

# **Hearing Students' Voices: Communication, Interaction and Learning via University Students' Forums in Saudi Arabia**

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## ABSTRACT

In 2004, a Saudi student at the College of Engineering, King Saud University (KSU) designed and launched an informal students' forum that aimed at communicating students' voices to university professors and administrators. Students could register for free, post academic and career problems and suggestions, and participate in the discussion. Soon other student discussion forums appeared at other Saudi universities. The aims of such forums were to help university students discuss their academic, technological and social issues, to give university professors and administrators a chance to know what their points of view are, to exchange ideas and information, to create strong social bonds, to engage students in inter-personal dialog, to collect an archive of learning materials, and to enhance feelings of intimacy and a sense of belonging to the university. The KSU students' forum has several sub-forums for each college, a general, academic, literary, women's, language learning, entertainment, information technology, mobile phones, university news, humor, suggestions, and complaints subforums. Such university forums have become very popular among Saudi male and female students. For example, the King Saud University students' forums have 8,193 registered members, 16,048 threads and a total of 201,916 posts in three years. The present study examined the Languages and Translation students' forum and reports the kinds of topics, issues and problems posted, the advantages and disadvantages of those forums as perceived by a sample of participants, and the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the forums.

**Keywords:** *Students' forums. University Online discussion forums, student interaction, student collaboration, student communication.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Online discussion forums are very popular in all disciplines worldwide including education. Academic online discussion forums are commonly used for a single class, department, college or even university. A review of the literature has shown few studies that stated the benefits of online discussion forums. For example, Cody (2003) indicated that asynchronous online discussion forums can enhance community college students' education and contribute to their teaching and learning. Kirk, & Orr (2003) added that threaded discussion forums on the World Wide Web allow students to post, read, and respond to messages independently of time or place. Threaded discussion forums give students an opportunity for deeper reflection and more thoughtful responses and comments than instant messaging and chat. They are excellent tools for engaging online students. They foster lively interaction among the students and between students and their instructors. They serve as catalysts for active individual and group learning that requires dialog and exchange of ideas and information. They motivate students to become highly engaged in learning activities. They promote the development of learning communities. They are suited for covering topics that may be too controversial, sensitive, or personal for some students to discuss face to face.

In addition, Kuhl (2002) pointed out that online discussion forums are communication tools for actively engaging students in online courses. They are effective learning community strategies for online courses. They engaged students in the online course and the students begin to build learning communities that help in the successful completion of online courses.

Markel (2001) considered discussion forums a public place for discussion that allows time for reflection. They allow as many replays as participants want of what was said. A discussion can be revisited and commented on as long as the forum is open, while in a classroom or out of class. Instructors and students' responses are key components for the construction of shared knowledge through the online discussion forum. The deepest learning is in the writing about and discussing the course content within the learners' community. According to cognitive learning theories, discussion forums are a pedagogically sound practice that helps the students design and engage in the discussion forums with our students. They provide the students with opportunities for becoming actively involved in the course content and constructing their own deeper and lasting learning.

The literature showed few empirical studies that explored the effects of discussion forums on online learning. A study by Hill (2006) investigated how SIT2LRN facilitators use Discussion Boards for assessment and to promote online learning within courses. Results revealed some facilitators for promoting online engagement of students, and, in limited cases, student creativity and critical thinking. Facilitators noted a correlation between students' engagement in Discussion Boards and higher marks in a course. Through the Discussion Boards, facilitators encouraged collaboration, dialog, interaction, and reflection among students. They could align the course learning outcomes and discussion topics, encourage peer-to-peer feedback, promote friendliness, encourage work sharing, and motivate the students. Facilitators in upper online courses assessed discussion board activities, with diverse assessment techniques. A correlation between assessment of activities and student interaction was found.

In another study, Hmelo, Guzdial & Turns (1998) described CaMILE (Collaborative and Multimedia Interactive Learning Environment), an online forum for collaboration and reflection. Topics include project-based learning, a model for understanding collaboration tool use, collaborative domain-relevant student discussions, examples of using CaMILE in various university disciplines, and use of the World Wide Web.

