

The Influence of Teacher Presence in Blended Learning: A Case Study in a Postgraduate Course

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of teacher presence in a postgraduate course. Results show that a teacher's immediate feedback to students' contributions indeed encourages students' involvement in online discussion. A key issue in online course administration is how to improve the quality of student participation. Regarding the questionnaire, students reported on both the strengths and weaknesses of online activities. The students gained encouragement from peers, were more motivated to investigate the topics, and many of them found it easier to contribute their ideas online than in class. On the other hand, students who did not pay enough attention in class had trouble getting involved in online activities; in addition, if students did not get responses from the teacher and peers, they tended to feel disappointed and discouraged. We can infer that teacher presence plays a very important role as it affects how students participate in discussions. Especially when students have contradictory comments on controversial issues, they look to the teacher to step up and take a stronger leadership role. The students think that it is quite essential to have a teacher's involvement toward these critical points.

Keywords: teacher presence, peer discussion, online interaction

INTRODUCTION

Online discussion boards are increasingly utilised in the administering of university courses, consistent with trends regarding the integration of information communication technologies into education. In the traditional face-to-face classroom, a teacher performs the multiple roles of organizer, instructor, controller, counselor, expert, and resource evaluator. The advent of the information society has brought about some significant changes in the teacher's role, including the following: changes in relationships with students; changes in roles as facilitators, challengers and managers who support learning; changes in the content and scope of teaching; changes in the locus of control, from the teacher to the learner. The role of the teacher must change insofar as it is no longer sufficient for teachers merely to impart content knowledge. Rather, it is crucial for teachers to encourage critical thinking skills, promote information literacy, and nurture collaborative working practices in order to prepare students for the challenges that await them in the information-age society. Therefore, the teacher's presence in online discussion can be an effective way to motivate students (Graham, Cagiltay, Craner, Lim, & Duffy, 2000) and is essential to promoting learning (Fredericksen, Pickett, & Shea, 2000).

Although discussion boards are becoming more and more common in the administering of university level courses, understanding of how to best utilise them remains modest amongst researchers. (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). O'Quinn and Corry (2002) found that many teachers believe online courses, and even online components of traditional face-to-face courses, to be highly time-demanding, with limited rewards or recognition for efforts. Furthermore, some studies have shown that students do not consider teacher presence to be as crucial in the online environment as in the face-to-face classroom (e.g. Kelly, Ponton, & Rovai, 2007). However, McKay, Van Schie and Headly (2008) and McKerlich and Anderson (2007) have argued for the importance of direct instruction, especially in the beginning of a virtual world learning experience, regardless of the technology used.

This study attempts to explore how teacher presence in an online discussion fosters students' social interactions and connections to the course material, whether teacher presence can enhance the frequency of online discussion, and what students' responses have to say about the effectiveness of online discussions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The many options made available by new technologies help teachers to design interactive classes in both distance and blended courses, allowing learners to more effectively communicate, participate, and collaborate in authentic tasks (Goold, Coldwell, & Craig, 2010). For example, Kol and Schcolnik (2008) indicated that online forums can be implemented in courses to encourage thoughtful communication in the foreign language, allow for the development of writing skills, provide a framework for text discussion, and facilitate the acquisition of interactive competence. Such a student-centred class allows for peer learning while fostering additional benefits to students in such areas as enhanced motivation, an increased sense of responsibility for one's own learning, and improved metacognitive skills (Parr, Wilson, Godinho, & Longaretti, 2004; Savignon & Roithmeier, 2004).

Chau and Cheng (2010) indicate that the swing of focus from that of teaching to learning, the move from a directed, positivist paradigm (explanation, knowledge transmission, product as good or bad) to a constructivist one (inquiry, knowledge creation, process as unfolding), requires teachers to reconceptualise the changing teacher-student relationship and calls for a clear definition of teacher responsibility in independent learning. Many scholars suggest that teachers need professional development to acquire strategies for successful teaching as current online teaching environments change (e.g. Dixon, Dixon, & Axmann, 2008, Wang, 2009; Wilson & Stacy, 2004). For example, Cebrian De La Serna (2003) points out that teachers nowadays play different roles, such as in being assessors of the autonomous learning process, resource facilitators, designers of new technology-rich learning environments, adapters of different materials, producers of new pedagogical materials in ICT-based settings, and evaluators of different processes. Denis, Watland, Pirotte, and Verday (2004) define the profession of e-tutoring using a list of seven roles for e-tutors to manage in their interactions with students in the online classroom: content facilitator, metacognition facilitator, process facilitator, advisor, assessor, technologist, and resource provider. Brown (2002) indicates that different characteristics of roles may need to be combined to address specific e-learning contexts suited to the reality of the contemporary educational environment. Kim, Lee, and Lim (2010) also suggest that the roles of instructors vary according to learners' needs and learning contexts so that teachers are facing challenges in designing innovative pedagogical approaches to promote learners' cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition. Craig, Goold, Coldwell, and Mustard (2008) recommend that university staff need to be provided with

opportunities for professional development to ensure that they have the key skills in online teaching to manage and meet what students expect of them as online teachers. Similarly, Goold, Coldwell, and Craig, (2010) stress that targeted professional development is required, especially for novice e-tutors so that they can direct students' online communication and collaboration in ways that will ensure that learning objectives are being met.

