



Online Forum Discussions and the Development of Opinions in College-Level ESL Writing

To succeed academically, students must learn how to develop critical response to texts (both written texts and visual texts). Asynchronous forums provide an ideal setting for developing these response practices. This article illustrates how the author created scaffolded online forum discussions to support students in their academic literacy development. These discussions took place in a high-intermediate community college ESL class that included early- and late-arriving immigrant students, US-educated multilingual writers who have graduated from US high schools, and international students. The article concludes with a list of issues that teachers should consider when attempting to use online forum discussions in their specific contexts.

English i really hard for me because i have difficulty in writing essays because sometimes i don't know how to spell a word or say it if i am talking to someone. I took English class four years when i was in high school for i could learn how to say words, spell and how to write and essay. (...) Also if i need help i am going to look for it because i don't want to have hard time in writing essays and also i don't want people to be making fun of me when i don't know how to say a word. (Bruna, Latina)

When I was 12 and went to the United States. It was really challenging but I got the hang of it. Learning English was really challenging because if you go out, you have to speak english and if im home I speak my own language and, sometimes I mix it. And when I was in Junior High I took ESLs and on first it was hard to write in english and I think that I will get better on that. Im not sure but I think i took ESL like 3 years. (Simon, Filipino)

I remember some experiences I had when learned English. When i was in market and i didn't know how to translate in English, and i asked other people how to translate to English, but they ignore me because i was Asian person. Then I decide it that i have to learn english very well and help other people that don't know hoe to speak English. (Jooho)

Introduction

The students in my intermediate-level community college ESL courses vary greatly in background: adult immigrants who have been living in the US for more than 10 years, recently arrived immigrants, international students, and a growing number of US-educated multilingual students. This diverse group of students also varies greatly in terms of academic preparation; many are unfamiliar with academic conventions, others have had limited experiences with schools, and an increasing number of students have been in the American public education system for years, yet still lack the necessary skills, knowledge, and experiences to engage successfully in complex writing practices, as illustrated in the opening quotes of this article.

The official goal for the semester-long high-intermediate writing course I teach (Writing Level 4) is to take students from paragraph writing to essay development, to familiarize students with writing in different rhetorical modes, and to acquaint students with the expectations of college-level academic writing. In this context, conventional approaches to intermediate-level academic ESL writing have been problematic in several ways:

1. They usually place an enormous focus on form and on a specific, and frequently too rigid, essay organization;
2. The teacher is often the sole audience, assessor, and evaluator of the form and organization of the students' writing;
3. Instruction often ignores central ways of writing via digital media in the 21st century, such as emailing, blogging, sharing opinions in an online forum, and social networking, in spite of the fact that these ways of writing have become integral to not only our everyday lives, but also to success in academic settings (Thorne & Black, 2007).

Given these concerns, I decided to experiment with ways of engaging my students in writing via online forum discussions. Throughout 1 academic semester, I required students to write online posts and reply to each other in forum discussions as part of their course work. I designed the curriculum so as to integrate the writing in online forum discussions to the writing of academic essays. The writing in online forums served as one of the first steps, that is, as part of the "brainstorming" phase of the process of writing drafts of five-paragraph persuasive essays for our class. I specially designed the online forum discussions to provide students with a space to write informally and publicly about their initial opinions on controversial issues we debated in our class.