In a third study, Ferry, Kiggins, Hoban & Lockyer (2001) used asynchronous forums, synchronous forums and e-mail as a knowledge-building community. The students worked in small and large groups to solve "real world" problems and authentic problems related to a school context. The study aimed at developing communication, collaboration skills, and negotiation. Findings showed that the students preferred to use forums that are available to all students. They used the forums in a variety of ways. The researchers concluded that many of the skills used in mediating face-to-face discussion could be transferred to the online discussion forums.

As in many parts of the world, online discussion forums have become a widespread phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, used in many fields and by different groups of professionals and non-professionals (Al-Jarf, 2006c; Al-Jarf, 2006d). In 2004, a Saudi student at the College of Engineering, King Saud University designed and launched an informal students' forum ([www.cksu.com](http://www.cksu.com)) that aimed at communicating students' voices to university professors and administrators. Students could register, post academic and career problems and suggestions, and share interact in the discussion. Soon other student discussion forums appeared at King Fahad University, King Faisal, Arab Open University, Imam University, and King Abdul-Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. Since then, informal university student forums have become popular online learning communities that are voluntarily launched, administered, and moderated by students. The students' forums were established to create opportunities for in-depth peer-to-peer and student-instructor-administration communication and interaction. These university students' online discussion forums are informal, i.e., not officially created or supervised by the university

administrators or departments. Sub-forums have been created for the different colleges: Agriculture, Architecture, Arts, Business, Computer Science, Dentistry, Education, Engineering, Languages and Translation (COLT), Medicine, Pharmacy, Pre-Health Science, and Science. In addition, several forum categories are available such as general, academic, literary, women's, language learning, entertainment, information technology, mobile phones, university requirements, university news, humor, suggestions, and complaints subforums and others. These university students' communities have not been the subject of any research studies in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the literature review showed lack of studies that investigated informal students' forums, that are created, designed, and supervised by students. Therefore, this study aims to examine the kinds of topics, issues and problems posted in the COLT students' forum; the benefits and shortcomings of those forums as perceived by the participants; and the linguistic and cultural characteristics of those forums.

The present study will focus on the COLT Forum only. COLT has 4 departments: (i) European (English, French, German, Russian, Spanish); (ii) Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Farsi, Turkish, Urdu); (iii) African Languages & translation (Swahili, Amharic); and (iv) Intensive language programs for grad and undergrad students such as Intensive language programs for engineering, medicine, science, computer science; and General English university requirements: arts, education, business and others.

## II. THE KSU UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' FORUMS

The KSU University Students' Forums have a total of 15,686 members, 25,073 discussion threads and 397,222 responses. The distribution of the KSU University Students' Forum members, threads and posts by college is shown in Table 1.

**Table (1) KSU Forum Statistics**

Participating Colleges	# of threads	# of Posts
Agriculture	131	1,131
Architecture	107	6,204
Arts	296	3,3947
Business	1,127	12,375
Computer Science	1025	10,022
Dentistry	671	8,977
Education	418	3,947
Engineering	453	3,115
Languages and Translation (COLT)	707	8,587
Medicine	670	7,183
Pharmacy	580	8,473
Pre- Health Science	215	3,636
Science	293	2,964
Grand Total	6693	110561

The aims of these forums are to help university students discuss educational, technological, social issues and others, to convey their points of view to university professors and administrators. The students' forums' terms and conditions of use do not allow the students to discuss issues that do not agree with the teachings of Islam; students may not ridicule or abuse any of the teachings of Islam; may not discuss unconstructive political issues, may not criticize other political regimes; may not use obscene or derogatory language; may not swear at other members; may not post an advertisement for other websites; may not use the forums for commercial purposes; cannot use the names of public figures; discuss issues related to religious sects such Sunnis and Shiites; and may not post women's pictures. Such university forums are very popular among Saudi male and female students.

### III. THE COLT STUDENTS' FORUM

The College of Languages and Translation (COLT) forum has 707 members or 10.56% of the total university students' forum members. They have posted a total of 8,587 or 7.77% of the total university students' forum posts.