The concept of teaching presence is defined as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). Indicators such as setting curriculum and methods, shaping constructive exchange, and focusing and resolving issues are used to measure the extent to which each category of teaching presence is represented in an online course.

Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang (2003) used Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2001) “practical inquiry” model as a framework to analyze the patterns and types of collaborative interactions taking place in three online classes. They found that students engaged primarily in “serial monologues” when instructors' explicit guidance and “teaching presence” were not provided. Shea, Li, and Pickett (2006) focused on two components of a model, teaching presence and community, for online teaching and learning. They regard teaching presence as the core role of the online instructor, and believe it to be a promising mechanism for developing learning community in online environments. Similarly, Arbaugh and Hwang (2006) established construct validity for the components of teaching presence and suggest that it is a valid framework for studying online management education.

Brady and Bedient (2003) point out that teacher presence depends mainly on effective feedback in the process of communication. Their study investigated the effects of increased teacher presence on student performance and attitudes towards instruction. For the experimental group, the instructor provided detailed feedback that addressed cognitive, affective, behavioral and personal elements of student performance and communication for all email and discussion postings. Moreover, detailed feedback and informational feedback were used in a weekly email which was sent only to the experimental group. Results showed that there is no significant difference between groups as measured by the total course attitude variable. However, the analysis of variance for student attitudes toward the instructor shows a significant difference between groups as measured by the total instructor attitude variable. The authors concluded that the construct of teacher presence needs clearer focus to be effective in web class design if educators want to achieve higher student achievement and better

attitudes in designs built around improved instructor-student contact.

In a well formulated task such as the categories of teaching presence designed by Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2001), no overt teacher facilitation is necessary to support advanced cognitive presence, but teacher involvement and prompting might be necessary for students to attain a solution stage frequently and collaboratively with feedback and input from other students (Arnold & Decate, 2002). After experiencing the tasks and challenges arising from a project related to international tele-collaboration, Wang and Ip (2010) suggest that in addition to elaborate preparation and careful monitoring, timely adjusting of the project is of great importance to achieve satisfying learning outcomes.

The background presented above shows that online discussion has the potential to foster student social interaction and facilitate understanding of the contents of the subject; this study is based on the incorporation of online discussion in an English phonology course. Moreover, teacher presence is the term adopted in this study to refer to the participation of the instructor in the activities of online discussion. To explore how teacher presence can enhance the frequency of students' participation in online discussion, and to better understand students' perceptions of the effectiveness of online discussion, teacher presence was adopted in this study. Teacher presence incorporated in the study is mainly the teacher's feedback, comments, and reminders to help students discuss the posted topics effectively. The instructor's roles are process facilitator, advisor, and assessor. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between student online discussion frequency and teacher presence?
2. What are the students' responses to the effectiveness of the online discussion?

METHOD

Subjects

This study took place within an English phonetics and phonology postgraduate course at a university in Hong Kong during the fall semester of 2010. This particular class was chosen because it took advantage of the additional learning opportunities afforded by the use of an asynchronous online discussion E-learning system provided by the university as a supplement to traditional classroom discussion.

Initially there were twenty students in the class, but two students dropped after the second week and one student dropped after the third week. The remaining seventeen students, three males and fourteen females, aged from 22 to 28, had backgrounds in

English education, literature and translation, as well as economics and business.

Course contexts

This course enabled students to develop their knowledge of the English sound system by examining its segmental and suprasegmental features, thereby helping participants develop knowledge of English phonetics and phonology in relation to different varieties of English and enhance their own language proficiency in terms of the English sound system for effective communication in the English as an international language (EIL) context.

It is a three credit point course and runs over 12 weeks. Online discussion is one of the teaching/learning tasks in this course. The online discussion aims to further facilitate a cognitive understanding of the pedagogical topics through collaborative learning. The guidelines are presented as follows:

1. Form small groups of 4.
2. To use personal experiences to reflect on what students have read/learned in the course so that they would be better able to connect the issues with real-life, personal experience.
3. To be exposed to different points of view and gain a better understanding of the complexity of these issues by discussing the topics with their group members.
4. Though it is not necessary to summarize all the information of the readings, students are nonetheless expected to demonstrate some theoretical knowledge of the issues. They should make an explicit connection between the research content and their own experiences in learning a foreign language.
5. This is an exchange of ideas and opinions, so they must respond to their group members' postings.
6. There is no required length on the postings.

Five discussion topics are listed below:

Topic 1. Introduce yourself and talk about your experience learning the pronunciation of English in a classroom setting.

Topic 2. What kinds of ESL/EFL learners would benefit from learning a phonemic alphabet for consonants (or vowels)? What kinds of learners would not? Do you think certain consonant e.g. /p/ or vowel e.g. /e/ difficulties cause a greater breakdown in communication or are more irritating to listeners than others? If so, which?

Topic 3. In your opinion, what contributes more to a learner's intelligibility – accuracy of consonant and vowel sounds, or command of stress, rhythm, and adjustments in connected speech?

Topic 4. Self Study Week: Response to one of the 10 questions raised by Keys and Walker (2002)

Topic 5. Please share your research proposal with us.