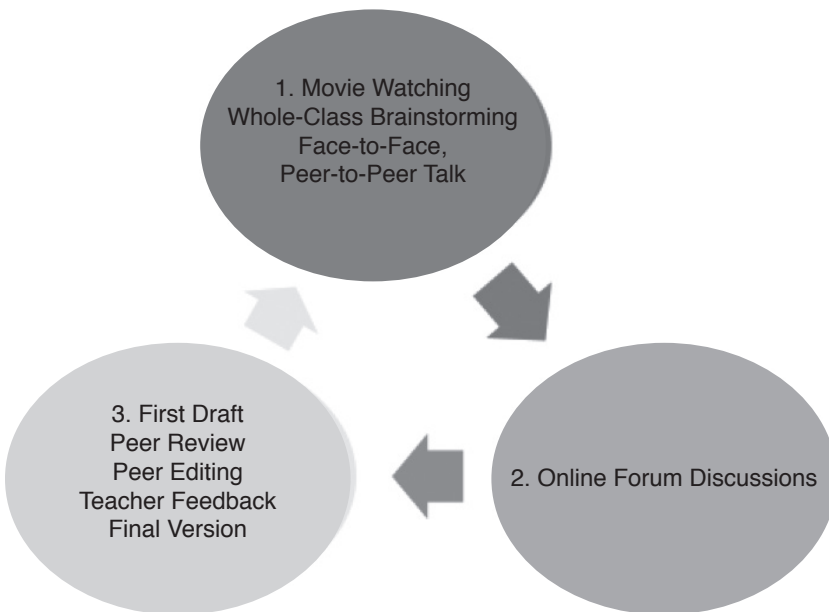
I organized the online forum discussions in the following way:

1. Before students started writing on the online forums, they generated five controversial issues in the movie *Spanglish* as a whole class ("whole-class brainstorming") with my help during a face-to-face discussion.
2. After this, each student selected one of the five issues to write a re-

sponse in the form of an online forum discussion post. In these posts, I required the students to explain their opinion on their controversial issue and support it with three reasons.

3. Afterward, I required the students to reply to other posts written by their peers. I asked students in their replies to specifically “argue” with each other so that they could help their peers develop strong reasons to support their arguments about the controversial issues in the movie.

In addition, as part of the norms for participating in the online forum discussions, I explicitly said that the students would not have to worry about spelling or grammar when writing in the online forums. I emphasized that the forum was not a place to work on “grammar,” and it was important to “feel comfortable and free” when writing in the online forums. Most important, I asked the students to “argue” with each other so that they could help their peers develop strong arguments and reasons to support their arguments about the controversial issues they generated about the movie. In the end, the same controversial issues were used to generate a second and more formal response in the form of a five-paragraph persuasive essay. Students were aware that their responses on the online forums were going to be later expanded and turned into their thesis statement for their final essays. In the case of the essays, in addition to working on clarity, organization of ideas, and academic style, the students would also have to pay attention to grammar and spelling errors. The process of writing in Writing Level 4 as well as the place of online forum discussions in this process is illustrated below.



To help readers visualize the kinds of activities, prompts, and instructions given to students on how to participate in the online forum discussion about

the movie *Spanglish*, below are examples of the specific language, sequence, and structure I used to pedagogically frame teaching decisions and student actions. As explained above, the first step entailed that students generated five controversial issues in class together with the teacher. This was done in the form of a “whole-class” brainstorming and discussion. While the students came up with their ideas, I recorded what they said on the board, helping them turn phrases into complete questions using the modal verb “should.” Here are the final five controversial issues students generated about the movie *Spanglish*:

1. Illegal immigration: Should Flor stay in the US?
2. Private schools: Should Flor send Cristina to the private school?
3. Different lifestyles/values/beliefs/identities: Should Cristina change her lifestyle or identity?
4. Love: Should Flor and John be together?
5. Other people’s kids: Should people interfere or get involved in other people’s kids’ education?

The second step required that students write an opinion about one of the controversial issues previously discussed in class. To help students with this, I made the list of controversial issues available on the class website. In asking students to provide their opinions, I intentionally planned so that the focus of the prompt was on the message, on accomplishing the act of writing, and on conveying an opinion to others. Although grammatical accuracy was not emphasized, I still provided a model of how to write “an opinion” so that students had an example of a linguistic way to express an opinion in English. The third and final step required that students post a comment to two other classmates’ opinions about the controversial issues, which would entail that students read their peers’ ideas. This helped me set the stage for students to become an audience for each other. Below is the exact prompt I used. It demonstrates the sequence and the language of the task that framed the online discussion.

1. Choose 1 controversial issue in the movie *Spanglish*.
2. Write your opinion about it.
3. Reply to two other classmates.