### IV. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A sample of 105 students and 25 instructors were randomly selected from the members of COLT Forum. The sample of students belong to different college levels, represent both male and female members and study in the different foreign language programs at COLT. The instructors have a BA, MA, and Ph.D. degrees, work in the different language programs and teach a variety of language and translation courses. All the students and instructors were surveyed. They were contacted by e-mail. They were asked open-ended questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the students' forums. The responses were classified according to the questions and are reported qualitatively.

In addition, the first 300 threads in the forum together with the students' comments, responses to each thread were selected. The threads selected were classified according to topic. The linguistic features of the thread and posts were analyzed. Results are reported qualitatively.

**Table (2) Examples of Academic Topics Posted in the COLT Forums**

Forum topics	Forum topics
How to study German	College trip
COLT admission test	Scholarships
Admission requirements	Common errors in translation
Teaching techniques	"I love you" in 100 languages.
Why do we study arabic rhetoric	Arabization
Teachers' pronunciation	Lack of concentration during oral translation
Teachers' qualifications	Translation and language lessons
Advice to freshman students	Trados
Complaining about specific courses	TOEFL
Translation job opportunities	Terminology websites
Future of female translators	What do you think of grammar teachers?

Sample translations	We won't advance with these programs.
Bilingual dictionaries	Language learning websites
Translation websites	Machine translation on the internet
Translator's Day, Open Day	Glossary of poetic terms
Tips for a successful translation project	Announcements
I need names of dictionaries	First meeting between the students and college administrators and faculty

## V. RESULTS

### *5.1 Types of Topics Posted*

Table (1) shows a sample of language and translation topics posted by the members of the COLT Students' Forum. The students posted all kinds of language learning and translation topics related to the languages taught in the college, in addition to announcements, extracurricular activities, field trips, responses to students' questions and requests for help in non-academic problems.

### *5.2 Advantages of Students' Forums*

Results of the student and instructors' surveys showed that the students discuss educational, technological, social issues and others. The forums enable the students and instructors to exchange ideas and information. All of the participants find the topical language and translation resources, language learning lessons, conference announcements, and translation issues discussed useful and helpful. They benefit from the administrative queries, test-taking tips, translation career opportunities, and recommendations for freshman students. The forums help members collect an archive of learning materials. Some students post their poems, short stories and translated articles.

In addition, the students receive feedback and moral support from peers especially when they post academic inquiries or problems related to the college programs, registration, transferring to and from the college and others. Graduate students ask questions about and receive feedback on proposal writing and research methodology. The college administrators respond to some of the queries and explain the rationale behind some rules and regulations or programs components.

Moreover, the students' forums support collaborative knowledge creation and sharing in an academic environment. They give university professors and administrators a chance to know how students feel, what their points of view are. They create strong social bonds among the students of the college and the whole university. They forums enhance feelings of intimacy and a sense of belonging to the college and university among the students.

Since Saudi students' study in a gender-based environment (Al-Jarf, 2005), some female participants feel that the forum gives them an opportunity to interact with male peers and discuss what they study in the same course. Some male participants reported that female members receive more attention from the college administration as their questions and queries receive prompt and immediate responses.

### ***5.3 Students' Forum Shortcomings***

Some of the shortcomings of the students' forum are that only 22% of the participants are active. Some are active for a while, then lose interest and quit for dissatisfaction. Most members just browse and read. Others exchange compliments and thank-you notes. 90% of responses are not real comments. Just compliments. Some of the posts are trivial particularly in the general chat forum which has 8011 posts (6.6%). There is lack of control over the topics posted. Students can post anything as their identity is concealed and the admins are students.

96% of the students use a nickname to conceal their identity. Some students violate the dialog ethics such as: Use of vulgar language, attacking other people's opinions by attacking their character, resorting to personal attacks, and discrediting an opponent's character and use sarcasm rather than discussing the issue and using sarcasm. When a college administrator posts a topic or responds, supporting students post approvals and praise. Others cannot oppose the dean's opinion as they will be flamed by supporting participants or because they are afraid of punishment and worried about their grades. The following are some examples:

- *COLT empire.*
- *Hey dean, step down!*
- *Hoda (female department head) and Homiedan (college dean) are tweeting out of the squadron*
- *Yes to Dr Jamal, no to the Ain Shams university graduate*
- *A horrible sight at our college. Where's the dean*
- *Mrs Hoda, have mercy on those on earth.*
- *Nour Alhuda is a lizard without a tail.*

Some instructors believe that the COLT forum lacks a purposeful choice of discussion topics of common interest. All instructors are unhappy about students' personal attacks and unjustified and anonymous criticisms of instructors. If an instructor responds to an attack from students, the forum admin deletes it as forum admins are students and do not give instructors an equal opportunity to respond or express their opinion as the students. They do not verify what the students say about instructors and courses.