Differences in difficulty levels for the different topics for discussion are to be expected. For example, Topic 1 should be more difficult than Topic 5, as the former is to express personal experiences, while the latter is to propose and share an academic work. Relatively speaking, topics 2 to 4 are comparable in their levels of difficulty, since for all of these students need to read related articles and integrate the content knowledge with their personal experiences. The strategies for teacher presence were pre-planned before the study took place. In general, teacher's comments and sending reminders are two commonly used strategies during the process.

Procedure of the online discussion

To get the discussion going, they have to post their first message by 1:00 pm on the second day of the discussion period (which usually falls on a Saturday). They should post at least one more time to comment on their peers' views after their first message.

Instruments

The questionnaire designed for this study contained 18 five Likert-type questions and 4 open-ended questions. Four constructs are included. The first one concerns the comparison of online discussion and in-class discussion (Items 1-4 and 7-8). The second one is about the critical thinking abilities involved in the online discussion (Items 6, 13 and 16). The third construct regards contents and English learning (Items 5, 10-12, and 14-15) and the fourth one related to interaction (Items 9 and 17-18). The open-ended questions were designed to elicit more detailed information about the advantages and disadvantages of the course design.

Procedures

Approximately two weeks were spent on each topic in English phonetics and

phonology, such as Week 3’s focus on how segmental features affect communication. Online discussion was an integral component of the course activities, but did not account for any percentage of students’ final grades. The web-based E-learning system, mentioned above, was available for students to access from any computer terminal within or outside the university computer network. The online discussion was organized with the same weekly thematic focus as covered during class. Student contributions to the weekly discussions were based on their required readings (See Figure 1).

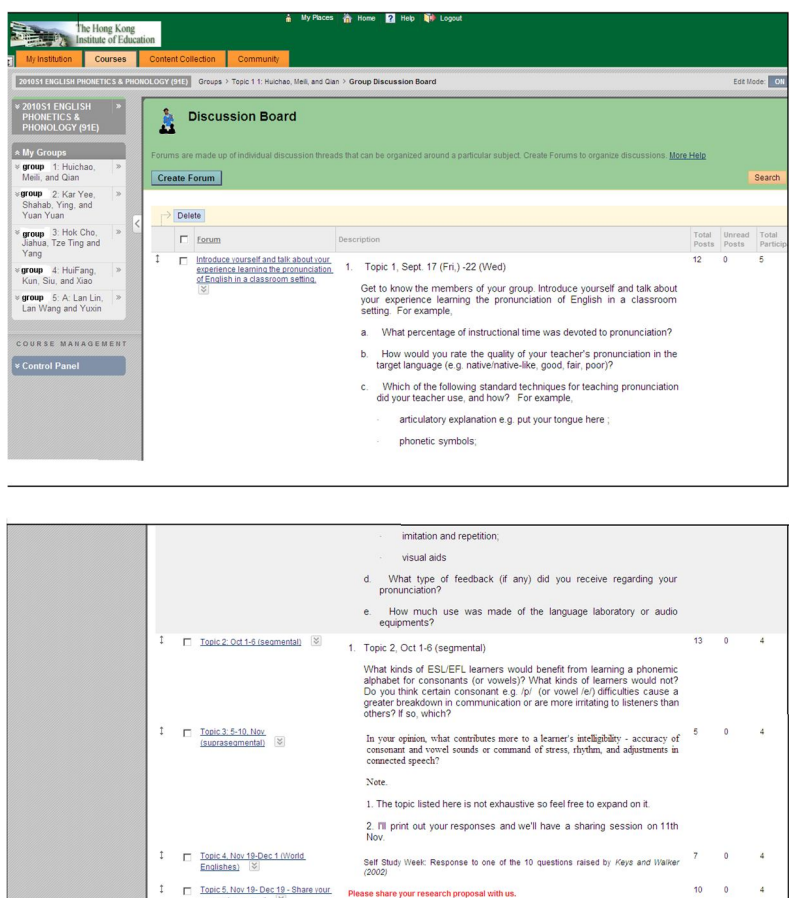


Figure 1. Screen capture of e-learning online discussion page

To answer the first research question about the relationship between student online discussion frequency and teacher presence, the online discussion frequency and the teacher’s reflection was calculated and analysed. As for the second research question concerning the students’ responses to the effectiveness of the online discussion, their responses to the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively using SPSS 14.0.

RESULTS

The following tables cast light on three aspects of the study: the online discussion frequency, the teacher's reflection, and the overall survey on this online discussion. Table 1 examines the frequency of online postings of different activities during the online-discussion. Based on the five topics, the number of the students' first publications, peers' feedback, students' responses to peers or the teacher's feedback, teacher's comments, and teacher's reminders were presented. There are 20 students participating in the first topic. In the second week, 18 students participated in the discussion and 17 students remained after the third topic. Due to the drop in the number of the participants, the interaction frequency among the five topics was slightly affected. The number of peers giving feedback decreased from 27 to 2. Nevertheless, the response to peers or teacher's feedbacks does not follow the pattern. The second and fifth topic discussions motivated the participants; the responses (10 and 7) are higher than for the rest of the topics. Likewise, the teacher commented on the second and fifth topic discussion more than for the rest of the discussions. The teacher's reminders follow the frequency of the former pattern. Such a pattern, however, failed to explain the delay in posts. The delayed posts were at their highest level in the second week, but not in the fifth week. All of the participants finished posting on time in the first and the third week. The fourth and fifth topic discussions had fewer students post before deadline, and there are 3 and 2, respectively, posting nothing for the topics.

