and a belief that they could do well in the course. Subsequently, this influenced their participation in the OLF. The importance of the tutor's face-to-face facilitation skills as discovered in this study has also been highlighted by Tsang et

al. (2002) who found that tutors' philosophy, attitudes and ability to encourage learners to interact have considerable effect on learners' participation in asynchronous discussions.

To sum up, distance learners' varying degrees of participation in the OLF was mediated by the dialogic interactions they engaged in with CoPs, specifically, members of the online learning community comprising the self, peers and tutor. The findings indicate that it was the interplay of these contextual factors that mediated distance learners' participation in the OLF as shown in Figure 1.

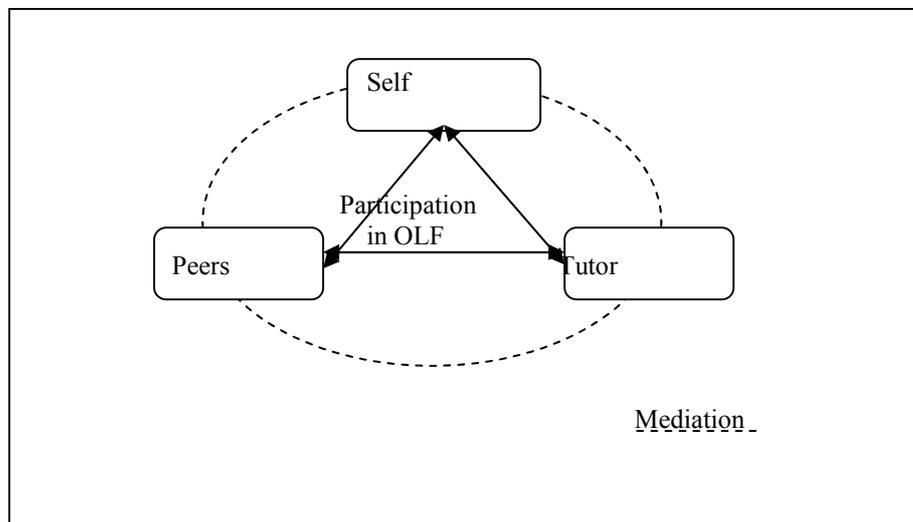


Figure 1. The Interplay of Contextual Factors Mediating Distance Learners' Participation in the OLF (Sadhna, 2013)

4. Conclusion

The analysis of this study revealed that successful learner participation in the OLF was mediated by the interplay of various contextual factors associated with self, peers and tutor. It emerged as a result of the dialogic interaction that learners had with CoPs within the immediate contexts of their society, institution and course. Encounters and engagement with the multiple voices and experiences from the various CoPs in different contexts influenced their individual needs, goals, expectations and values. These subsequently encouraged interaction between the learners with their peers and tutor that eventually mediated their participation in the OLF. The findings support the notion of learning as a socially mediated phenomenon that occurs through dialogic interaction with CoPs, particularly as learners negotiate understanding (Wenger 2009; Bakhtin 1981; Vygotsky 1978).

This study illustrates the importance of the tutor as a language instructor in the blended learning setting. When managing and moderating discussions in the OLF, tutors should ensure that instruction be anchored in real-world situations which will be more appealing to the distance learners to ensure successful learning outcomes. Apart from that, support in terms of timely as well as constructive feedback and guidance, is critical to ensure that discussions in the OLF proceed productively. Such support will not only enhance collaboration among members of the online learning community, but also encourage better learner participation. Additionally, the enthusiasm, encouragement and support of learners shown by the tutor are also crucial in the face-to-face classroom. They enable the tutor to bridge the discussions and new knowledge encountered in the face-to-face classroom with those in the OLF. Such support may also reduce any feelings of disengagement, with content, as well as with members of the learning community.

Findings of the study also indicate the importance of learner participation in the OLF. In the act of collaborating with others, learners can provide and receive feedback not only from the tutor but also from peers, which enriches their knowledge base. Furthermore, participating in the OLF is an ideal pedagogical activity as it encourages low stakes writing by allowing learners to explore the target language and practice their language use.

