

**Discussing writing:
Peer feedback on writing essays in an online forum for learners of English**

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Educational Research,
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This thesis was completed as part of the PhD Doctoral Programme in
e-Research & Technology Enhanced Learning.

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for
any other degree or diploma.

Signature.....*Enda Tuomey*

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Abstract

This case study investigated feedback, interaction, and knowledge creation in an asynchronous discussion forum in which learners of English provided peer feedback on short argument essays for the IELTS test, a gatekeeper English exam used for immigration or university entrance. Over eleven months, a small but active group of intermediate and advanced learners from many countries changed participation from seeking feedback to giving complex macro-level feedback on each other's writing, changing their perceptions of peer editing and improving their own writing, while a much larger group engaged primarily in lurking.

The research was exploratory at first, since it was not known whether learners would join or provide feedback, but as members joined, peer feedback loops and varying patterns of interaction emerged. To investigate these processes, both content and structure were examined, with forum posts examined using thematic units as the unit of analysis, and server logs providing structural data such as membership duration and posting patterns. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to gain further insight into member perceptions.

Feedback was viewed as a process with benefits for both givers and receivers, rather than as a product given by an expert. Lurking was a key form of participation for both active and less-active members, while changes in roles and participation were mainly associated with longer membership and more feedback.

Because of the informal learning setting and high turnover, models from outside educational settings were used as theoretical lenses: organizational citizenship (Bateman & Organ, 1983) and organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), to investigate roles and behavior; and Nonaka's SECI framework (1994), to examine knowledge conversion and creation. Applying citizenship behavior to online settings posed problems due to the difficulty of distinguishing between discretionary or supra-role behavior and the core intent of a knowledge community. In contrast, a modified SECI framework appeared to be a useful metaphor, emphasizing peer feedback as socially-constructed knowledge.

Keywords

Peer feedback, peer editing, online discussion, asynchronous discussion, learning English, IELTS, knowledge creation, organizational citizenship, roles and behaviors

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------|---|
| ADF | Asynchronous Discussion Forum |
| CMC | Computer-mediated communication |
| CoI | Community of Inquiry |
| CoP | Community of Practice |
| EFL | English as a Foreign Language |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| IAM | Interaction Analysis Model (Gunawardena et al., 1997) |
| L1 | A learner's first or native language |
| L2 | Second language learner (e.g. learning English or Japanese) |
| LMS | Learning Management System |
| OCB | Organizational Citizenship Behavior (Organ, 1982) |
| PLE | Personal Learning Environment |
| SECI | Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization (Nonaka, 1994) |
| ZPD | Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) |

Chapter 1 Introduction

What happens when learners of English from around the world preparing for a major exam voluntarily post essays in an online forum and give feedback on each other's writing?

This thesis looks at interaction, feedback, perceptions, knowledge creation, and change in an asynchronous online discussion forum for academic essay writing for learners of English preparing for the IELTS exam, a high-stakes test of English proficiency used internationally for immigration or university entrance. It examines how participants shared frustrations, identified problems, suggested solutions, and worked to improve essay writing for the exam.

In particular, the study examines how new knowledge was constructed through online feedback on essay writing and how this led to changes in member perceptions, participation, and proficiency. The findings suggest that not alone did learners provide substantial and useful feedback to each other, but that given enough time, encouragement, and engagement, large numbers took on new roles and changed their perceptions of giving feedback.

As in many online communities, participants played different and evolving roles, with varying degrees and forms of participation. Some visited once and did not return, while others moved from only requesting feedback to employing increasingly sophisticated metalinguistic strategies to evaluate their work and that of others.

This thesis will propose that online discussion in informal learning settings is under-researched; that knowledge can be shared and created more extensively than much literature on discussion forums suggests, with explicit critical thinking or consensus not necessary in every thread; that intermediate and upper intermediate learners of English can give and apply feedback to improve academic essay writing; and that alternative models of community and online interaction may help in understanding informal learning settings.

1.1 Background to the Research

This research stems from my work teaching English, particularly for TOEFL and IELTS, over the last 25 years in the Middle East and Zimbabwe, and from the increasing use of web-based resources related to writing for these exams. Political

and sociocultural issues surrounding learning and teaching English have been themes in my career.

I set up Writefix.com in 2001 as a very basic website with materials and links for English language and IELTS preparation courses I was teaching. The site was a static, Web 1.0 resource, of the type of passive e-learning McConnell identifies as “transmission-dissemination” (2006, p. 15), lacking feedback or interactivity. Over time, website visitors from many countries emailed me commenting on its usefulness, asking questions about IELTS writing, and occasionally offering essays for review. Responding to individual essays was time-consuming and repetitive, since many of the same issues arose frequently and work on one essay could not be shared with other users.

When the opportunity arose to work on this thesis, I felt that a completely redesigned website with interactive features and discussion would provide a more efficient, effective, and possibly even social environment for learners, as well as allowing me to gather data.

Beginning in November 2010, the website was completely remodeled after an expensive and frustrating design process lasting almost a year. During this time, a range of open-source and commercial forum software and social network software was tested, particularly Vanilla (from vanillaforums.org) and Elgg (elgg.org). The objective was to find attractive, functional user interfaces to present short (250- to 350-word) essays in a single screen, searchable by topic, user, date, rating, or vote. I also wanted user profiles and features from social networks such as Facebook or Twitter with which users could express identity through comments and tools such as pictures, avatars, links to personal web pages, links to friends, and personal information (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The intention was that users would create an online portfolio of their writing, particularly for IELTS Writing Task 2 opinion or argument essays. Visitors or members, with varying privileges, would be able to comment or link to essays, give feedback on other members’ essays, rate essays or vote on favorites, and discuss their work, as well as maintain a social presence through profiles and links.

Many forums and discussion applications were too limited, had too many features, were too complicated to administer or for new users to use, or were too ugly or old-fashioned. Many could not be customized to allow full essays, edits, and comments to appear in threads as I wanted. Work with a professional developer customizing Elgg

(open-source discussion software, with modifications encouraged by the Elgg community) was cancelled due to scope creep, unsatisfactory standards, and unsustainable costs. Plans were scaled back, and I looked for an alternative lightweight discussion forum which I could set up and run on my own, and settled on Simple:Press, a plugin for WordPress. I was attracted by its appearance, its relatively simple feature set, and the fact that it integrated with WordPress, the website platform. Resource pages were added to the website and the new forum became active in November 2011.

When the forum started, I had no idea if any users would join or if they would post essays or comments, and I was very unsure if they would provide feedback to other members. Accordingly, the initial thrust was exploratory, rather than towards testing any particular theory. However, the first peer feedback occurred about two months after the forum started, and from March 2012 onwards, visits to the forum soared, with over 1,300 members joining and a smaller number becoming active, eventually contributing over 2,200 essays, comments and questions.

1.2 Research Approach

The research examines the participation and interactions of visitors and members in an online discussion forum on writing essays for the IELTS exam. A case study approach is used of a single case, the bounded context of an online discussion forum on academic essay writing for L2 learners over 11 months from the forum's beginning to its close. Following Fahy, Crawford, and Ally (2001), Jeong (2005), (2006), and Kay (2006), both structure and content were examined. All posts on the forum were analyzed for content (Rourke, Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), using thematic units within messages as the unit of analysis, while server logs provided some structural data (see Jeong, 2005). To provide a richer picture, semi-structured interviews were carried out with eleven of the most active members of the forum. The researcher was a member-researcher (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Spradley, 1980), actively involved in the activities and discussions in the forum.

Underpinning the research was my untested belief that reasonably proficient L2 learners could identify problems in essay writing and provide useful feedback for each other online.

Accordingly, I decided at an early stage not to investigate my role directly as a moderator or peer or to analyze my input, but instead to focus on the interaction and input of the members on the site and on their beliefs, interactions, and perceptions,

and how these led to new knowledge being created. Since I was an active member-researcher, my involvement inevitably shaped many interactions, possibly including some which I was not directly involved in. However, in keeping with an exploratory and pragmatic thrust with its desire to help learners prepare for the exam, the focus was on the learner perceptions, beliefs, interaction, and change, rather than the input of the researcher as a member, moderator, designer, or teacher. Adler (1990) suggests that such complete-researcher membership forces researchers to take on the obligations of members and to deal with the practical problems members face, and as a result organizes the behavior and thinking of researchers.

When the new forum was added to a relaunched Writefix.com website in November 2011, I had very little information about who would visit – or indeed if there would be any visitors at all, let alone some willing to register, post essays, or give feedback to others. This contrasts with traditional educational contexts in which participants are normally clearly defined.

Two filters, however, indicated who possible members might be. First, the forum was an addition to a website already reasonably popular for its IELTS and language learning resources. The second was the site's level of English, which would discourage visitors with less than IELTS Reading band 4 or 4.5 (Dalsgaard, 2006; Sengupta, 2001), and its resources, which would be too simplistic for candidates above band 8.5. As a result, the forum was expected to target intermediate level students interested in IELTS. However, "if we build it, will they come?" was certainly a concern, followed by uncertainty over who "they" would be, whether they would become active members, and what form that membership would take.

In summary, the forum arose out of a desire for a more effective way to help language learners preparing for a challenging test, and it exceeded my expectations. Despite the effort involved, many members moved from simply requesting feedback to giving detailed feedback to others, as well as asking and answering questions, writing excellent essays, and sharing frustrations and knowledge about IELTS. People visited, registered, and, taking on a variety of roles, helped other members (and perhaps thousands of unknown others) by sharing and creating knowledge about academic essay writing.

The thesis considers how online peer feedback in an asynchronous discussion forum for language learners contributed to improvements in writing for exams such as IELTS, and investigates member perceptions of the power of the exam and the value

of giving and receiving feedback. It also examines the mediation of asynchronous discussion in promoting knowledge creation.

The writing task (the linguistic focus of the essay topic and the suggestions in feedback and comments) constitutes one focus of the analysis: the thesis also examines discussions around the essays, styles of participation (from lurking to spending hours giving feedback on a single essay), roles and interactions, changes in role and identity, and knowledge creation among users.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

There appeared to be four gaps in the literature regarding the viability of an online forum on academic essay writing for English language learners: the under-theorization of learning online in informal learning settings; the difficulty of applying some models of learning to online communities; the often-unquestioned acceptance of critical thinking as an explicit goal of online learning and discussion; and a lack of cross-disciplinary studies connecting learning in educational settings with knowledge in organizations.

1.3.1 Lack of Research on Informal Online Learning settings

The biggest absence was in the lack of research on online discussion in informal learning settings. Although the internet and associated technologies hold immense potential for facilitating both formal and informal learning, studies of online discussion or peer feedback were based almost without exception on groups in formal academic environments in which enrollment, duration, activities, and participant proficiency levels were determined by institutional contexts.