As indicated by the course schedule (see Appendix), each online activity served a different purpose and required students to give different kinds of feedback. For the first online activity, students were asked to give self introductions and share personal experiences. This can be deemed as the easiest task among the five activities, and it yielded the largest number (and percentage) of submissions and peer feedback (refer to Table 1) before the deadline. Besides giving directions in class, the teacher did not need to be involved much in the online activity, as only one teacher comment was given.

Table 1 *The Frequency of Online Postings for Different Activities*

| | Students' first publications | Peers' feedback | Students' responses to peers or teacher's feedbacks | Teacher's comments | Teacher's reminder | Remarks |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Topic 1 Introduce yourself | 20 | 27 | 4 | 1 | 0 | all posted before the deadline |

| | | | | | | |
|--|----|----|----|----|---|--|
| sub-sum | 51 | | | 1 | | |
| Topic 2 Segmental problems | 18 | 11 | 10 | 23 | 1 | 2 before, 16 after, all but 2 dropped (!!) in week 2 |
| sub-sum | 62 | | | 24 | | |
| Topic 3 Supra-seg mental problem | 17 | 5 | 1 | 8 | 0 | all but 1 dropped (!!) in week 3 |
| sub-sum | 23 | | | 8 | | |
| Topic 4 World Englishes | 14 | 5 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 9 before, 5 after, 3 did not post |
| sub-sum | 21 | | | 8 | | |
| Topic 5 Share your proposal | 15 | 2 | 7 | 23 | 2 | 10 before, 5 after , 2 did not post |
| | 24 | | | 25 | | |
| Notes: | | | | | | |
| 1. The number of students in this class was 20 at the beginning of the semester. | | | | | | |
| 2. Two students dropped out in week 2, and one student dropped out in week 3. That is to say, there were only 17 students in the whole class responding to topics 3-5. | | | | | | |
| 3. Sub-sum indicates sub-sums of students' participation and teacher presence. | | | | | | |

Beginning from the discussions on the second topic, students were assigned more specific and course related tasks. The second topic is one of the topics where numbers reached the extreme. The activity asked students to specify types of students who would or would not benefit from learning a phonemic alphabet for consonants. The students had difficulties with this topic, and most of them failed to submit on time; as a result, the teacher had to give a greater number of prodding comments to urge students to share their opinions and ask why most of them were late. Because of the teacher's effort, all the students made their submissions, and over half of them gave feedback on either the teacher's or their peers' comments. The teacher reported that students replied to her comments soon, meaning the students had Internet access and were not too busy; however the initial tardiness of posting once again pointed to the difficulty of the topic.

One other activity that gave similar results was topic five. Students were asked to share their proposals for this activity. This proved hard for the students again, and the deadline was extended. Ten out of the seventeen students were able to post their sharing before the original deadline, whereas five submitted before the extended deadline; two of them never posted. The teacher gave reminders of the deadline, announcements of the new deadline as well as extensive feedback to each of the students' posting. All these factors combined contributed to the large number of teacher comments and responses, as seen in Table 3. Although indicated in Table 2 "[the students] had positive and active interaction with the teacher in terms of their proposals", this was not reflected in the numbers collected in Table 1; only two comments were made towards the peers, and fewer students replied to the teacher's comments than for the second topic. The number of students' responses to peers or teacher's feedback, however, was the second-highest out of the five topics, falling behind only the above mentioned topic two.

For the third and the fourth topics, the numbers of comments and feedback were almost all identical. For these two topics, students were given choices; for topic three, students could choose, from among two perspectives, which one they wanted to support, and outline their reasoning. This did not appear to be overly difficult for students, as all seventeen students in the class posted before the deadline. As for topic four, students were to select one out of ten questions from their text and answer. For this task, only nine students were able to post their answers on time; five others posted after the deadline, and still three others never published. The teacher made relatively fewer contributions, commenting on a little less than half of the number of postings received; and only one third of the class commented on their peers' work; even fewer (one or two) responded to the teacher's comments.

Out of the five topics, topic one was the least related to the course material. The students did not have any trouble, submitted on time, made multiple comments, and the teacher did not have to get involved a great deal. For topics two and five, the lack of comments and tardiness of work submission resulted in the teacher's needing to get involved more, and making more comments and reminders to motivate the students. It seemed effective in the case of topic two, as many students responded to the teacher and then gave peer feedback. For topic five, not much online peer interaction could be observed, but quite a few students responded to teacher or peer comments. Topics three and four saw intermediate teacher presence. The students were relatively prompt in posting on time, and the teacher commented on a smaller number of articles. These two topics had very few students' responses to peers or teacher's feedbacks—only two and one, respectively. It seemed that besides their original post, the students did not have

much to add on to other students' or the teacher's comments. The above result is similar to many of the previous studies (e.g. Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003; Pena-Shaff & Nichollas, 2004; Wang, 2009). Students failed to take advantage of the online learning community of inquiry, and also failed to achieve the resolution of each topic, even when overt teacher involvement was adopted and both acknowledgement feedback and information feedback for each topic were provided to remind students of the assigned online activities and respond to their posting. Interaction of this type is basically driven by task in origin (Hare & Davis, 1994); therefore, students just completed the assigned tasks and formed a monologue (independent postings without replies) in the discussion board, consistent with the result reported in Chen and Looi's study (2006).