Reference

- Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad & Mansor Fadzil. 2002. Distance learning developments in Malaysia. Paper presented at a seminar on Developing Higher Education for 21st Century: UK and Malaysian Perspectives. Kuala Lumpur, 4 April
- Abtar Kaur & Ansary Ahmed (2006). E-learning challenges as perceived by communities of practice: Open University Malaysia's experiences. *AAOU Journal* 2 (1):51-65.
- Amhag, L. & Jakobsson, A. (2009). Collaborative learning as a collective competence when students use the potential of meaning in asynchronous dialogues. *Computers & Education* 52:656-667.
- Arend, B. (2009). Encouraging critical thinking in online threaded discussions. *The Journal of Educators Online* 6 (1): 1-23.

- Aspden, L. & Helm, P. (2004). Making the connection in a blended learning environment. *Educational Media International* 41 (3): 245-252.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Emerson, C. (Trans.), Holquist, M. (Ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Balaji, M.S. & Chakrabarti, D. (2010). Student interactions in online discussion forum: Empirical research from 'media richness theory' perspective. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 9 (1). <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/9.1.1.pdf> [5 August 2013]
- Brindley, J., Walti, C., & Blaschke, L. (2009). Creating effective collaborative learning groups in an online environment. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10 (3), 1–18.
- Chan M. Y. (2011). Engaging Students in Public Discourse using ICT. *ABAC Journal*, 31 (1): 20-27.
- Chang, C. (2012). Fostering EFL college students' register awareness: Writing online forum posts and traditional essays. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching* 2 (3):17-34
- Clouder, D.L. & Deepwell, F. (2004). Reflections on unexpected outcomes: Learning from student collaboration in an online discussion forum. In Banks, S., Goodyear, P., Hodgson, V., Jones, C., Lally, V., McConnell, D. & Steeples, C. (eds.). *Proceedings of the 2004 Networked Learning Conference*. <http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2004/proceedings/contents.htm> [10 June 2013]
- Dennen, V. P. (2005). From message posting to learning dialogues: Factors affecting learner participation in online discussion. *Distance Education*, 26(1), 125–146
- Dysthe, O. (2002). The learning potential of a web-mediated discussion in a university course. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27 (3):339-352.
- Fahy, P.J. (2003). Indicators of support in online interaction. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 4(1). <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/129/209> [13 January 2013]
- Freiermuth, M.R. (2001). Native speakers or non-native speakers: Who has the floor? Online and face-to-face interaction in culturally mixed small groups. *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 14:169-199.
- Gerbic, P. (2006). To post or not to post: Undergraduate student perceptions about participating in online discussions. *Proceedings of the 23rd annual ASCILITE conference: Who's learning? Whose technology?* http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney06/proceeding/pdf_papers/p124.pdf [10 November 2012]
- Guan E. C., Latifah Abdol Latif & Ramli Bahroom (2011). Enculturation of lifelong learning: Perspectives from the New Economic Model. In *The International Lifelong Learning Conference (ICLLL) 2011* (pp. 400-409), 14-15 November, Kuala Lumpur.
- Habibah Ab. Jalil, Angela McFarlane, Ismi Arif Ismail & Fadzilah Rahman (2008). Assisted performance – a pragmatic conception of online learning. *International Journal of Instruction*, Vol.1, No.2: 57-76.
- Harasim, L. (1989). Online education: A new domain. In Mason, R. & Kaye, A. (eds.). *Mindweave: Communication, computers and distance education*, pp. 50-62. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Hilton, J.L., Graham, C., Rich, P. & Wiley, D. (2010). Using online technologies to extend a classroom to learners at a distance. *Distance Education* 31 (1): 77-92.
- Hisham Dzakiria (2004). Technology does not always teach distance learners, but effective distance teachers do... *Malaysia Online Journal of Instructional Technology* 1(1): 60-81. <http://pppji.usm.my/mojit/articles/html/Hisham.htm> [2 May 2011].
- Hisham Dzakiria (2008). Students' accounts of the need for continuous support in a distance learning programme. *Open Learning*, 23 (2): 103-111
- Kern, R., Ware, P. & Warschauer, M. (2004). Crossing frontiers: New directions in online pedagogy and research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24:243-260.
- Kreijns, K., Kirschner, P.A. & Jochems, W. (2003). Identifying the pitfall for social interaction in computer supported collaborative learning environments: A review of the research. *Computers in Human Behaviour* 19: 335-353.
- Kuldip Kaur & Zoraini Wati Abas (2004). An assessment of e-Learning readiness at the Open University Malaysia. *International Conference on Computers in Education (ICCEE2004)*, Melbourne, Australia.
- Lamy, M.N. & Hassan, X. (2003). What influences reflective interaction in distance peer learning? Evidence from four long-term online learners of French. *Open Learning* 18 (1): 39-59.