However, the increase in informal learning settings, for example with the advent of various forms of open access courses such as Coursera (Bates, 2012; Koller & Ng, 2012), edX (edx.org), massive open online courses MOOCs (e.g. Educause, 2013), and globally networked learning environments, or GNLEs (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008), may require greater understanding of how people learn autonomously in emergent or less predictable domains rather than in more traditional, bounded learning contexts (Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2010; Williams, Karousou, & Mackness, 2011). Learners can now not only produce, repurpose, and share user-generated content in multiple formats, but can set up their own online learning resources and

environments, form learning groups, and determine their own routes toward formal or informal educational goals (see also Waldron, 2012).

In language learning, an increasing availability of authentic resources in the target language and direct interaction with native speakers has allowed motivated learners to supplement traditional human and material resources such as schools or teachers or even to bypass them entirely (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012). Although still involving considerable effort and self-regulation, entry into communities of programmers, writers, scientists, or musicians has become more easily achievable, with many language learners viewed as autonomous users rather than dependent learners.

1.3.2 Applicability of Models of Online Learning Community

A second and related gap was in terms of the applicability of models of discussion and learning community. Many of the existing studies of online discussion sought to apply frameworks or models such as Wenger's community of practice (1999), the community of inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), both often associated with academic environments, to analyze target communities or discussion or to map student perceptions, learning outcomes, or patterns of interaction.

Although there are many similarities with communities of practice, the forum did not exemplify all the characteristics of such communities as described by Henri and Pudelko (2003), Hildreth, Kimble, and Wright (2000), Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), or Daniel, McCalla, and Schwier (2003).

For Wenger (1999), a community of practice is defined along three dimensions: mutual engagement, with members engaged in common actions or ideas; joint enterprise constantly renegotiated by the individual members; and a shared repertoire, or words, stories, tools, actions, ways of doing things, or concepts that the community has produced (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). However, while aspects of each of these are partly true for the forum, there are also significant differences.

Henri and Pudelko (2003) described a continuum of community based on increasing levels of social bonding and intentionality, with communities of practice having the highest levels of both, learning communities occupying a middle position, and communities of interest with relatively low levels of bonding and intentionality. The relatively weak bonding and short timeframes in the forum would seem to indicate a description as a learning community rather than as a community of practice. In addition, for most of the members and visitors, the core focus of the online

community was not their permanent or long-term practice or part of their identity, but only a short-term, enabling goal, that of passing the IELTS exam. Similarly, while some members mentioned the usefulness of improved academic writing, most did not seem to relate it to their overall academic or professional future or identity.

The forum also seemed to fit Daniel, McCalla, and Schwier's (2003) description of a virtual learning community as a group of people who gather online to pursue learning goals, rather than that of a distributed community of practice with members bound together by shared expertise and shared interests or work. The forum's less stable membership, goal-oriented focus, fixed or pre-determined purpose, and the varied academic and professional backgrounds of the members are in contrast to the more stable membership, identity-oriented and negotiated purpose and shared practice and profession of a community of practice. Although some members were active for six months or more, membership was typically just 43 days, not displaying the timespan and sustained interaction required by Wenger (2011).

Other features of the forum which identify it more as a learning community rather than a community of practice included the ease with which the community could be disbanded, and the identity or self-perceptions of group members, in which there appeared to be no intention of a shared practice or profession beyond the immediate enabling goal of a desired band in IELTS (Daniel, McCalla, & Schwier, 2002).

Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002) also define communities of practice as groups of people who deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by "interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 7), while Hildreth, Kimble, and Wright (2000, p. 3) also note that members of communities of practice are "professionals formally bound to one another," and embodying a store of knowledge. While in the case of the forum in this study it could be strongly argued that a store of knowledge regarding academic writing did in fact exist, most members chose to present themselves as learners or as lacking in particular areas or skills needed for the exam rather than as practitioners with expertise.

The practical inquiry component of the community of inquiry model proposed by Garrison et al. (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Garrison, 1991) also seemed inappropriate because of its emphasis on teaching presence and its sequence of triggers leading to hierarchical levels of critical thinking. The model includes four phases: a triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution. Triggering requires "a well-thought out activity" (Akyol & Garrison, 2011, p. 4) to ensure full engagement from students, as they are described.

Garrison et al (2001) noted that, while in conventional educational settings teachers explicitly initiate triggering events, any group member may directly or indirectly add triggers in more democratic and nonhierarchical online settings. However, Garrison et al. also noted the need for the teacher to initiate, shape, or, occasionally, discard triggering events to maintain the focus on intended outcomes. To ensure that learners do not remain in the exploration phase, teaching presence is required to model critical thinking and to further cognitive development, and Garrison et al. (2001) noted that this phase is difficult to detect for teachers or researchers, and must often be inferred from communication. As Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung observed, to establish and maintain a community of inquiry “requires a thoughtful, focused, and attentive teaching presence” (2010, p. 33). As well as placing a heavy cognitive load on forum members, it may have been unrealistic to expect such a level of experience or expertise on the part of members in evaluating the work of themselves and others.

Other models also employed taxonomies, vertical hierarchies of thinking, or sequences of events more suited for formal curriculum structures with defined cohorts of students. Models or frameworks examining how online discussion is used to learn and create knowledge in autonomous or informal settings seemed to be less frequent in the literature.

In the forum context, the voluntary nature of participation and the effort required to find and join the forum, and to read, comment on, or give feedback on other members’ essays would require participants to have at least some attributes of autonomous learners.

1.3.3 Critical Thinking as an Unquestioned Aim

A third and related challenge given the forum focus on essay form rather than content lay with the emphasis in many studies on critical thinking as a necessary goal of online discussion (Andresen, 2009; Arend, 2009; Cheong & Cheung, 2008; Coffin, Painter, & Hewings, 2005; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Hewings & Coffin, 2006; Kay, 2006; Lapadat, 2002, 2007; MacKnight, 2000; Maurino, 2007a; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; McLoughlin & Mynard, 2009; Thomas, 2002; Warschauer, 1997; Williams & Lahman, 2011), or “the ostensible goal of all higher education” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 87).

Some studies outline taxonomies of components of critical thinking, while others use the term generically, but a belief in a vertical progression towards more complex

levels of thinking (Engeström, 1999) seems to underpin many studies, despite results frequently finding less critical thinking, constructive criticism, or knowledge construction than expected (Bullen, 1997; Garrison et al., 2001; Harrington & Hathaway, 1994; Hew & Cheung, 2010; Jeong, 2003; Kanuka & Garrison, 1998; Maurino, 2007b; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; Thomas, 2002).

1.3.4 Learning in Education and Knowledge Creation in Organizations

As the boundaries of educational institutions blur with the growth of new academic offerings, such as the open access courses, MOOCs, and GNLEs mentioned earlier, and with increased autonomy and self-organization among learners, educational research may benefit from looking at web-based research and organizational and social studies for models that are not based on fixed enrollments, specified durations, or curriculum-demarcated contexts. Research into open source software, programming, consumer and user-generated content communities already provides useful perspectives into knowledge creation, learning, and roles different from those in conventional classrooms and groups (Engeström, for example, discusses short-lived, intense, responsive mobile communities as wildfire activities (2009) and knotworking (2000); Wiley and Edwards (2002) look at self-organized social systems in learning). While knowledge management has been studied in organizations primarily for its benefits to the organization (Bryceson, 2007; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Hara & Hew, 2007; Yu, Lu, & Liu, 2010), cross-disciplinary awareness may contribute more to improved understanding of learning online than research from any one discipline (Hannafin & Kim, 2003).

To examine these problems, concepts from organizations will be examined for applicability and usefulness: organizational citizenship behavior by Bateman and Organ (1983), with the related organizational commitment model of Meyer and Allen (1991); and the SECI (socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization) knowledge conversion spiral of Nonaka (1991, 1994) with Takeuchi, Konno, Toyoma, von Krogh, and others. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) suggests that discretionary or extra-role behaviors by individuals contribute to organizational well-being and continued membership, and “support the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place” (Organ, 1997, p. 95). In contrast to OCB’s focus on individual contribution, Nonaka’s SECI framework (1991) suggests that knowledge is created within organizations through a cycle of activities designed to spur continuous dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge.

A related issue concerns the intent or core function of online community such as a forum on essay writing, and what constitutes its central task. In conventional organizations, distinguishing between the organization's main function and employees' discretionary or supra-role behavior (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2011; Bateman & Organ, 1983; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Fugelstad et al., 2012) may be relatively simple. However, in online knowledge communities, the lines between the task and the behavior that supports the task are more blurred: if knowledge is socially constructed, then socialization (Nonaka, 1991, 1994) and pro-social behavior (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Organ, 1997) may be much more central.

The choice of frameworks not commonly used in formal educational settings is a deliberate response to the informal learning setting of the forum in this study. It is not a rejection of other models and frameworks such as Garrison et al.'s community of inquiry (2000, 2001) or of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), but a complementary view which hopes to provide alternative ways of thinking about the interactions and learning that take place in the forum.

The choice of these models and frameworks was not made before the study, but emerged from reading, re-reading, and reflection during and after the analysis of data. They are proposed as metaphors for understanding some of the interactions and processes occurring on the forum, rather than as theories to be tested or confirmed.

1.4 Epistemological Stance

The following section outlines some of my beliefs regarding teaching, learning, and technology which influenced the choice of research.

I position myself as a practitioner engaged in teaching, learning, and research, rather than as a philosopher (Creswell, 2007). This approach is allied to the pragmatist approaches of John Dewey (1916) and William James (1907): truth is that which works and is useful or valuable. In line with pragmatism, I feel theories are most valuable for practice, rather than for inherent elegance.

Dewey espoused a problem-solving social ethos, with knowledge "a perception of those connections of an object which determine its applicability in a given situation" (1916/1997, p. 347). Jézégou (2010) defined pragmatism as "mutual adjustments, of accommodations geared at creating realms of common knowledge," and demanding an understanding of the environment and the values and actions of the actors in the research setting.

Kumaravadivelu (1994) warned of the danger of pragmatism becoming mere eclecticism or degenerating into unsystematic and uncritical classroom pedagogy. He argued for a “principled pragmatism” (p. 30) based on classroom practice, as espoused by Widdowson (1990) in language teaching, in which “the relationship between theory and practice, ideas and their actualization, can only be realized within the domain of application, that is, through the immediate activity of teaching” (Widdowson, 1990, p. 30). Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 32) argued that instead of responding to pendulum swings in method, language teaching needed coherent frameworks and “method-neutral” but not atheoretical strategies.