While the number of teacher's comments is different for each topic and the difficulty of each topic for discussion was not well controlled due to the course needs and requirements, it indeed will not undermine the conclusions we draw. Among the five topics, topics one and five are not really much related to the course readings. If both are excluded, we may clearly see how teachers' presence positively influenced student's response rates and attitudes. In Table 3, the sub-sum of students' first publication, peer's feedback and students' responses to peers or teacher's feedbacks in topic 2 is 62, and the sub-sum of teacher's comments and reminders is 24. That is, the greater the teacher's presence, the more students' participation and interaction was demonstrated. On the other hand, whenever the teacher's presence decreases, the students' involvement lessens. The sub-sum of students' participation in topic 3 is 23, and the teacher presence is 8; The sub-sum of students' participation in topic 4 is 21, and the teacher presence is 8.

Table 2 *Teacher's Reflection of Teacher Presence*

| Topics | What is the teaching presence | When are responses given? | Students' responses? (The effects) | Sample interaction |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Introduce yourself | 1. divided the whole class into 5 groups 2. created first forum and gave first topic 3. gave instructions on the online learning. 4. gave few feedbacks to students' sharing | Sept.16 Gave instructions on how to use the online discussion channel. Sept. 17 created first forum and giving first topic | All the 18 student posted their sharing before the deadline | T: Introduce yourself and talk about your experience learning the pronunciation of English in a classroom setting. S: My name is Wang Qian, and you can also call me Bobbie. I am from mainland and a fresh graduate from Tianjin Normal University. |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| | | and dividing the whole class into 5 groups | | |
| 2 Segmental problems | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> gave second topic. gave some general but immediate feedbacks to students' sharing urged students who did not post their sharing on time to share as soon as possible | <p>Oct.1 gave second topic.</p> <p>Oct.4 gave immediate feedback to students who shared their opinion on time and also urged students to post their sharing as soon as possible</p> <p>Oct. 4-Oct.7 Gave feedback to those who posted their responses later than the deadline</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Most of the students did not post their sharing on time.(Only 2 students posted their sharing before the deadline, after the reminder from teacher, all the rest 16 students post their sharing continuously after deadline) Most of students could respond to teacher's feedback immediately | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> T: Dear all, I don't know why you didn't post your opinions by the deadline. S: Sorry for the late response. ... T: Hi, Bobbie, Thanks for your sharing. What I wonder is you have never encountered certain consonant difficulties which cause breakdown in communication... S: Dear Rebecca, I think the troubles caused by different pronunciation of consonants or vowels are really common T: You have shown understanding and sympathy for those who cannot achieve the standard. |
| 3 Supra-segmental problems | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> gave third topic. gave extra notes and clear instructions gave a few feedbacks to students' sharing | <p>Nov.5 gave third topic and extra notes and instructions</p> <p>Nov.5-10 gave a few feedback to students' sharing</p> | <p>All the 17 students posted their sharing on time. (Except one student dropped from the course) Students tended to use more polished language and formal style in this sharing session.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> T: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The topic listed here is not exhaustive so feel free to expand on it. I'll print out your responses and we'll have a sharing session on 11th Nov. T: Yes, Joe, you have made good observations... |
| 4 World Englishes | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> gave the fourth topic no reminder from teacher for students who did not post their sharing on time. gave some comments and asked some stimulating questions | <p>Nov.19 gave the fourth topic</p> <p>Nov.19-Dec.2 gave some in-depth feedbacks to students' sharing</p> | <p>There are 9 students who posted their sharing before the deadline, other 5 posted their sharing after deadline, and there are 3 students who did not post their response eventually.</p> <p>And this time,</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> T: I can't agree with you more about your view: it is motivation which attracts the learners to practice their pronunciation. T: So you mean NS norm is unrealistic and we don't need to pursue this goal? Chinese English or Hong Kong English is fine with you. How about the teacher's role in pronunciation teaching? S: Dear Dr. Chen, |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| | to students' sharing | | most students posted their opinions in a casual way. | Yes, I think we don't have to try hard to imitate the native speaker accent. |
| 5 Share your proposal 1 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. gave the fifth topic 2. gave gentle reminder for students to post their sharing before deadline 3. gave timely and extensive feedbacks to every student 4. postponed the deadline of fifth topic | <p>Nov.19 gave the fifth topic. Dec.8(it seems that) extended the deadline for another 10 days</p> <p>Nov.19-Dec.19 gave timely and extensive feedbacks to every student.</p> | <p>10 students posted their proposal before the first deadline.</p> <p>7 students posted their proposal by the second deadline.</p> <p>All the students posted their proposals before the second deadline and they had positive and active interaction with the teacher in terms of their proposals</p> | <p>1. T: Please don't forget to post your proposal on e-learn discussion board - topic five</p> <p>S: Sorry I am so late here. I am doing 1/3 of my assignment. What I am focus on is...</p> <p>T: You should have focused on certain segments ...</p> |

Table 2 shows the teacher's reflection on teacher presence. Four categories are covered, including "what is the teaching presence", "when are responses given?", "students' responses?" and the "sample interaction." The responses given were well planned. All the students and the teacher joined and subscribed to the forum at the beginning of the semester. Therefore, whenever one student posted his/her response, all the participants would receive the message immediately by email notice. The teacher or the classmates could give timely feedbacks accordingly.