- Lim, T.S.K. (2009). Online forum discussion: making sense of how knowledge is woven in a tapestry of social interactions and collaboration. International Conference on Information, Kuala Lumpur. <http://www.ici9.oum.edu.my/pdf/paper19.pdf> [17 July 2013].
- Lin, L. (2008). An online learning model in facilitating learners' rights to education. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 12 (1) <http://www.distanceandaccesstoeducation.org/Results.aspx?searchMode=3&criteria=en> [17 July 2013].
- Mansor Fadzil & Latifah Abdol Latif (2009). Enhancing institutional effectiveness and efficiency: A case for Open University Malaysia. Paper presented at International Forum on Open and Distance Education, Beijing, China, 15-20 October.
- Merriam, S.B., Cafarella, R.S. & Baumgartner, L.M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, M.G. & Kearsley, G. (2011). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning (3rd Ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Niewolny, K.L. & Wilson, A.L. (2009). What happened to the promise? A critical (re)orientation of two sociocultural learning traditions. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60 (1): 26-45.
- Nor Aziah Alias & Nik Suryani Nik Abdul Rahman (2005). The supportive distance learning environment: A study on the learning support needs of Malaysian online learners. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*. http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2005/Alias_Rahman.htm [16 July 2012].
- O'Reilly, M. & Newton, B. (2002). Interaction online: Above and beyond requirements of assessment. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 18 (1): 57-70
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications
- Pramela K. (2011). Fostering student engagement in online forums for language proficiency and knowledge enrichment. *International Conference of Social Science and humanity, IPEDR*, 5 (2), pp. 329-332. Singapore: IACSIT Press
- Puvaneswari Murugaiah & Thang Siew Ming (2010). Development of interactive and reflective learning among Malaysian online distant learners: An ESL instructor's experience. *The International Review of research in Open and Distance Learning*, 11 (3): 21-41.
- Rovai, A.P. (2002). Building a sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 3 (1):1-16.
- Roziana M. Rosli (2010). Exploiting online forum to enhance language and communication skills. In *Proceedings CULI 7th International Conference 2010. Pathways in EIL: Explorations and innovations in teaching and research*, pp65-73.
- Sadhna Nair (2013). Contextual factors mediating participation in an online forum: A case study. Unpublished thesis submitted for the degree of PhD. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Salmon, G. (2004). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online (2nd ed.)*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Sfard, A. (1998). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher* 27 (2): 4-13
- Siti Hamin Stapa (2007). Socio-cognitive theory in second language learning: The use of online forum among adult distance learners. *The International Journal of Learning* 14 (7):137-143.
- Supyan Hussin (2008). Creating a bigger ZPD for ESL learners via online forum in Malaysia. *College Teaching Methods & Styles Journal*, 4(11), pp.1-10.
- Tan, C. K. (2006). The implementation of an online discussion board for collaborative learning. In Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan, Norizan Abdul Razak & Mohamed Amin Embi (eds.) *Online Teaching and Learning in ELT*, pp. 111-131. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Tsang, E.Y.M., Choi, H.M.F. & Tam, K.C. (2002). Students' participation in computer-mediated communication. In Murphy, D., Shin, N. & Zhang, W. (Eds.). *Advancing online learning in Asia*. Hong Kong: Open University of Hong Kong Press.
- Vethamani, M. E. (2006). Computer-mediated communication in literature learning. In Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan, Norizan Abdul Razak & Mohamed Amin Embi (eds.) *Online Teaching and Learning in ELT*, pp. 111-131. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Vonderwell, S. & Zacariah, S. (2005). Factors that influence participation in online learning. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 38 (2):213-230.

- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Warschauer, M. & Kern, R. (Eds.).(2000). *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Warschauer, M. (2007). Technology and writing. In Davison, C. & Cummins, J. (Eds.), *The international handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 907-912). Norwell, MA: Springer
- Wenger, E. (2009). Communities of practice: A brief introduction. <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/> [6 August 2012]
- Wertsch, J.V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zubaida S.A. Alsree (2000). Email in the workplace. Its discursal and sociocultural impact. *Language Reporter*:19-34.