In line with pragmatic approaches and Kumaravadivelu’s “post-method” condition (1994), I also agree with Sfar’s call to employ both a “participation metaphor” and an “acquisition metaphor” for learning and teaching (Sfar, 1998, p. 11). Sfar warned that a “trendy mixture” of constructivist, social-interactionist, and situative approaches, based on the participation metaphor, can result in the use of cooperative learning for all students and situations and the banishment of “teaching by telling.” Teaching in Africa and the Middle East and living in South East Asia has acquainted me with many learning and teaching styles from both metaphors. With experience in those settings, from infants to adults and the enthusiastic to the unwilling, I feel different perspectives – associative, cognitive, constructivist, or didactic (Bates, 2008) – can have a place depending on the learner and the context. To provide only the participation metaphor Sfar describes could deny learners alternative and perhaps more effective learning environments.

A further motivation is my desire for social action (Freire, 1972; Thomas, 1993). Many candidates taking IELTS are doing so to improve their economic and social standing, and I believe they deserve support and access to resources. My experiences teaching writing and IELTS and encounters with members on writefix.com have allowed me to witness changes in many lives. Through critical thinking and shared constructed knowledge, learners can become members of wider and increasingly powerful communities and perhaps rebalance power asymmetries in society. (The exam can of course serve to maintain inequity (Pennycook, 2007; Tollefson, 2000): for poorer learners, access to college and opportunities to take exams such as IELTS may be very difficult).

Kanuka (2008) stressed the link between philosophical orientations and how – or whether – we choose and use e-learning technologies. Of a range of philosophical orientations Kanuka describes, I would identify most closely with a progressive

educational approach, often associated with problem-solving, democratic cooperation, and personal development. While learning is something that students must do for themselves, the teacher and students in this approach are in a partnership. The teacher's role is to organize, stimulate, and evaluate by helping and encouraging students (Kanuka, 2008).

Kanuka (2008) suggests that progressive or pragmatic orientations are often aligned with uses determinism. Such a view would favor the use of discussion forums, wikis, blogs, user-content sites, social networks, or some aspects of course management systems to encourage cooperation and peer interaction as well as an independent work environment. However, a determinist outlook also predisposes a risk of being seduced by technological solutions to problems. Accordingly, I need to be aware of what Egbert and Petrie (2005, p. 3) described as a "fallacious inclination to test technologies rather than theories," and the need to avoid being driven by technology (Laurillard, 2008). Parchoma (2010) and Kanuka (2008) warn that technologies are not necessarily value-neutral, and that their affordances should neither be assumed nor ignored. As Feenberg (1991) pointed out, we make cultural choices in choosing to use particular technologies. To avoid being swayed by novelty, Prabhu's "subjective sense of plausibility" (1990, p. 175) can help when deciding to use a particular technology.

A further educational belief is that learning is not necessarily vertical, but can be lateral or expansive. Ryberg and Christiansen (2008) noted reservations regarding Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, in which movement appears to be upward towards increasing complexity through scaffolding from more capable peers. In contrast, Ryberg and Christiansen described learning as becoming broader and more horizontal (Engeström, 1999), taking place across communities and activities in informal learning settings, with learners having at once more autonomy and greater responsibility for their own learning.

Because of the concern of this study with perceptions, interactions, growth and understanding, rather than directly measurable outcomes, and because of its assumption that new understanding can be created through community participation, it incorporates elements of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1991). In sociocultural theory, adults, peers and experts influence individual learning (Vygotsky, 1987). Scaffolded learning (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) occurs in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the distance between independent

problem solving and the level of potential development which can be achieved with the right guidance.

Echoing socio-cultural and constructivist beliefs, I view knowledge growth and thinking as comprising both social/interactive and personal components. Meaning is constructed through interactions with others as well as within ourselves, since we are inescapably social (Goodyear & Zenios, 2007; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2008): as Pea suggested (1993), knowledge is socially constructed “through collaborative efforts toward shared objectives or by dialogues and challenges brought about by differences” in perspectives (1993, p. 48).

Knowledge evolves through different modes of participation within fluid, overlapping communities, and in our responses to this participation, summarized in Wenger’s (1999) social theory of learning as becoming, belonging, doing, and experience, with the aspect of new identity and learning-as-becoming particularly relevant for the forum members in this study.



Figure 1: Wenger’s Social Learning (1995, p. 5)

In writing in particular, I recognize the tensions between process and the intertextual product, the formative discourse, and the social interaction of the classroom or online discussion and the final product of the writing exam.

Bentz and Shapiro (1998, p. 6) use the term “mindful enquiry” based on a synthesis of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical social science.

1. All research involves both accepting the biases of one’s own situation and context, and trying to transcend it.

2. Human existence, as well as research, is a process of interpreting one's self and others, including other cultures and subcultures.
3. Inquiry may contribute to social action by critiquing existing values, social and personal illusions, and practices and institutions (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 6).

1.5 Roles: Teacher, Designer, Researcher, Moderator, Peer

My role in this research took several forms over the lifetime of the study, including those of teacher, designer, moderator, member or peer, and researcher (Figure 2).

The impetus for the study came from my work as a teacher preparing learners for IELTS and from my use of a simple static website to support this teaching. In this role, before the research started, I was primarily giving feedback as an authority figure, more-able other or domain expert, either in conventional classrooms or through occasional one-to-one emails to individuals.

As I decided on the design of the forum for a relaunched website, I took on the role of designer, determining the type of space and the interactions sought, and choosing particular aspects of technology to support these. This phase began a year before the launching of the forum and continued as the forum software was tweaked and members were encouraged to provide feedback.

As members joined, my role changed to both that of a forum moderator and of a member. As moderator, I welcomed new members, attempted to respond to posts that had not received replies, and carried out basic housekeeping such as tagging, moving some posts between sub-forums.

While a small area of the website gave my background and indicated that I was a teacher of English, I did not dwell on this in posts and did not mention any particular expertise in IELTS. Accordingly, I saw myself as a "complete-member researcher" exploring a group of which I was already a full member (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741) with the characteristics of Adler and Adler's (1994) full membership, or Spradley's (1980) complete participation. In this phase, my primary form of involvement was not as a researcher, but as a moderator and peer. In Adler and Adler's terms (1994, p. 380), I attempted to use my membership so as "not to alter the flow of interaction unnaturally." However, inevitably, my feedback also took the form of teaching, with Hattie and Timperley (2007) noting the continuum between instructing and giving feedback becoming much more intertwined as feedback takes

on the form of new instruction, rather than “informing the student solely about correctness” (Kulhavy, 1977, p. 212).

My fifth role of researcher occurred in phases at different times, sometimes in parallel forms. The earliest form was in my early search for literature on models of community, networked learning and suitable methodological approaches. As the forum gained momentum, I researched literature on feedback in L1 and L2 in online and conventional settings, and on methods of analysis of online discussion including content analysis and network analysis.

The most important phase as researcher began during the formal analysis of posts and comments which, for the most part, began after the forum closed. It was at this synthesis stage that I sought to make meaning out of the interactions in the forum, the changes in participation, and the knowledge created by these contributions and interactions.

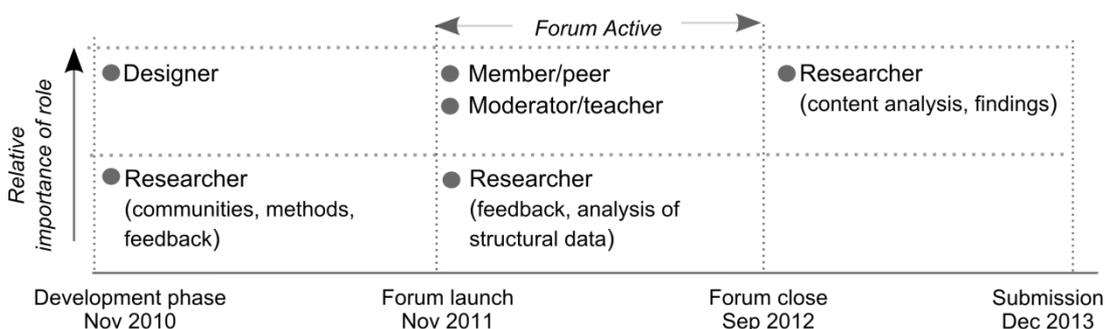


Figure 2: Changing Roles

1.6 Research Questions

The research is guided by one overarching question and three subsidiary questions:

Overarching Research Question

To what extent do feedback and interactions in an asynchronous online forum support informal peer-to-peer learning of English as a second language?

Subsidiary Research Questions

1. What types of interactions occur in an online discussion forum on essay writing for language learners?
2. What types of feedback on essay writing indicate learning and knowledge-sharing among forum members?

3. What perceptions do users have of the feedback and interactions on the forum?

Question 1 examines interactions, behaviors, roles, and modes of participation of members and visitors to the forum, including fixed, scripted, dynamic, and emergent roles, organizational citizenship behaviors, and how particular types of commitment may affect contribution. It also looks at features of online discussion which may promote or hinder learning and knowledge creation.

Question 2 investigates the feedback on writing given on the forum, including the types of feedback given, changes in learner use of feedback, and whether feedback contributed to change and knowledge creation.

Question 3 focuses on members' perspectives regarding feedback in writing and the benefits of participation in the forum. The relationship between perceptions and proficiency is examined, particularly with regard to how change in one affects the other and whether this leads to a spiral of increased engagement.

1.7 Intended Audience

This thesis is intended to be of interest to teachers of writing, particularly in L2 and IELTS academic essay writing, and to designers and forum moderators in language learning websites and other learning communities in both traditional and informal learning settings.

It is hoped that the research will encourage more teachers to use feedback in L1 and L2 writing by helping their students to see the value of feedback, suggesting how they can give and apply feedback, and increasing their students' confidence, sense of agency, and self-regulation.

1.8 Overview of Thesis Layout

The next chapter (Chapter 2) reviews literature in several areas, including the IELTS exam and candidates; feedback in second language learning (L2), particularly in writing; the nature of asynchronous discussion and online roles, interactions and behaviors; and models of organizational citizenship and knowledge creation in organizations.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in the study, the theoretical background, and my personal stance as a peer/member, researcher, teacher, designer, and

moderator. It describes the unit of analysis and explains decisions made regarding coding and the choice of themes from the data.

Chapter 4 describes themes and findings from analysis of the forum and interviews. It presents data in five parts: participant profiles; interactions, roles, and behaviors; community and social presence; feedback, knowledge-sharing and change in the forum; and the perceptions of the members.

Chapter 5 relates the findings to the literature and to the research questions. It discusses in more detail why models from organizational behavior and knowledge management may be helpful in understanding how knowledge is shared and how learners interact online in informal learning settings.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 6, in which the research questions and theoretical contribution of the study are discussed, along with limitations, suggestions for further study, and some reflections on the study.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

In this chapter, I review research from the literature in six key areas: the IELTS exam and its far-reaching effects on candidates; profiles of IELTS candidates as potential forum participants; feedback in L2; asynchronous discussion forums in language learning; online interactions, roles, and organizational citizenship behavior; and frameworks of knowledge conversion, e.g. Nonaka's SECI model (1994), as a device for analysis of knowledge creation in online discussion.