From the detailed logs and reflection in Table 2, we find that teacher's immediate feedback to students' sharing indeed encourages students' to involve themselves more actively in online discussion, except in the case of extraneous matters, such as the heavy work load at the end of the semester. Many researchers (e.g. Chen and Looi, 2007; Graham, 2005) suggest that the tasks in a blended learning environment must be well planned in advance, but the influence from other courses is not within the control of the course designer. In addition, when the online participation is not a component in the students' course assessment, students may devote themselves to other courses. As An and Frick (2006) conclude, students' beliefs regarding the effectiveness of computer mediated communication will be strengthened if teachers use it themselves, and if there are practical to students themselves. In addition, teachers' reminders exert positive influence on increasing the quantity of the students' responses: almost all the students could post their responses after the teacher's reminder individually. However, how to

improve the quality of students' sharing is the key issue that really warrants attention.

Regarding the quantitative analyses, the reliability of the questionnaire is 0.93 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency. The values reached the satisfactory level (≥ 0.7), according to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Generally speaking, students held positive responses to this course as shown in Table 3. With regard to the comparison of online discussion and in-class discussion (Items 1-4 and 7-8), most of the students (over 60%) perceived the positive effects of integrating online discussion into the course, and agreed that the online discussion might be the key to eliciting their interests in this activity—most likely because the affective filter has been lowered and students felt more comfortable while doing discussion online. Concerning the critical thinking abilities involved in the online discussion (Items 6, 13, and 16), more than 80% of the students expressed positive attitudes. They learned to look at topics from perspectives they would not have considered on their own, and this in turn promoted critical thinking on their parts. As for contents and English learning (Items 5, 10-12, and 14-15), student also agreed that the online discussion helped them grasp phonetics and phonology better and helped them improved their understanding of their English ability. Finally, regarding interaction (Items 9 and 17-18), more than 60% of the students agreed that the online discussion enhanced the frequency of interaction among students.

Table 3 *Results of the Questionnaire*

| | SA | A | N | D | SD | Mean | Std. |
|---|------|------|------|-----|----|------|------|
| 1. I enjoyed the online discussion this semester. | 46.7 | 40 | 6.7 | 6.7 | 0 | 4.27 | .88 |
| 2. I learned things in the discussion that I could not have figured out on my own or in class discussion | 46.7 | 33.3 | 13.3 | 6.7 | 0 | 4.20 | .94 |
| 3. The online discussion gave me the opportunity to ask questions I would not have asked in class. | 33.3 | 40 | 26.7 | 0 | 0 | 4.07 | .80 |
| 4. I would enjoy participating in such a discussion again. | 60 | 33.3 | 6.7 | 0 | 0 | 4.47 | .83 |
| 5. The process of talking/writing through topics helped me to understand them better. | 46.7 | 33.3 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 4.27 | .78 |
| 6. Talking with other students helped me to look at topics from perspectives I would not have considered on my own. | 53.3 | 40 | 6.7 | 0 | 0 | 4.47 | .64 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|------|------|------|-----|------|------|------|
| 7. The forum of the online discussion provided less anxiety and a more relaxed environment than classroom discussions. | 66.7 | 26.7 | 6.7 | 0 | 0 | 4.60 | .63 |
| 8. I would have liked this class better without the online discussions. | 0 | 6.7 | 26.7 | 40 | 26.7 | 2.13 | .92 |
| 9. I would like to keep in touch with one or more of my discussion partners. | 26.7 | 40 | 33.3 | 0 | 0 | 3.93 | .78 |
| 10. This discussion gave me good ideas for teaching that I implemented this semester, or plan to implement when I start teaching. | 46.7 | 20 | 26.7 | 6.7 | 0 | 4.07 | 1.03 |
| 11. The online discussion enhanced my understanding of the content of the articles (research papers). | 53.3 | 33.3 | 13.3 | 0 | 0 | 4.27 | 1.03 |
| 12. The online discussion enhanced my understanding of phonetics and phonology. | 73.3 | 13.3 | 13.3 | 0 | 0 | 4.60 | .74 |
| 13. The online discussion enhanced my ability to think critically. | 53.3 | 26.7 | 13.3 | 6.7 | 0 | 4.27 | .96 |
| 14. The online discussion enhanced my English ability. | 40 | 20 | 33.3 | 6.7 | 0 | 3.93 | 1.03 |
| 15. The online discussion improved my understanding of my English ability. | 33.3 | 26.7 | 40 | 0 | 0 | 3.93 | .88 |
| 16. The online discussion enhanced my understanding of different perspectives. | 66.7 | 20 | 13.3 | 0 | 0 | 4.53 | .74 |
| 17. The online discussion in class provided me with opportunities to share my views with others. | 60 | 26.7 | 13.3 | 0 | 0 | 4.47 | .74 |
| 18. The online discussion enhanced the frequency of the interaction among students. | 60 | 26.7 | 6.7 | 6.7 | 0 | 4.4 | .91 |

The results of the open-ended questions (Items 19 to 22) have granted the values of this study. The four questions are listed as follows:

19. Please describe how you felt about the online discussion both from an affective and a cognitive perspective. Did it help you to learn or understand the material more

- fully? Did it lower your “affective filter” to make discussion more enjoyable?
20. Please describe how the teacher/peers provided you with feedback to improve your understanding of content knowledge. (e.g. how to write a proposal)
 21. Please describe how the teacher’s presence in online discussion board facilitated/hindered your exchange with her and/or peers.
 22. What suggestions do you have for improving this exchange?