Online Forum Discussions and the Development of Opinions

In the perspective adopted in our Writing Level 4, language was seen as a vehicle to accomplish real purposes and functional tasks with others (Nunan, 2004). In the case of the online forum discussions, students were required to accomplish the task of “arguing” with each other in order to build strong opinions about the topic they were writing about. The rationale for using online discussions as one of the steps in the writing of a persuasive essay was that through these discussions, students would have the opportunity to develop their opinions in writing and feel compelled to find evidence to support their opinions when arguing with each other in written form. These more “robust” and substantiated opinions would then become the thesis statement of their final essay

on the topic they were writing about. Online forum discussions in this context served as a space for students to discuss their opinions with each other, sharing and refining their ideas.

Another important aspect of the way in which online forum discussions were integrated into the writing activities of our Writing Level 4 class was my belief that writing was often initiated and planned in actual talk and conversation (Leander & Prior, 2004). In our class, students were also given the chance to orally discuss and negotiate opinions before writing them in online forum discussions and essays. In view of that, I purposefully developed writing activities that combined talking and different kinds of writing, including online forum discussions. In this sense, online forum discussions can be here considered genres that share more characteristics with oral discussions than with more academic and formal ways of writing (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007), given that the online medium allows for interaction and the possibility of response. I believed that engaging in writing informally in online forums in collaboration with others would provide students the opportunity to write down their initial ideas while having the chance to read and respond to other people's ideas.

In sum, pedagogical decisions for the use of online forum discussions were made with the intention to:

1. Move away from focus on form to focus on meaning making and the development of strong opinions;
2. Diminish the role of teacher-centered evaluative feedback, which is usually focused on form and grammar, to promote student-generated collaborative feedback, which would be more focused on content and sharing of opinions; and
3. Encourage students to become readers and resources for each other.

I believed that this process could potentially help students move from talking and writing about their opinions in online forums with a wider audience of peers to afterward writing in a more academic and less interactive type of writing, in our case, the five-paragraph academic persuasive essay.

Below is a sample of an online forum discussion thread about one of the most popular controversial issues about the movie *Spanglish* generated and selected by students in Writing Level 4.¹

Should Flor send her daughter to private school?

By Yuri - Wednesday, September 29, 2010, 10:42 AM

In my opinion, she doesn't need to send her to private school. The one reason is the school fees it might be too expensive. The tuition in the private it must more expensive than the normal school. So I don't think Flor can afford the tuition. The second reason is her daughter may be not adapting the new environment. Comparing the other students, her daughter's is different. So maybe she will lose herself! In the end, Flor shouldn't send her daughter to private school~

Reply 1: Should Flor send her daughter to private school?
by Shannon - Wednesday, September 29, 2010, 02:11 PM

YES! That is true. When her daughter goes to school, she will compare herself with others. She will see differences between them. That will make her feel uncomfortable. And lose faith.
So I agree with your opinion.

Reply 2: Should Flor send her daughter to private school?
by Marlene - Thursday, September 30, 2010, 03:43 PM

In my opinion Flor should send her daughter to private school because this is a great opportunity. Private schools offer a better education and programs for children. Private schools have a small community of students and they are more controlled. Also, private schools have fewer discipline problems.

Reply 3: Should Flor send her daughter to private school?
by Zack - Thursday, September 30, 2010, 07:22 PM

The thing about the schooling might not be a problem. Because there are 20,000 dollars in scholarship for Cristina. But I worry about that Flor might lose something if she sends her daughter to the private school. Could not be equal with Deborah. That's the question I worry about.

Reply 4: Should Flor send her daughter to private school?
by Simon - Sunday, October 3, 2010, 07:51 PM

I think that Deborah < John's wife is going to pay for Christina's education and it's true that private school is really expensive, but they can afford it

Reply 5: Should Flor send her daughter to private school?
by Wendy - Sunday, October 3, 2010, 08:32 PM

I think going to private school with a scholarship is a wonderful opportunity, so Flor should send her daughter to the private school. I don't understand why she has hesitated about that matter.