This literature review was carried out in different phases, as described in Chapter 1, Section 5 and in Figure 2 "Changing Roles." A general overview of online community and discussion occurred before the forum was established, during the long design period, with design issues and testing prominent. Once the forum started, research concentrated on reviewing literature on feedback in L1 and L2 settings, but also on methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis. While the forum essays and posts were coming in, my engagement with them was more that of a peer and moderator, rather than that of an academic researcher: as mentioned in 1.5, content analysis did not begin until the forum had closed.

In summary, the chapter identifies a dearth of research on informal online learning for formal educational goals among language learners, and examines various patterns and trajectories of participation in asynchronous discussion and how these influence knowledge creation in peer feedback on essay writing.

2.1 The IELTS exam

Many students of English as a foreign language have to write short academic essays for exams such as IELTS (the UK/Australia-based International English Language Testing System, owned by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, and University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations). The IELTS exam is primarily taken for university enrollment overseas or for immigration (IDP.com, 2012), but also as a graduation requirement, or for professional registration and accreditation (IELTS.org, 2010a; Merrifield, 2008, 2012).

Over six million students have taken IELTS, with over a million and a half candidates sitting the test in 2010 (IELTS.org, 2012).

2.1.1 Format of the exam

In IELTS, candidates are tested in Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. The paper-based, hour-long writing component in the Academic track has two formal writing tasks, one describing data such as a graph or map in 150 words, and the second presenting an opinion on an issue in about 250 words (IELTS.org, 2012). This second task, the opinion or argument essay, is the focus of this study.

Candidates receive bands between 1 ('no ability to use the language') and 9 ('expert' user) in each skill area. An overall IELTS score of band 6.0 indicates that the student is a 'competent' user of English, and a band of 7 indicates a 'good' user (IELTS.org, 2010b).

Band 6.5 is often accepted for entry to Australian universities (Lai et al., 2008), but some faculties require higher grades. The average for all candidates in 2010 was 6 for females and 5.8 for males (IELTS.org, 2010a): female candidates tend to score slightly higher in all skills. Candidates from most language backgrounds score lower in Writing than in Listening or Speaking (IELTS.org, 2010a), with an average band of 5.8 worldwide in Writing, compared to 6.4 in Reading.

Essay writing is an academic, disembodied practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989), and essays are epistemic forms "with slots and constraints for completing those slots" (Collins & Ferguson, 1993, p. 40), or "target structures that guide enquiry." Essays pose varying cultural and academic demands for their rhetoric and organization, with candidates expected to agree or disagree, find two sides rather than one, balance emotion with logic, and develop ideas which may already seem clear. While the slots identified by Collins and Ferguson may support the use of models or exemplars, not all L2 writing teachers use models, with many preferring to emphasize more general skills (Abbuhl, 2011; MacBeth, 2010).

2.1.2 IELTS: A High-stakes Exam

In addition to the normal emotions associated with any difficult test, there are layers of added complexity with high-stakes exams such as IELTS.

Failure to get the band required by an employer, immigration authority, or overseas university can mean the expense and delays of resits or preparation. Failure can also mean a loss of face or employment if the test is sponsored by a school, government, or organization.

For candidates from economically-depressed or politically-unstable countries, not reaching the desired band can mean a missed opportunity for a better or more secure standard of living for test-takers and their families. Professional and semi-professional workers from countries such as the Philippines, Egypt, or Sri Lanka support families and contribute extensively to national economies through their hard work and remittances from English-speaking target countries such as Canada, the US, the UK, or Australia.

Low grades are of course possible with all tests, but it is impossible to ignore the particular associations of the IELTS exam. As a test of ability in a privileged foreign language (Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2011; Pennycook, 2007; Tollefson, 2000), failure to get a desired result can also mean a sense of exclusion from that language community. Although English is widely used internationally and has lost some of its colonial baggage, it is not a neutral or value-free subject. For critics such as Pennycook (2007, p. 112), English is not so much a language as “a discursive field: English is neoliberalism, English is globalization, English is human capital.” Pennycook dismisses views of English as being neutral or as having become a global language without overt political action, or as being necessarily beneficial to those that learn and use it. Tollefson, like Pennycook, dismisses claims that the spread of English contributes to economic well-being, arguing that it fosters “significant social, political and economic inequalities” (Tollefson, 2000, p. 8). While English is seen as “a key to economic opportunity” at an individual, institutional, or national level (Goodman & Graddol, 1997, p. 200), it can be associated with moneyed or privileged classes, serving them rather than the entire society (Tollefson, 2000).

Receiving low grades in the “culture-specific” IELTS test (Uysal, 2010, p. 5) after years using the language can be galling. Tollefson’s portrayal (2000, p. 7) of a Filipina university teacher’s exam anxiety is a good example. Similar situations occur in “outer circle” countries (Kachru, 1997) such as India or Pakistan or with other “world Englishes” (Bhatt, 2001), and applicants to UK universities from English-speaking backgrounds in countries such as South Africa are increasingly required to take the test. Shohamy (1997) suggests that tests can be used to define linguistic knowledge, determine membership and create biases against individuals and groups.

In essence, IELTS acts as a gatekeeper for entry into prestigious academic, socio-economic and cultural circles, a role emphasized by the test’s association with the British Council, a cultural and educational arm of the UK government (British Council, 2013). The IELTS exam is therefore regarded as a politically-positioned,

“high-stakes” exam (Moore et al., 2011, p. 6) with important consequences for students (Green, 2007; IDP.com, 2012; Merrifield, 2012, p. 19; Uysal, 2010), and an extensive level of “washback,” or impact on teaching, learning, and preparation as well as on the wider community, families, and work (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996, p. 298).

As part of washback, preparation classes, websites, and forums have emerged to help students with essay writing through advice, tuition, or feedback. Mickan and Motteram (2009, 2008) describe such IELTS preparation as a type of socialization or apprenticeship into activities, genres, and social practices connected with the test.

2.1.3 IELTS as a Predictor

Despite the effort needed made by candidates, colleges in destination countries voice concern that IELTS may not equip students with the English needed for academic success. Mismatches are reported between IELTS scores, candidates’ perception of their own ability, university expectations, and ratings of new employees’ communicative skills (Bayliss & Ingram, 2007; Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999; Lai et al., 2008; Yen & Kuzma, 2009).

Literature on the predictive ability of IELTS for academic success is mixed (Yen & Kuzma, 2009). Picard (2007) noted that good reading scores were better predictors than writing, but, generally, IELTS scores do not predict long-term academic success beyond the first year or two (Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Oliver & Dooley, 2002), with personal factors more important later in college (Rea-Dickins, Kiely, & Yu, 2007).

Summary

In summary, IELTS is an expensive, challenging, and influential assessment of English proficiency with a gatekeeper status for entry into new academic, socio-economic, or professional communities. Due to the privileged status of English, candidates have to adapt to not just the normal issues of first and second language interplay, but also expectations regarding rhetorical, cultural, and socio-linguistic features associated with the community that devises the exam. Varieties of English that highly-educated candidates have used successfully may not be endorsed by the test, and candidates may have to learn academic forms of limited future use. Despite the exam’s importance and its impact on identity, personal factors may be more important for academic success or adaptation to new environments.

For the forum members, almost none of whom were English majors, IELTS essay writing success was a determining factor for their immediate future, and the pressure and anxiety stemming from the exam permeates the posts and energizes the interactions in the online discussion.

2.2 Participant Profiles

This section examines typical IELTS candidates and, therefore, the expected audience for the forum.

While IELTS does not release many details on candidate profiles, the bulk of 2011's 1.7 million IELTS candidates came from China, South East Asia and South Asia (IDP.com, 2012). In 2008, over 260,000 candidates came from China alone, with 43% aged over 22 and most hoping to study Master's degrees or higher (British Council, 2009). The 2004 figure for the Middle East, North, Central and Southern Africa totaled just 6% (Hawkey, 2005).

Studies on candidates in specific colleges and countries provide more detailed information (Merrifield, 2008, 2012; Merrylees, 2003; Moore et al., 2011; Woodrow, 2006). In China in 2009 most candidates (57%) were between 19 and 22 (British Council, 2009), but Merrylees (2003) found a mean age of 31 among candidates in Australia taking IELTS for immigration, with an average age of over 35 for Filipino candidates. Candidates intending to immigrate had IELTS band scores slightly higher than those of university-enrolled students. Moore et al. (2011) described Cambodian test takers as males, aged 25-29, employed, comparatively well-educated, using English at work, taking private classes in English, and more aware of their weaknesses in English than younger students.

Rea-Dickins et al. (2007) cautioned against overly-simple characterizations, or what Saravanamuthu termed 'cultural monolithism' (2008, p. 141). Examining the impact of IELTS on a group of Chinese students in the UK, Rea-Dickins et al. argued for a move away from traditional labels, for example in terms of gender, country context, or L1, and towards a focus on learning ability and membership of new academic communities.

This thesis will propose the existence of two groups of IELTS candidates: one in conventional educational settings preparing for primary degrees, generally younger and with access to teachers and traditional resources, and a second, older group of

graduates generally preparing alone outside formal educational settings, with less support or access to resources, and preparing to emigrate or study overseas.

2.2.1 IELTS Candidates as Autonomous Learners

IELTS candidates from the second group described above may need to be what Haythornthwaite (2008) describes as autonomous learners: “responsible for, and in many cases alone in creating their own learning context and content as they search the internet for materials to support their needs” (Cuthell, 2003; Haythornthwaite, 2008, p. 598; Little, 2003). The Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project define autonomy as the ability to take charge of one’s own learning (Holec, 1980): such autonomous learners need to direct their own problem-solving processes (Dalsgaard, 2006), and identify resources, test personal beliefs, and decide how to proceed based on their needs, perceptions, and experiences (Hannafin, 1999).

Online learning particularly requires learners to take responsibility for their own learning (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003). However, “not all learners are prepared for such ownership” (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003, p. 2), requiring skills such as critical media literacy and technology literacy (Haythornthwaite, 2008).

McConnell (2006) noted that for students to become lifelong learners, they must develop skills of self-regulation and self-assessment, or be “weaned away” from over-reliance on the opinions of others (Candy, Crebert, & O’Leary, 1994, p. 150). Boud and Falchikov (2006) described teacher-centered assessment and feedback as undermining students’ capacity to judge their own work.

Autonomy, however, does not always mean working alone: Boud (1988) noted that interdependence requires a choice of learning partners and settings, or a sense that members matter to each other (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) suggested a need to become dependent on other students’ contributions, with such “structural dependence” creating reasons for working together and increasing mutual respect and self-esteem.