When a college administrator posts a topic or responds, supporting students post approvals and praise. Others cannot oppose the dean's opinion as they will be flamed by supporting participants or because they are afraid of punishment and worried about their grades.

Finally, although the forum helps the participants bring their problems to the administration's attention; it has not helped them solve any of the problems yet. When some students criticized the Russian language program, the administration did not respond and has not been contributing to the forum for more than a semester.

Due to the volume of threads, topics, comments and responses, it is difficult to locate a specific topic. The forum's search tool is inefficient in searching the forum archives. It is time-consuming to read and respond to messages of so many students. 32% of threads are not related to forum's main theme. In some posts, the message subject is not specified such as: "*have a problem, what do you think, need help, have a questions*". No specific language and translation sub-forums are available.

### ***5.4 Linguistic features of Students' Forums***

The students mostly use slang and colloquial rather Standard Arabic. Transliterated English or French words are interspersed. Spelling and grammatical mistakes are very common. Issues, responses, and comments are written with a humorous style. Large logos with pictures and

mottos are inserted in the posts. Varying font size and color. Forums support collaborative knowledge creation and sharing in an academic environment.

## **VI. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The benefits that students and instructors mentioned about the informal college students' forum in the present study are consistent with the benefits mentioned about academic online discussion forums in prior studies such as Kirk, & Orr (2003), Kuhl (2002), Markel (2001), Hill (2006), Kiggins, Hoban & Lockyer (2001), and Hmelo, Guzdial & Turns (1998).

Unlike prior studies in the literature such as Hill (2006), Ferry, Kiggins, Hoban & Lockyer (2001), Hmelo, Guzdial & Turns (1998) that investigated academic online discussion forums pertaining to specific online courses and where student participation is mandatory, participation in the students' forums in the current study is optional and the forums are not part of any academic course, nor officially created and supervised by a department or college within the university. The students' forums are informal. The threaded discussions are not structured. Forum members can create any thread and post anything they wish. The students can use them at their own convenience. This is contradictory with the results of a study by Kirk, & Orr (2003) about academic forums associated with specific online courses which mentioned insufficient engagement of online students in the threaded discussion forums due to the bulk of threaded discussions, replies and comments that add a great deal of reading to the students' regular course load. They distract students from more or equally important coursework and create overwhelming burden for instructors.

Unlike female students in Al-Jarf's (2007) study who were shy to participate and interact in the discussion forum of an online course with male and female students from another university, female students in the students' forum in the current study feel that the forum gives them an opportunity to interact with male peers and discuss what they study in the same course probably because they use a nickname, not their real names, thus their identity is unknown to the public.

Students' forums in this study are a hodgepodge of members with different majors, threads, responses, and comments. In this respect, Kuhl (2002) indicated that online instruction needs to focus on collaboration and communication tools for implementing learning communities. She gave some guidelines for creating online learning communities such as communicating frequently with the students in class; creating a space for non-classroom related interaction; and understanding the limitations and strengths of the technology being used.

To overcome the shortcomings of informal students' online forums, this study recommends that participating college instructors teaching different foreign languages such as Russian, French, Chinese, Japanese, and Turkish and others run a sub-forum in which students collaborate with foreign students in the respective countries. The students can engage in interpersonal dialog to develop cross-cultural communication, understanding, collaboration and expand foreign language learning (Al-Jarf, 2006a; Al-Jarf, 2006b; Al-Jarf, 2006e; Al-Jarf, 2005).