Reply 6: Should Flor send her daughter to private school?
by Josh - Sunday, October 3, 2010, 08:29 PM

Yes, I agree with you. Flor is not rich for supporting private school, and changing environment is a really important thing for kids. If Cristina fails to adapt to a new environment, that will be a big problem.

Concerning the construction of strong opinions and arguments, there were two main ways of agreeing and disagreeing in replies given in this online forum discussion. On one hand, students used prototypical expressions of modality for agreeing and disagreeing with the verb “agree,” such as “I agree,” “I strongly agree.” When this happened, students used such expressions of modality only positively; that is, the negative markers “not” or “dis-,” as in “disagree,” were not found in the whole online discussions about *Spanglish*. On the other hand, students used other expressions of modality to agree or disagree, such as modal verbs (e.g., “should,” “shouldn’t,” and “can”) or mental clauses (e.g., “I think,” “I don’t think,” and “In my opinion”). For example, the sample discussion thread above shows students using “I agree” explicitly when they agreed with the original post in Reply 1 and Reply 6. In contrast, when students disagreed, they tended to use other expressions of modality in Reply 2, Reply 3, Reply 4, and Reply 5.

As we continue to examine the construction of opinions, note that the student who initiated the online thread identifies himself as not recommending Flor to send her daughter to the private school; however, the arguments and reasons he makes are highly hedged by expressions of modality such as “might” and “maybe,” which makes his statements less forceful and assertive. In looking at ways of being, it seems as if the ways in which this student uses language to express his opinions reveal a nonaggressive way of putting his arguments forth in the forum. Expressions of modality, especially the historical forms of modal verbs such as “might,” can also be related to politeness, as highlighted by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). The use of low-value expressions of modality can also indicate that this student is positioning himself in the forum as a respectful and polite participant. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) consider it extremely important for ESL learners to know how to “soften” requests and statements by using expressions of modality appropriately in social interaction. This knowledge, according to the authors, helps learners not be perceived as abrupt or aggressive by other speakers of the language. It is interesting to note that many students who replied to this post challenged the argument by stating that Flor’s daughter would receive a scholarship and the cost of the tuition should not be a problem. This discussion demonstrates that students’ posts in this forum recognized when other students’ posts were not strongly committed to the truth value of their statements, and, thus, acknowledged how to use these opportunities to make their own statements stronger, by counterarguing what was originally said in the new discussion topic.

Discussion

Overall, engagement in online forum discussions in our class afforded students the opportunity to develop complex and strong arguments when expressing and disputing opinions with each other. Their online conversations were permeated by overt and explicit expressions of modality, which is a grammatical resource used to express opinions in the English language. Through engagement in online forum discussions, multilingual students seemed to have practiced different ways to experiment with when and where to use expressions

of modality to express their opinions. It seems that this specific online forum discussion served indeed as an environment for expressing and disputing opinions in this ESL writing class. In doing so, online forum discussions provided a rich place for using language in meaningful and purposeful ways, one of my main objectives and concerns.

Above all, the most important feature of the online discussions in the process of writing academic persuasive essays in our class was that it also provided students with a written record of other people's ideas. In the forum, other students' ideas were public and visible, and, as such, available for being taken up, challenged, and used by participants to refine and further develop their arguments and opinions in their essays. In light of this, online forum discussions became powerful supports or "scaffolds" for the development of academic literacy in the context of our ESL writing class.

However, despite the many positive outcomes, in designing online forums I also realized that collaboration and active participation in online forum discussions do not simply occur. The lack of replies or the very low number of replies a single post gets is a common problem when online forum discussions are used for pedagogical purposes. For varying reasons, students seemed to find certain discussion topics in the forum more stimulating and engaging than others. As a result of these problems, I realized that careful pedagogical consideration, including clear instructional purposes for the multiple uses of technology, need to be considered, especially concerning my students' broad range of diverse experiences with computers and the Internet.

In addition to what I as an instructor have noticed as successes of using online forum discussions, students in Writing Level 4 have also pointed out the significance of having participated and/or having had access to online forum discussions on the class website (Moodle) in the process of writing their essays. Many Writing Level 4 students have indicated online discussions as their favorite course activity when informally polled by the teacher at the end of the semester. In addition, many of the students justified their answers by saying that online discussions with peers have helped them get ideas in their essays. As an example, below are two self-reported US-educated students' opinions and perceptions on how helpful online forum discussions in Writing Level 4 were for them in writing their essays.