Autonomy is also associated with more overtly political thinking, such as the rejection of traditional classrooms and moves to new language pedagogy and learning (Benson, 2007). However, Williams, Karousou, and Mackness (2011) warned against the “normative overtones” of the drive towards network learning, learner autonomy, and emergence, with an over-emphasis on autonomy resulting in inadequate support and learner isolation (Williams et al., 2011, p. 40).

Candidates enrolled in conventional classes and receiving IELTS preparation may have better access to textbooks and teachers, and perhaps to face-to-face feedback. These advantages, however, combined with less self-reliance and perhaps less self-regulation, may make them less likely to seek out alternative resources such as IELTS websites or primary sources such as native speakers, social media, or newspapers. Such resources can facilitate direct entry into L2 user communities for more autonomous IELTS learners (Sokkett & Toffoli, 2012), regardless of any limitations in their previous educational experiences.

The effectiveness of IELTS preparation varies, with accusations of rote learning in some reports. Brown (1998) found a one-band increase after focused preparation for IELTS writing over ten weeks, and Zhendong (2009) found that an IELTS preparation course in Hong Kong motivated students to learn more on their own or with classmates. However, Green (2005, 2007) found very limited value for IELTS preparation, with quicker improvement limited to lower-level candidates. Mickan and Motteram (2009) noted that most candidates at one Australian center had not taken any courses, despite the test being a 'significant aspiration' with many taking the test repeatedly. Instead, candidates reported informal learning activities such as reading novels, watching TV, or working in an English-speaking environment, as well as doing IELTS-related practice tests or reading textbooks.

Summary: Profiles of Forum Members

In summary, IELTS candidates can be usefully be into divided into two groups, one in formal learning and one in informal learning settings. This second group tends to be older, from middle-income and developing countries, with at least a primary degree, taking the IELTS for further study or immigration abroad, and characterized by greater autonomy, either by disposition or circumstance. Perhaps working or married with family, most are preparing for major changes in their academic, professional, or socio-economic circumstances. Their experiences with learning English, teaching methods, and L2 writing may vary considerably. With many such candidates preparing alone for the exam, themes of autonomy, interdependence, and identity are important for understanding their participation.

2.3 Peer Feedback

Peer feedback, also called peer review, peer comment, peer editing, peer evaluation, peer revision, or peer response (Berg, 1999; Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998) is an activity in L1 and L2 writing classrooms which allows students to receive more feedback and to practice important skills for the development of language and writing ability. Peer feedback provides “meaningful interaction with peers, a greater exposure to ideas, and new perspectives on the writing process” (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009, p. 30), or as described by Liu and Carless (2006, p. 280), “a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards.”

Critics, however, have described peer feedback as “the blind leading the blind with unskilled editors guiding inexperienced writers in a process neither understands well” (Graner, 1987, p. 40).

In a key definition, Ramaprasad (1983) described feedback as being more about its effect than its content:

Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way. (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4)

Ramaprasad’s definition emphasizes a process, not a product, and the need for a response: for feedback to be complete, recipients have to be aware of a gap and appreciate the standard being aimed for, be able to compare their current level with the standard, and be able to take appropriate action to narrow the gap. Hattie and Timperley similarly describe the goal of feedback as being “to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance and a goal” (2007, p. 86), or ‘discrepancy feedback’ (Voerman, Meijer, Korthagen, & Simons, 2012, p. 1102). This view of feedback as a looping process with multiple actors, action, and reaction (Van De Ridder, Stokking, McGaghie, & Ten Cate, 2008) is in contrast to views of feedback as a product given by a perceived expert or authority figure.

Peer feedback in various forms has been well researched in conventional L2 educational settings and in face-to-face L2 writing (Amores, 1997; Black, 2005b; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Jacobs & Zhang, 1989; Lee, 2011; Leki, 1990; Liu &

Sadler, 2003; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998; Zamel, 1982). Online studies with L2 students are less common: as recently as 2007, Ertmer et al. commented that “little is known” about the efficacy of peer feedback online (2007, p. 1).

2.3.1 Feedback as Socially Constructed Knowledge

A definition by Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006, p. 206) of peer feedback as activities that “strengthen the students’ capacity to self-regulate their own performances” changes the focus from teacher-generated comments to a more student-focused activity and provides a glimpse at an underlying theoretical basis.

Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000, p. 287) suggest that peer assessment may be seen as “a manifestation of social constructionism,” involving the joint construction of knowledge through discourse. Berg (1999) and others similarly suggested that peer feedback reflected a shift to process approaches in writing (Berg, 1999; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Flower, 1989; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Steinbach, 1984; Tang & Tithecott, 1999). Since experienced writers look to colleagues for feedback as a normal part of writing, inexperienced writers should also use peer feedback (Berg, 1999): a socially-constructed view of writing would encourage emergent writers to develop their practice in a community.

An important social basis for feedback arises from the concept of scaffolding, or interactions where an ‘expert’ assists learners to rise above their current competence (Min, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976, p. 90). Donato (1994) found L2 learners to be capable of providing scaffolded help normally only associated with expert-novice interaction, with even novice learners able to scaffold each other’s learning (Antón & Dicamilla, 1999), and both givers and receivers of feedback benefitting. Villamil and de Guerrero (2000; 1996) and Liu and Carless (2006) noted that L2 students giving peer feedback variously relinquished, appropriated, or switched roles, with knowledge shifts as members contributed different areas of expertise.

Reflecting Vygotsky’s premise that higher cognitive development originates in social interaction, Antón and Dicamilla (1999) reviewed earlier work describing collaborative dialogue about language as a clear source of second language learning. Swain and Lapkin (1998, p. 320) noted that dialogue provided both an occasion for language learning and the evidence for it: in second language learning, language is

both process and product, with dialogue in the L2 serving to “co-construct knowledge” (Donato, 1994; Min, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 321).

2.3.2 Benefits for Givers of Feedback

As well as benefitting from receiving peer feedback, learners can benefit from giving feedback through reflection, synthesis, self-regulation, and self-assessment, resulting in improved writing.

Liu and Carless (2006) found that feedback encouraged students to manage their learning, shifting students from dependence on instructors for judgment to “a more autonomous and independent situation where each individual develops the experience, know-how, and skills to assess their own learning” (McConnell, 2002, p. 89). By commenting on the work of peers, students develop standards to assess their own work (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Rosalia, 2010) and to reflect more critically on their postings (Ertmer et al., 2007), with internal and external feedback from peer editing as a catalyst creating “self-regulated learners” (Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 246).

Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (1999) found that peer feedback helped recipients to carry out self-assessment, with the process of feedback as important as the content. Liu, Lin, Chiu, and Yuan (2001), Cho and Cho (2010), and Liu and Carless (2006) noted that learners giving feedback read, compared, questioned ideas, and suggested modifications, positively influencing how reviewers self-assessed and revised their own writing.

Lundstrom and Baker (2009) found that givers who focused solely on reviewing peers’ work improved more in their own writing over a semester than did receivers, particularly at lower proficiency levels. Cho, Schunn, and Wilson (2006, p. 261) also reported commenting on peers’ papers to be “more helpful for revising than attempting to address peers’ suggestions.”

Berg (1999) suggested that peer response helped inexperienced L2 writers find problems in their writing, particularly mismatches between writer intentions and the reactions of the reader. While many L2 (and L1) students perceive writing to be a solitary skill, writing involves multiple levels of others, intertextuality, and audience (Berg, 1999).

2.3.3 Teacher and Learner Perceptions of Feedback

Despite the “remote” possibility that writers gain nothing from peer feedback (Cho, Schunn, & Wilson, 2006, p. 261), teachers and learner have reservations about its use.

Rollinson (2005, p. 23) noted “doubts” by many L2 teachers regarding peer feedback, despite its social, cognitive, affective, and methodological benefits. Hyland and Hyland (2006b) similarly noted student and teacher reservations about feedback, with Sadler (1989) suggesting that some teachers may feel threatened by students cooperating in evaluating writing.

A more commonly-expressed reason is that most L2 learners seem to prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback (Ge, 2011; Lee, 1997, 2011; Saito, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995), with teacher feedback more likely to be adopted (Yang, Tsai, Kim, Cho, & Laffey, 2006; Zhao, 2010).

Topping’s review of studies comparing feedback from teachers and peers suggested outcomes “at least as good as teacher assessment, and sometimes better” (Topping, 1998, p. 262), with similar results from Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000). Stefani (1998) rejected such comparisons, arguing that students wanted “user-friendly information, relating to how they are doing and how specifically they might be able to improve upon what they are doing” (1998, p. 348).

In general, a consensus has emerged that rather than preferring teacher feedback over peer feedback, recognizing the characteristics of each for particular purposes may be more useful (Caulk, 1994; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Stefani, 1998).

Cho and McArthur (2010) reviewed literature suggesting that because subject-matter experts and novices represent knowledge differently, learners may understand peer comments more easily, with peer comments incorporated into revisions more often. Winer (1992) noted that despite concerns over L2 ability, non-native speakers were more able to explain differences between L1 and L2 writing to peers, and Kearsley (2000) similarly suggested that learners find peer feedback effective because it comes from their perspective rather from an expert one.

Cho et al. (2008) found feedback from novices in a technology forum to be accepted more often than expert feedback (Cho, Chung, King, & Schunn, 2008), and Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) found that while teacher feedback resulted in improvements in grammar, feedback from peers resulted in changes to content, organization, and vocabulary.

Yang et al. (2006), with English learners in China, noted that teacher feedback was associated with “misinterpretation and miscommunication” (p. 193), and a perception that no further work was required once a teacher had addressed errors (2006, p. 192), whereas negotiation with peers prompted greater reflection and revision. Learners may view the instructor’s word as the authoritative one (Zhao & McDougall, 2005).

Caulk (1994) found that almost 90% of intermediate students made valid suggestions, with only 6% of peer responses containing advice Caulk considered poor. Peers acted “more like normal readers” than evaluators, responding immediately to the part they were reading (Caulk, 1994, p. 185). Teacher L2 feedback was often general, referring to an entire essay, while responses from students were more specific. Peers also used simpler language to give feedback.

Having several reviewers identify similar problems may persuade writers to revise papers (Caulk, 1994; Cho and McArthur, 2010). Multiple peers may detect more problems (Miyake, 1986) and reduce the likelihood and impact of inaccurate feedback.

The specificity of comments (Shute, 2008) is also important, with Shute (2008) and Ellis (2009) providing a useful list of feedback types ordered by detail. Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 90) outline four types of feedback, ranging from feedback about the task (specific details about incorrect or missing, information or usage), about the processing of the task (drawing attention to classes of errors such as verb agreement or descriptors), about self-regulation (drawing the learner’s attention to skills or strategies already discussed or practiced), and about the self as a person (comments such as “well done”). Cho et al. observed less improvement when comments were vague, but overly-directive comments led to changes only in the specific paper rather than general changes in writing ability (Cho, Schunn, & Wilson, 2006). Voerman et al. (2012) similarly outlined categories of feedback along specific/non-specific and positive/negative dimensions, and suggested that the most effective ratio may be approximately 3 parts positive to 1 part negative.