Both pros and cons are presented for item 19. Some of the students agreed that the online discussion helped them understand the materials better and enabled them to express their ideas freely with less time limitation and lower affective filter; others, on the other hand, argued that the delayed posts and inattentive participants decreased the efficiency of the discussion. The integrated opinions from item 20 indicated the online discussion allowed the peers and teacher to immediately provide answers from various perspectives. The results from item 21 again highlighted the importance of the role played by teacher feedback: that is, the teacher played an important role, analogous to that of a coach, in guiding students into the right path at the right time to play an excellent “game.” The online discussion has indeed aided in the building of a closer relationship between the teacher and students, compared with the traditional classroom teaching.

In the last item, students provided a few suggestions for this activity. Some commented on the deadline control of each topic discussion posting, others were dissatisfied with the chosen topics, and still others suggested the teacher could have adjusted the question guiding styles to make the discussion more active and open. Some students suggested the online discussions should not be held with them being divided into smaller groups, so as to remove boundaries from between groups of students, which happened to have held back some of them from commenting. When there is grouping, students wanted to be able to choose their own group members. Also, concerns were raised that because the online activities did not contribute to their course grades, it was not taken as seriously as it should have been, and the teacher was required to be strict and lay down the law. Some students also wanted more frequent online discussion sessions and have the ideas and questions raised in online discussions reflected more in class. As Smith, Sorensen, Gump, Heindel, Caris, and Martinez (2010) found in their study, students in online learning were less satisfied with group work because of their expectation of working individually and asynchronously in the online learning environments.

From the questionnaire, the students showed an awareness of both the strengths and weaknesses of the online activities. The students gained inspiration from their peers,

raised their motivation about the topics, and many of them found it easier to contribute their ideas online than in class. Also, the students could share ideas wherever they wanted, instead of within an assigned period when they are in school. However, students who did not pay enough attention in class have trouble getting involved in online activities; furthermore, if students do not get responses from the teacher and peers, they may be disappointed and discouraged. Moreover, some students actually do not like to use computers for discussions and prefer face-to-face conversations. Differences and merits of synchronous versus asynchronous learning modes of instruction have been discussed in previous studies. Park and Choi (2009) found that learners' satisfaction with the online course and perceived relevance to learners' job, prior knowledge, and experiences influenced their decision to drop out or persist. Consequently, they suggested that rewards such as certificates or praise should be provided to motivate online learners. Singh (2003) stressed that teachers should construct the most effective blended program designs to ensure that each ingredient, individually and collectively, adds to a meaningful learning experience.

Moreover, the students treated feedback from the teacher as a guideline. Whenever they were about to go in a wrong direction, the teacher would lead the discussion. Also, the teacher asked questions that were effective to stimulate students' thinking and helped them come up with more insights to their discussion topics. Students perceived this feedback as helpful and time saving. As for the feedback from peers, the students were able to gain different perspectives on specific knowledge topics through their fellow students' comments. We can infer that the image the teacher brings is important, as it affects how discussions might or might not be smooth or well participated. If the teacher presents a serious and distant image to the students, then they might be reluctant to express their opinions online. The teacher's immediate response to discussions was largely welcomed by students, as they think that in this way the discussions are more active. When students have contradictory comments on controversial issues, they have an expectation for the teacher to step up and take role as the judge. The students think that it is quite essential to have their teacher's involvement on these critical points.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study investigated how teacher presence influences students' performance on online discussion from three aspects: the online discussion frequency, the teacher's reflection, and the overall survey on this online discussion. The results show that students completed the assigned tasks, and made independent postings most of the time, without replies in the discussion board. Interactions were often one-way serial

monologues. Through the online discussion, the affective filter was lowered; students felt more comfortable with taking part in online discussion. The online discussion has helped to build a closer relationship between the teacher and students, compared with the traditional classroom teaching method.

The teacher's immediate feedback to students' sharing promotes students' motivation and encourages students to involve themselves more actively in online discussion. The teacher's reminders also promote the quantity of the students' responses. The teacher played an important role as a coach to guide students into the right direction and helped students to grasp phonetics and phonology better. Discussions tended to explore the issues in an interesting way, but without integration of the ideas raised. The teacher role in this study was considered as conforming to the traditional image, as expert or evaluator, rather than as a nurturer, explorer, or challenger.

Given the complicated interaction of the variables involved in online discussion, some limitations exist in this study. First of all, different discussion topics were assigned weekly and the different types of teacher presence may impact students' participation. The interpretation of this study faithfully reflects on the reality happening in a typical postgraduate classroom but the generalizability of the study seems rather limited. Second, little evidence of challenging ideas was found. The teacher didn't design well the discussion questions and arouse students' interest to express their ideas on the specific issues so that during the discussion process, teachers' questions cannot provide opportunities of in-depth thinking for students. These adversely affected the entire quality of the discussion.