I think this course has helped me to know how to write an essay and what steps i should follow, now I know how to use my ideas and how to settle them in a essay. My favorite activities during this course were participate in the in groups, discussions in Moodle because every one has a different opinions and i like reading them and sometimes disagree with my classmates. (...) My favorite topic essay was spanglish because we know how flor felt because she didnt know how to speak in English. (...) I think that moodle it is a very good complement to help us in our assigments. I like the way that we use to submit our ideas and essays in this helpful site in internet. I will recommend this class because people that take this class learn a lot and have fun at the same time. (Bruna, Latina)

i think this course helped me a lot to write a good essay because i thought i can't write an essay but throughout his course the instructor help me and guide me to write what i want to say. Also my favorite activities in this class was watching a movie before writing g an essay because it help me to think what should i write. i would choose the first persuasive essay to be my favorite essay because this essay was the first essay that i wrote in class and it's about immigration. (...) In addition, i liked to use Moodle because i could communicate with my classmates and trun the homework in Moodle. I especially recommend you to take this class because this class will changed your writing style and become more academic writer. (Jooho, Korean)

These students' opinions suggest that students who participated frequently in online forum discussions in Writing Level 4 perceived these discussions to be helpful in the process of developing and sharing opinions in writing essays for that class. For all the reasons mentioned above, online forum discussions became an invaluable practice for the development of academic essay writing, familiarity and comfort with the use of technology to communicate with others, and confidence with writing in English in our class.

Pedagogical Implications

My attempt at using online forum discussions in my ESL writing class has taught me that successful use of technological platforms and media requires careful pedagogical consideration and also much trial and error. As with most technology, I anticipate that instructors will find challenges and successes with online forum discussions, especially when teaching an extremely diverse group of students. To make this process less intimidating and help pave the way for the use of online forum discussions for pedagogical purposes in ESL writing practices, here are some practical suggestions to consider before designing these activities:

- Have a clear place and purpose for online forum discussions in the process of writing essays or other major assignments in your class;
- Access prior knowledge and familiarize your students with the topics they will be writing about by facilitating oral and face-to-face discussions in class before having students engage in online forum discussions;
- Use authentic materials, such as movies or other texts, to promote genuine peer discussions about shared topics, opinions, experiences, and interests;
- Design situations in which students feel a real sense of audience, in which they can rely on using their peers as resources and readers (e.g., encourage replies with the real purpose of "arguing with each other");
- Develop clear prompts and provide lots of models of what you are expecting in terms of posts and replies;
- Schedule regular visits to a computer lab so that students have the

chance to practice engaging in these new emerging ways of writing in a safer space with each other's and the teacher's support;

- Above all, include students in the process of generating prompts and discussion, turning them into full participants and creators of content and knowledge.

As my experience with the use of online forum discussions demonstrated, active participation in a variety of practices of digital literacy can surface as an option in bridging multilingual student access to academic practices in a more meaningful way. Particularly when they are learning to become literate in a second language, affording multilingual students structured and purposeful opportunities to engage in diverse practices of digital literacy, such as online forum discussions, can help integrate and empower them to participate in privileged and less alienating ways of acting in society through reading and writing. To become an active and successful participant in society in our times seems to require diverse social experiences, including the ones in the virtual world of the Internet. When afforded these opportunities, language learners, including US multilingual students, can use these experiences to transform and adapt the knowledge they acquire in school to become resourceful and motivated writers.

Author

Clara Vaz Bauler received her PhD in Education with an emphasis in Applied Linguistics from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has been teaching Portuguese and English as a Foreign and Second Language since 2001. Clara works as the world language content instructor and supervisor at the Teacher Education Program at UCSB, and her research focuses on SLA methodologies, ESL writing, and technologies as educational environments.

Note

¹Pseudonyms were assigned to students so as to protect their identities.

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