2.3.4 Learner Perceptions of Peer Feedback

Although some studies claim that students generally give peer feedback less credence, others disagree (Askell-Williams & Lawson, 2005; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998; Zhang, 1995), with Rollinson (2005) describing peer feedback as less authoritarian than teacher feedback.

Sharing work with peers may be difficult in some settings. Winer (1992) observed apprehension among US-based ESL teacher trainees about being “ridiculed by a fellow classmate” (Winer, 1992, p. 77) and the presence of an “unwritten code based on mutual protection” which inhibited productive evaluation (Brown, 1984, p. 48). Müräu (1993) similarly noted concerns over embarrassment when receiving peer criticism, and a desire to avoid embarrassing others with possibly negative evaluation.

Non-academic reasons such as friendship, dislike, or lack of acquaintance with a peer can affect feedback (Falchikov, 1995; Hew & Cheung, 2010; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Pond, Ulhaq, & Wade, 1995; Zhang, 1995, 1999). Peers may simply not be in the mood to give or receive feedback, or may not be motivated to analyze thoroughly.

Zhang (1995, p. 218) warned against equating L1 feedback with L2 contexts: in some societies, students may resist feedback from peers or be reluctant to provide it (Carson & Nelson, 1996) with peer feedback appearing to lacking validity or expertise. Direct or negative criticism may be threatening in some cultural settings, and learners may prefer to receive supportive feedback before negative feedback. De Luque and Sommer (2000) noted a preference in collectivist cultures (e.g., in parts of Asia) for indirect feedback and more group-focused feedback, whereas learners from individualist cultures such as the US preferred more direct and individually-targeted feedback. Examining western approaches to teaching in China, Hu (2002, p. 99) suggested that L2 students who view the teacher as “the one who knows” may ignore peer feedback due to perceptions that peers are not knowledgeable enough to make worthwhile comments. Hu (2002, p. 100) suggested that it is “taken for granted” that that the teacher as knower and giver of knowledge has the sole right to evaluate the students’ performance. As one of Sengupta’s students in Hong Kong noted (1998, p. 23), “only the teacher can tell me how to make my composition better.”

Students may lack self-efficacy, perceiving themselves as lacking the domain knowledge needed to analyze writing or the L2 ability to comprehend a peer’s writing and communicate suggestions. As Hattie and Timperley noted (2007, p. 95), learner perceptions of about success or failure can often have more impact than the reality of that success or failure, and learners need to be able to relate the feedback to the cause of their poor performance. Weaver and Cottrell (1986) summed up student opposition to peer evaluation (of interviews) as being that “they are not trained to do it, that it isn’t their job, that some do not take it seriously, that some don’t want to do it” (1986, p. 39).

When peer-reviewing online, students may be “released from much of the responsibility” of face-to-face encounters (Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995, p. 212). In a Guardado and Shi study (2007) with L2 students in Canada, some participants welcomed being able to give feedback anonymously, as in an earlier study by DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001), but with some others preferring face-to-face discussion. Tsui and Ng (2000) also claimed that face-to-face feedback in a Hong Kong secondary school worked better, but Tuzi (2004) found that online feedback resulted in more revisions than the preferred face-to-face discussion.

2.3.5 Response to Feedback

Connor and Asenavage (1994) and DiPardo and Freedman (1988) noted the difficulty of establishing a direct relationship between peer feedback and improvement. Although recipients may view feedback as beneficial, it may not result in significant improvement (Li & Steckelberg, 2006; Mawlawi Diab, 2009), and this has also been found for online L2 feedback, although some studies report more positive outcomes (Rollinson, 2005). Over half the students in a Mendonça and Johnson (1994) study incorporated peers’ comments, but Connor and Asenavage (1994) found less application. Some learners are more reflective and willing than others to incorporate feedback (Tseng & Tsai, 2010), with proficiency and the relationship between peers as important factors, and it is important not to confuse feelings that feedback is desirable with the question of whether feedback benefits performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 95).

In general, mature, experienced writers may be “better at revising than younger people” (Haar & Horning, 2006, p. 4), while Zamel (1982) found skilled writers more likely to revise global and essay-level aspects of their writing. However, Tang and Tithecott (1999) found that both proficient and less proficient students gained in language awareness and self-confidence. Lee (1997) suggested that weaker L2 students benefited from directive feedback, while less detailed cues encouraged advanced students to apply their own revisions.

Some higher-ability participants in a study by Ge (2011) with adult L2 learners in China felt they put too much effort into peer review but received too little back. Students in this higher level group did not do as much revision and did not improve as much as weaker students. In a meta-analysis of feedback studies, Falchikov and Goldfinch were “surprised” that more able students were not significantly more accurate in giving feedback (2000, p. 316).

Kobayashi and Rinnert (2001, p. 86) tentatively suggested that essay-level knowledge and revision skills may be “somewhat independent or separable” from language proficiency, with the ability to fix smaller grammar or mechanical errors separate from the ability to make major revisions. Similarly, being able to give macro-level comments in feedback did not guarantee that students could revise their own writing at the macro level (Cho & MacArthur, 2010).

2.3.6 Training in Peer Feedback

Several studies have reviewed training for giving feedback (Anderson, Bergman, Bradley, Gustafsson, & Matzke, 2010; Carson & Nelson, 1996; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Falchikov, 1995; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). Leki (1990) observed that untrained L2 students focused on surface errors. Mangelsdorf (1992) cautioned that peer reviews would be inadequate initially but would improve with training. Nelson and Murphy (1993) concluded that given training in how to discuss writing, appropriate social skills, and a cooperative atmosphere, L2 students could engage successfully in peer feedback.

Feedback training can focus on micro-level aspects of grammar and syntax, on macro-level features such as organization and ideas, or on communication skills. Berg (1999) found that intermediate L2 students trained to ask questions, be specific, and focus on meaning produced better feedback, regardless of proficiency level, with the givers also making better revisions themselves. Mangelsdorf (1992) similarly trained students to focus on content and organization, rather than style or grammar, with training on being polite and on grammar such as modals. Gerbic (2006) suggested modeling strategies for responding to peers rather than simply stating opinions. Students in an Ertmer et al. (2007) study graded feedback from peers, with postings demonstrating analysis or synthesis receiving more points, and students evaluating their own feedback as well as that of others. Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggested that feedback was most effective if different forms – specific information about errors or missing details, information about task processes, and reminders about self-assessment strategies – were inter-related.

Descriptors or exemplars can be helpful for higher-level learners, but providing a set of rubrics does not guarantee accurate application. However, Patchan et al. (2009) found that given clear rubrics and adequate incentives, even weaker students provided comments that were similar in quantity and quality to those of instructors. A Sadler and Good study (2006) featured rubrics developed collectively with young

students, while Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) found that peers gave better feedback using global descriptors than when using multiple criteria.

2.3.7 Writing in L1 and L2

The structure of academic essays and argument in English can differ substantially from that of the student's first language (Silva, 1993). Kobayashi and Rinnert (1996) identified different rhetorical patterns in Japanese and American writing, and Hirose (2003) and Kubota (1998) also noted inductive organization with viewpoints not expressed until the end. Mu and Carrington (2007) found a range of systemic differences with Chinese writers, while Uysal (2012) stressed the need to recognize differences in argumentation and reasoning, organizational patterns, the responsibility given to the reader or writer (Hinds, 1987), and cultural and rhetorical perceptions of good writing (Connor, 2002).

Despite the influence of Kaplan (1966) on identifying such differences, described as contrastive rhetoric, other authors suggest that L1 and L2 differences are overemphasized (Friedlander, 1990). Matsumoto (1995) proposed "something fundamentally common to any act of writing, regardless of the language" that leads to productive writing, with less proficient writers lacking strategies rather than being blocked by differences (Matsumoto, 1995, p. 26).

Zhang (2010) suggested that recurring weaknesses in learner writing can be compared with academic L2 writing strategies, while Chen suggested that preferences by Chinese EFL learners for particular patterns were linked to experience and cultural awareness (Chen, 2008). Mickan and Slater (2003) identified differences in interpretation of IELTS writing tasks, and Mu and Carrington (2007) and Silva (1993) argued for explicit teaching of patterns and audience expectations to help L2 writers use target styles more quickly.

Summary of this section

In summary, the use of peer feedback is supported by process views of writing, theories of second language acquisition, and socio-cultural views of learning and knowledge creation.

Although well-researched in L2 settings, both online and face-to-face, online feedback around academic tasks has not been examined in depth in more autonomous or informal L2 settings. However, research would suggest that peer feedback in L2 can work at least as well as expert feedback, and may be

complementary rather than a replacement. Training and guidelines can result in more successful peer feedback. The ability to give or implement feedback varies by proficiency level, and much of the literature suggests a learner focus on giving and acting on micro-level rather than macro-level feedback.

Rather than being a product or something given by an expert, feedback is more accurately described as a process benefitting both givers and recipients.

Among the hurdles facing the use of peer feedback are teacher and student attitudes and perceptions of efficacy, despite its possible benefits of increased autonomy and interdependence, improved language skills, and skills of self-regulation for givers and recipients.

2.4 Asynchronous Discussion

This section looks at how asynchronous discussion may help or hinder discussion, autonomy, and knowledge-creation or critical thinking in L2 learning.

From their peak at the start of the internet in 1994 (Hill, 2003; Sproull & Arriaga, 2007), discussion forums have developed standard features, including sequences of messages in threads and categories, either flat (with all responses following the initial post) or multi-threaded, and with settings allowing formatting and interactions with other users' messages and internal or external content. Key topics can be highlighted by administrators. Members can create online identities using pictures, signatures and varying amounts of information, and most boards have rules, written and unwritten, specifying types of behavior expected. Relatively new additions to forums include 'karma' or points and voting systems for posts or authors (Benkler, 2002; Lange, 2007; Schellens, Van Keer, De Wever, & Valcke, 2009).

Compared to applications such as Facebook or Twitter (which may not be available in major L2 learner countries such as China, Pakistan, or Iran), asynchronous discussion forums feature more permanent comments, more bounded memberships linked by common interests rather than social motivations (Boag, 2011), longer posts with attachments, and other formatting features.

Despite the long history of discussion forums, not all their features may be familiar to new users. While 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) are imagined to be comfortable with a variety of digital technologies, users tend to use particular tools for particular purposes and others much less frequently. Kennedy et al. (2007), for example, found that while almost half of a group of students in Australia shared files, 55% had never read a blog and 73% had never kept one. As recently as 2006, Kay noted that forum navigation was a concern for students, but found successful learning regardless. Orlikowski (2000) noted that users can subvert the intended ways of using the technology, ignoring some or repurposing others.