Based on the above findings, several suggestions are provided. First, teachers had better give timely feedback and comments to students' sharing, which can increase the motivation of the students and encourage them to think more and speak more on the online discussion board. If teachers can regularly and consistently give immediate and helpful comments on the discussion board, students will naturally check the forum frequently and respond actively. As a result, the interaction will become more and more active. It will become a virtuous circle.

Second, teachers are recommended to raise more stimulating and inspiring questions that can arouse students' interest and encourage students to express their ideas, which is the prerequisite of information exchange and discussion. Different levels of questions can be used in future studies, for examples, Bloom's taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) for categorizing level of abstraction of questions that commonly occur in educational settings. The taxonomy will provide a useful structure in which to categorize questions for discussion online. In a postgraduate course, the discussion questions could also been closely linked with

problem solving skills, creative and critical thinking, and technology integration. By doing so, higher-level thinking can be expected and obtained from discussions that take place in the online forums.

Third, teachers should decide how to group students, because this may restrict the discussions if there are too few members in each group. Based on the data procured in the course of conducting this study, students' comments on other groups were still very limited because they mainly commented on the works of the classmates from within the same group. Teachers may choose to make the online discussion platform a public forum for the whole class, so that students in the same class or same module can see each others' feedback and exchange their ideas more freely.

Finally, teachers can consider scoring the online discussion task, and including this as a component of the course grade. A key reason why the online sessions did not elicit more interest and motivation among students is because the performance in the online learning session was not credited to the students' final grade. Making online-tasks a part of the final scoring would likely better motivate students to want to share their opinions in this forum.

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Appendix

The course schedule

| | Date | Contents | Online activity |
|---|--------|---|--|
| 1 | 16 Sep | Overview <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module introduction; Assessment; Introduction of resource materials • Phonology as a component of the language system • Overview of the English sound system – segmental & suprasegmental | Get to know the members of your group. Introduce yourself and talk about your experience learning the pronunciation of English in a classroom setting. |
| 2 | 23 Sep | Moon Festival | |
| 3 | 30 Sep | Segmental system of English I <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vowels & diphthongs • Contrasting the English & Cantonese / Putonghua vowels | What kinds of ESL/EFL learners would benefit from learning a phonemic alphabet for consonants? What kinds of learners would not? Do you think certain consonant difficulties cause a greater breakdown in communication or are more irritating to listeners than others? If so, which? |
| 4 | 7 Oct | Segmental system of English II <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consonants • Contrasting English & Cantonese / Putonghua consonants | |
| 5 | 14 Oct | Revision: Segmental system of English Further practice on consonants and vowels Reading (1) Discussion | |

| | | | |
|----|--------|---|--|
| 6 | 21 Oct | <p>Suprasegmental system of English I – Syllable and Stress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● At word level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Syllable structure, syllabic consonant ○ Primary & secondary stresses, weak syllable | |
| 7 | 28 Oct | <p>Suprasegmental system of English II – Stress and rhythm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-articulation features across the word boundaries – Elision, assimilation and linking • Stress and rhythm in connected speech • Weak form • Contrasting stress and rhythm in English and Chinese | |
| 8 | 4 Nov | <p>In-class test</p> <p>Suprasegmental system of English III – Intonation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common types of tones in English • Pausing, tone unit and tonic syllable • Intonation contours | <p>In your opinion, what contributes more to a learner’s intelligibility – accuracy of consonant and vowel sounds or command of stress, rhythm, and adjustments in connected speech?</p> |
| 9 | 11 Nov | <p>Suprasegmental system of English III – Intonation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammatical, discorsal & attitudinal functions of intonation • Contrasting intonation in English and Cantonese / Putonghua • Readings (2) and (3) Discussion | |
| 10 | 18 Nov | <p>World Englishes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonological factors that affect effective communication of meaning • Current research on intelligibility in English as a Lingua Franca • Implementing an international approach to English | |

| | | | |
|----|-----------|--|--|
| | | pronunciation • Readings (4) and (5) Discussion | |
| 11 | 25 Nov | Self-study week • World Englishes and issues arising • Research Proposal Sharing (Online Discussion Activities) | Self Study Week: Response to one of the 10 questions raised by <i>Keys and Walker (2002)</i> |
| 12 | 2 Dec | Acoustic Phonetics Introduction to PRAAT http://www.praat.org Computer –assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) Readings (6) and (7) Discussion Module evaluation | Share your research proposal |
| 13 | 9 Dec | Project Consultation | |
| 14 | 16 Dec | Final Project Due | |

- Students are expected to attend **all** scheduled sessions and activities.

教師臨場感對學生在線上討論之影響：一門研究所課程之個案研究

摘要

此研究探討教師臨場感對學生在一門研究所課程線上討論之影響。研究顯示教師對線上討論的立即回饋的確可以加強學生線上討論的參與程度，但如何改善討論的品質值得關注。問卷結果顯示學生了解線上活動的優缺點，並從同儕回應獲得啟發，提升他們討論的動機，許多人並認為在網路討論易於課堂中討論。然而，課堂中上課不夠專心的學生，參與網路活動會遭遇困難。此外學生對無法獲得老師或同儕回應感到失望。因此可以推論教師臨場感會影響線上討論的順暢程度及學生參與程度，特別是具有爭議的議題呈現不同的論點時學生會期待老師扮演仲裁的角色，在這些關鍵的時刻，教師臨場感是相當必要的。

關鍵詞：教師臨場感、同儕討論、線上互動