Furthermore, Saudi students were brought up in an educational system that is teacher-centered, in which opinions are unilateral and which emphasizes rote memorization rather than discussion and self-expression. They neither practice persuasive writing nor dialog skills. Thus, they assume a passive role, and stick to a unilateral point of view. To promote meaningful interaction, communication and collaboration in threaded online discussion postings, the COLT forum admins can invite instructors, department heads, college deans and other stakeholders to answer questions and listen to and discuss students' problems and issues they raise in the forum. Since all students at COLT take language skills courses, writing instructors can teach the students persuasive and argumentative writing skills. In speaking course, students' may engage in debates



about controversial academic, administrative, social and cultural topics, with each team trying to convince the opposing team and the audience with their point of view providing evidence and cogent arguments. Speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary and linguistics instructors can teach students at COLT politeness formulas in English, Arabic, and other languages under study.

## APPENDIX



Image (1): The King Saudi University Students Forum Main Page



Image (2) A Sample of Threads and Topics from The General Forums and Archives

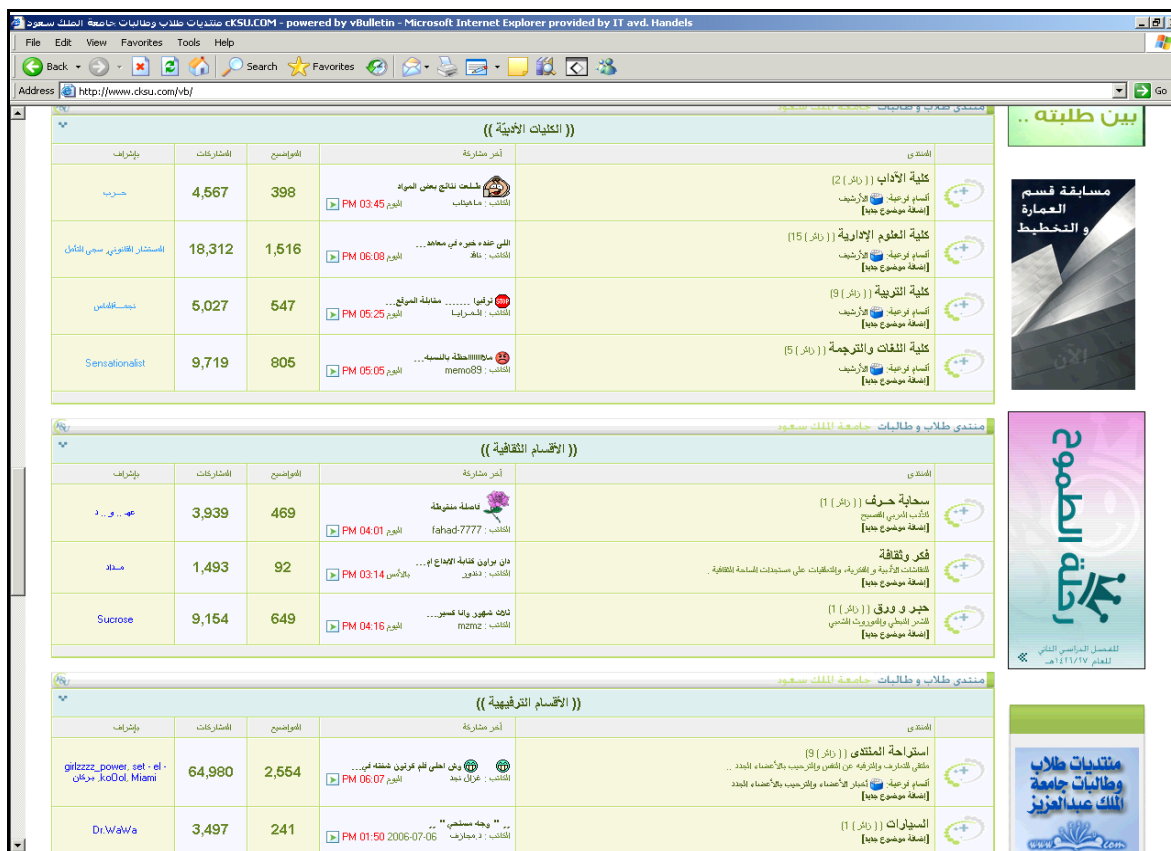


Image (3) A Sample of Threads and Topics from The College Forums

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