2.4.1 Asynchronous Discussion and L2

For L2 writing, a consensus appears to be that asynchronous forums allow time for less proficient students to prepare responses (Black, 2005b; Chen, 2004; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Kitade, 2006; Sotillo, 2000; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Chen and Looi (2007) found that online discussion allowed more time for clarification. Hyland (2003) and Ortega (1999) suggested that asynchronous formats

allowed more reflective responses and “greater participation from less-proficient students” (Hyland, 2003, p. 156). Several studies have found L2 students more confident and less hesitant in online discussion (Al-Salman, 2009; Gerbic, 2010; Zhu, 2012), with Al-Salman (2009, p.12) proposing that it allows “more intimidated people” to participate, and Liu and Sadler (2003) suggesting that it supported learners whose cultures “valued listening and silence” (2003, p. 196). Warschauer (1996) found Filipino students more active in face-to-face discussion and Japanese more active in online discussions.

Warschauer (1997, p. 471) claimed that L2 discussion increased student engagement, critical analysis, and socially-constructed knowledge, providing “an environment to learn language, learn about language, and learn ‘through’ language.” Swain (2000, p. 97) similarly described discussion in language learning as “dialogue that constructs linguistic knowledge... It is where language use and language learning can co-occur.”

For Dobao (2012), dialogue in L2 learning allowed learners to act as both experts and novices, with learners at different strengths helping each other solve problems and achieving performance above their individual competence.

Warschauer (1996) and Sotillo (2000) found more accurate and complex written language in online discussions than in face-to-face discussion, with Chun (1994, p. 29) suggesting that text-based discussion helped learners transition from written to spoken skills. Faigley (1992) defined such online “talk” as a hybrid of both written and spoken language. Montero, Watts, & García-Carbonell (2007) found high levels of modals in online L2 discussion, and claimed that collaborative learning interactions facilitated authentic social communication. For Jones, Garralda, Li, and Lock (2006), online settings removed the embarrassment of speaking English with same-language peers.

Using the target language to learn a language is a challenge. Antón and Dicamilla (1999, p. 236) described problems caused by the absence of the “critical psychological tool” of the L1, with participation in a L2 discussion forum a very different activity from using the L1 and reflecting a member identity and a self-assessment of adequate proficiency. The genres of writing in online discussion may differ from those in the essay-writing task, posing an additional challenge.

2.4.2 Autonomy, Critical Thinking, and Power in Online Discussion

The literature provides extensive support for discussion forums as shared spaces where learners construct knowledge through others' responses (Corich, Kinshuk, & Hunt, 2004) and where participants can reflect while participating (Bhattacharya, 1999; De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006; Hsi & Hoadley, 1997; Lapadat, 2002; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004).

Black (2005, p. 9) suggested that asynchronous discussion fostered more "higher order thinking, social construction of meaning, and reflection" than synchronous discussion, and Lapadat (2002) claimed that it was "particularly well-suited to joint construction of meaning," encouraging critical thinking and shifts in perspective.

However, despite early utopian hopes for online discussion, most researchers now accept that interaction is not guaranteed (Zhu, 2006). Laurillard described the claim that students learn through discussion as "one of the great untested assumptions of current educational practice" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 171), and eight years later, Rourke et al. asked if asynchronous communication really fostered more reflective responses (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 149), despite the "hyperbolic claims" for its benefits.

For many authors, writing in discussion is thinking. Lim, Cheung, and Hew (2011) and Thomas (2002) suggested that writing or typing messages can help develop critical thinking; as Scardamalia et al. (1984, p. 173) put it: "not only is reflection valued as an aid to writing, but writing is valued as an aid to reflection." Lapadat (2002, p. 0) suggested that online discussion allowed a participant to "write oneself into understanding," and created "a social milieu that elicits thoughtful contributions, and provides timely, contextually-appropriate feedback." The act of writing enhances "thinking on paper" (Mason, 1998, p. 361) by encouraging personal responses from learners in articulating their ideas, and Rivard (1994) and Applebee (1984) similarly claimed that writing generates personal involvement, clarifies and connects ideas, and constructs knowledge.

Despite such suggested benefits, Thomas (2002) suggested that the "amorphous structure," divergent threads, lack of responses to many messages, and the long time that some threads last militated against Laurillard's conversational learning (Thomas, 2002, p. 362). For Thomas, students did not 'come together' to learn, and only a small number of student voices were heard. Posts and essays were "data stored for potential access" by other students, rather than contributions to dialogue and lacked the cohesion of face-to-face dialogue (2002, p. 362), with students interacting

only with other students' writing. Black (2005) similarly noted work by Harrington and Hathaway (1994) and by McLoughlin and Luca (2000) which found more sharing and comparison of information than critical analysis.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (2008, p. 6) similarly described discussion forums as ranging from "primitive" to "extremely primitive," with threaded forums in the "merely primitive" category. The inexorable downward movement and branching hierarchy turned synthesis into "a battle" with technology. Scardamalia and Bereiter suggested that forums can support brief question-answer or opinion-response exchanges well, but criticized the unmodified transition of the technology from "forums devoted to people's problems laying floor tile" to forums for learning or co-constructing knowledge about advanced concepts such as physics (2008, p. 6).

The need to recognize different types of discussion may be key. Rourke and Kanuka (2007) suggest dialogical and dialectical forms of web discussion. In dialogical discussion, people share "parallel, centrifugal, heteroglossic, spaces in which ideas are unfinished or co-constructed." Rather than instruct students directly, moderators encourage interaction, while students "build rapport and camaraderie, share relevant anecdotes and interpretations, and explore issues" (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007, p. 107). In dialectical discussion, with its 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' structure, members propose an analysis or position, others offer counter-proposals, and "through reasoned, reflective discussion" more sophisticated, higher-level synthesis emerges (Rourke and Kanuka, 2007, p. 107).

To meet this dialectical criterion, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) required discussion to amount to more than "dumps of opinions... higher-order learning requires sustained critical discourse where dissonance and problems are resolved through exploration, integration, and testing" (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 15). Typically, studies urge the use of guided activities, challenging topics, and clear requirements for participation, with Dysthe stressing the need to set an interesting and challenging initial assignment to encourage a "certain curiosity" about the topic (Dysthe, 2002, p. 346).

However, Kay (2006) challenged this assumption that "controversial and thought-provoking topics" were necessary to promote critical thinking and discussion (2006, p. 772) and noted literature attributing success in forums to authentic, course-related learning tasks and application-focused, concrete dialogue.

Kay's use of the term critical thinking (the study used the term 'higher-level' thinking) raises the issue of its meanings for different writers. For some, it is a set or hierarchy of particular skills, particularly those at the higher end of the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956: synthesis was renamed as "creating" in Krathwohl's 2002 revision); the self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking described by Scriven and Paul (2004); or the skills of clarification, assessing evidence, making and judging inferences, and using appropriate strategies and tactics outlined by Norris and Ennis (1989).

For others, critical thinking requires an outcome or action and is more of a process (Bai, 2009; Bullen, 1997). In Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's community of inquiry model, critical thinking is a "holistic multiphased process" (2000, p. 98), as well as an outcome, which starts from a trigger problem or issue and, following perception and deliberation ends in action.

Other definitions focused on a stance or attitude, with Glaser describing it as "an attitude of being disposed to consider problems and subjects thoughtfully," a knowledge of methods of inquiry and reasoning, and some skill at applying those methods (1941, p. 5).

In this thesis, critical thinking is viewed both as a process with an outcome and as a stance, rather than as a set of discrete skills. The stance reflects the autonomy and choices of forum members and visitors in response to the challenge of IELTS and the content and community of the forum. The emphasis on process reflects the similarities with the spiral in Nonaka's SECI knowledge-creation framework, and Garrison, Anderson and Archer's practical inquiry model. Rather than identify instances of, for example, comparison or evaluation in individual forum members' writing and feedback, a holistic and phased view of critical thinking about writing will be used.

In Kay's study, which analyzed both student attitudes and structural factors such as thread length, time between responses, type of initial post, and post length, high school students learning programming were able to post "clear and unambiguous messages" (Kay, 2006, p. 772) dealing with factual and conceptual knowledge problems which resulted in improved learning. Kay also claimed that students took responsibility for discussion and learned new facts and concepts without significant teacher intervention.

Forums may indeed suit particular purposes (Andresen, 2009). Analyzing online discussion in physics, Kortemeyer (2006) found that particular problems sparked different types of discussion, and that increased difficulty did not necessarily lead to more conceptual discussions. Hong, Lai, and Holton (2003) and Kortemeyer (2006), like Scardamalia and Bereiter (2008), found asynchronous discussion less successful when problem-solving, e.g., in mathematics, or when consensus was required. Jones et al. (2006) found online discussion better for dealing with global issues in writing rather than with micro-level issues such as grammar. Online discussion of open-ended questions gave both parties more control, compared to face-to-face settings where teachers might give final answers.

Asynchronous discussion can change conventional turn-taking behavior, allowing members to go beyond traditional classroom roles. (Black, 2005a) and Chun (1994) observed that removing instructors from a central role gave learners a greater role in managing discourse. Instead of the common classroom structure identified by Sunderland (2001) of ‘initiate-respond-feedback’ (a teacher initiation, a response from a student, and evaluation from a teacher which strengthens teacher control and the learner’s dependent position), Chun (1994) found that L2 learners initiated many types of discourse online.

Many early commentators hoped for discussion forums to become egalitarian, democratic, or student-led spaces (Chun, 1994; Ortega, 1997; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Dysthe (2002) suggested that the teacher staying out of the online discussion fostered dialogue, and Gerbic (2010, p. 133) similarly argued for “a democratic space” in which students took responsibility for the discussion. Ortega (1997) suggested that democratic online discussions would redress the balance of “hegemonic pedagogies,” with the teacher’s role subverted to that of participant (Kern, 1995). In the absence of teachers, students (particularly those less privileged or visible in conventional systems, such as female students or L2 learners) would fill the gap (Ortega, 1997).

However, although often perceived as more democratic, online discussion forums can be as dystopian as face-to-face forums or classrooms. Issues of trust and power can arise when critiquing peers, whether online or face-to-face (Byard, 1989). As in oral discussion, a few people may dominate the discussion (Klemm, 2000), and Dysthe (2002, p. 349) noted a danger of students using asynchronous discussion to present new information and to “say their piece,” instead of engaging with others’ ideas (see Garrison et al.’s “dumps of opinions,” 2001, p. 21).

Smith et al. (2009) suggested that online discussion may “replicate existing differences in power and influence across social groups” (Smith, John, Sturgis, & Nomura, 2009, p. 21). Examining trust in communities, Smith (2008) noted that the ability to engage in discussion can be constrained by self-other relationships, with members bringing different life histories to the group, while Lapadat (2002) stressed a need for moderators to create supportive environments to allow risk-taking and openness to change. Only in such environments can learners trust one another and accept responsibility for peer learning (Bruffee, 1999).

Levels of English and cultural differences among potential participants may also militate against communication. While cultural differences can contribute to online community (Banks, McConnell, & Bowskill, 2008; Bassett, 2011), Haythornthwaite (2002) raised concerns given these differences and reduced online cues. Postmes and Baym (2005) were pessimistic about relations between different cultures on the Internet, with the fragmentation of social networking sites such as Friendster and Orkut (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) indicating that populations can divide along geographical or cultural lines.

Lim, Cheung, and Hew (2011) and Gerbic (2006) noted that cultural and social norms need to be considered if using unaccustomed teaching or facilitation techniques with some L2 participants. As Biggs and Watkins (2001) suggested, participants in an online environment may feel a “collective obligation” to behave within “socially accepted” ways (2001, p. 282), and Gerbic (2006) proposed that encouraging participation may require explicit modeling by the teacher.

Johnson (1992) and Johnson and Roen (1992) found students regularly using opening compliments to avoid face-threatening behavior. However, excessive politeness can be limiting or indicate a lack of cohesion: Amores (1997, 2001) found that politeness strategies could dominate some L2 peer interactions and that some members tended to “define the peer-editing process primarily in social and emotional terms” (Amores, 1997, p. 49) instead of focusing on improving each other’s writing.

2.4.3 Discussion Forums and Styles of Participation

In many discussions, a small group of active contributors is responsible for a disproportionately large number of posts. In their analysis of 1.3 million reviewers on Amazon, Peddibhotla and Subramani (2007) found that just 3.6% had more than 10 reviews, while top reviewers posted 148 times as many comments as normal contributors. Faraj, Jarvenpaa, and Majchrzak (2011), reviewing large technology

forums, also noted the contribution of a “core subset of actors” (2011, p. 1476), and Whittaker, Terveen, Hill, and Cherny (1998) in an analysis of hundreds of newsgroups found that fewer than 3% of posters accounted for 25% of posts.

Critical Mass

Peddibhotla and Subramani (2007) stressed the importance of understanding this small segment, or “critical mass” – the small group of individuals who diverge most from the average and who make a big contribution while the majority do “little or nothing” (Peddibhotla & Subramani, 2007, p. 330). Farooq et al. defined critical mass as the number of people needed to make an online community viable and to attract others (Farooq, Schank, Harris, Fusco, & Schlager, 2007), while Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003) noted the difficulty of quantifying critical mass in communities with different expectations. Understanding this group is, however, key to predicting “the probability, extent and effectiveness of collective action” (Oliver, Marwell, & Teixeira, 1985, p. 524).

Low Levels of Participation

At the other end of the spectrum, low levels of participation in discussions have also been researched (Cheung, Hew, & Ng, 2008; Guzdial & Carroll, 2002; Hew & Cheung, 2008; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012) divide participation on discussion forums into three main types: lurkers who read the messages and do not participate, but who may learn by reading posts (Guzdial & Carroll, 2002); members who treat the forum as a notice board, posting their own position but having limited interaction (Dysthe, 2002; Pena-Shaff, Altman, & Stephenson, 2005) and members who participate fully. Salmon (2003) subdivided lurkers into freeloaders, who do not give anything in return; sponges, who lack confidence to contribute; and those with skills or access problems. However, a literature review by Hew, Cheung and Ng (2010) found a much wider range of reasons for low levels of contribution.

In many educational settings, lurking is seen as undesirable, reducing the benefits of fuller participation for the individual (e.g., Black, 2005a; Salmon, 2003; Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010), and for the community (Rovai, 2000), receiving benefits without giving anything back. Additionally, active members of the community may mistrust those who do not participate (Rovai, 2000). Thompson and Ku (2006, p. 373) similarly argued that successful collaboration depended on restricting “social loafing” while Hill (2003) noted the downward spiral of low participation, with visitors disappointed by the lack of updates returning less and less frequently.

However, partly in view of the concept of peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), increasing attention is being paid to less visible forms of participation (Beaudoin, 2002; Dennen, 2005, 2008), and less pejorative terms are being used for lurking. As McConnell (2002) pointed out, we do not know what is happening when learners are observing: 'lurkers' may recommend websites to friends; feel part of a community even without membership; and through hidden participation come to either outgrow their need or decide to take part more fully. McConnell asked if participation is always a "good thing" (2002, p. 88), and Ferreday and Hodgson (2008) cautioned against tyrannies of participation and collaboration.

Guzdial and Carroll (2002, p. 421) similarly agreed that lurkers can learn "vicariously" simply by reading discussions, reflecting, or by relating ideas from online discussion to offline work. Lurking may be a choice at a particular time: lurkers may be active elsewhere, or may return later to re-read and reflect or post (Dennen, 2008). In a Preece et al. study (2004), lurkers explained that they had not posted because they were still learning about the group, had nothing to offer, or because others had already said all there was to say.

Henri (1995) similarly found that students learned even without overtly interacting, and suggested that for many members learning online was an individual process reflecting personal objectives, while Preece et al. (2004) found that reading and browsing was enough for many visitors. Blanchard and Markus (2004) found lurkers to have a well-defined sense of community, although not as strong as that of more active participants.

However, for Black (2005), students who believed they were participating in discussion by reading were "effectively walking past the classroom and only looking in." While lurking may be a valid choice, it affects other members and group dynamics, with Black noting that students were hurt by a lack of responses to their posts. Smith et al. (2009) found that only members who contributed to discussions in a political forum experienced changes in opinion: reading posts did not seem to change lurkers' opinions.

Wenger (1998) differentiated between peripheral participation, leading to fuller or more active membership, and marginal participation, which may restrict a member to a minor or limited role. In a peripheral role, finding and revisiting a website, reading some posts, and making an initial post may be the beginning of a trajectory towards fuller membership.

Several studies in conventional education settings have discussed the effects of required participation (Althaus, 1997; Dennen, 2005; Dringus & Ellis, 2010; Edelstein & Edwards, 2002; Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Murphy & Jerome, 2005). Andresen (2009, p. 252) suggested that “many learners need an incentive to participate” and Hew, Cheung, and Ng (2010) reviewed studies finding that assessment encouraged participation. However, mandatory participation can result in members posting the minimum amount of messages required (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000) or low-quality messages (Dennen, 2005).

Clearly, in informal learning settings, enforcing participation may not be practical. To encourage commitment and reward participation, alternative incentives are increasingly used in communities such as TripAdvisor, Amazon, Slashdot, or StackOverflow. These include karma or reputation systems in which contributors accumulate points, status, or increased privileges; voting systems where users rate others’ contributions; and links to portfolios and profiles with histories of comments and scores. Vague or unconstructive comments such as “great essay” or “this is really cool” can result in loss of membership, with sites such as StackOverflow frowning on the use of “me too,” “thanks,” or other phatic content and seeking to eliminate ‘noise,’ with quality contributions rewarded instead through voting (StackOverflow.com, 2013).

In many educational or L2 settings, however, such ‘noise’ may help build community, lower affective filters, and provide language practice for members. Investigating social presence, Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer (1999) identified affective, interactive, and cohesive categories of discussion responses. Affective responses contain humor or emotion and self-disclosure; interactive responses continue threads, quote other messages, ask questions, offer compliments and thanks; and cohesive responses include phatics, salutations, names, addressing the group as “we” or “us,” and using language socially. In a similar classification, Lapadat (2007) proposed two categories – devices for building and maintaining community, and those adding coherence to online discussions. Community-building devices included greeting, praise, support, requests for help, stories, the reuse of phrases and jargon, empathy, and inclusive or “we/us” statements (Lapadat, 2007, p. 68), or recognition devices (Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010). Devices for building coherence included quoting other members, re-quoting, using names, and answering questions.

Role of Moderator in Online Discussion

Feenberg (1989) described online leadership, or moderation, as a crucial problem of conferencing, and research suggests that effective moderation of online discussion can increase learner participation (Hara et al., 2000; Tagg & Dickinson, 2008), promote deeper discussion and critical thinking (Arbaugh, 2010; Collins & Berge, 1997; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, Koole, & Kappelman, 2006; Ge & Land, 2004; Mäkitalo, Weinberger, Häkkinen, Järvelä, & Fischer, 2005; Salmon, 2003), and increase learner satisfaction (Anderson, Rourke, Archer, & Garrison, 2001; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Shea, Sau Li, & Pickett, 2006).

While frequent instructor participation can encourage participation (Kearsley, 2000; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007), too much or too early a contribution can stifle discussion or stop it prematurely (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Moderators therefore need to be aware of both the extent and the form of their participation.

Two main strands appear in the literature regarding moderation of online discussion. One focuses on the range of activities and the variety of roles performed by moderators at particular times – before the discussion, at various points during the discussion, and after, or with various simultaneous roles. Such studies appear to be a pragmatic response to the new demands of online teaching and discussion. A second strand focuses more narrowly on the effectiveness or sequencing of particular types of written or spoken input from the moderator, with such studies possibly derived from content analysis of discourse and models of critical thinking. Both strands, however, are frequently aimed at discussions demarcated by time or membership, in contrast to moderation in settings where the constant arrival of new members may force moderators to adopt even more simultaneous roles.

As an early and influential example in the first strand, Mason (1991) identified three main roles in online moderation– organizational, social, and intellectual roles. Organizational tasks include initial design of structure, threads, and tasks; the choice of discussion format, rules and expectations, pacing, and closure. Social roles include creating community by encouraging a positive tone, modelling, establishing trust, and prompting input. The intellectual role require moderators to focus discussion on crucial points, encourage students to expand on comments, and model knowledge-building by ‘weaving’ or synthesizing disparate ideas (Feenberg, 1989, p. 35). Winograd (2003) provided specific examples from the literature of subskills and actions in each of Mason’s categories. Heuer and King (2004) identified five roles for developing a sense of teacher presence: managing the course, including

troubleshooting and laying out clear expectations; modeling desired behaviors and interactions; coaching and encouraging; taking on the dual roles of teacher and learner, and responding promptly to student concerns in a an open climate

Collins and Berge (1997) found that moderators themselves described a large number of roles, with filtering content, firefighting, facilitating, and administrating as more common activities, and participant and helper as less common roles. Previous work by Berge (1995) identified four main groupings: managerial, social, pedagogical, and technical, and similar classifications into pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical roles have been proposed by Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee and Su (2005), and by Blignaut and Trollip (2003) into six comparable categories. A well-known categorization by Anderson et al (2001) for measuring teacher presence identified three main classes of moderator behavior: instructional design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction, but categorized social functions separately due to the joint role of instructors and learners in building social presence. Appendix 3 contains a sample of my comments as moderator along the dimensions proposed by Anderson et al.

In contrast to a common focus on the moderator's activity, Salmon (2003) proposed a sequence of stages in response to learner needs. In Salmon's model, interactivity between learners increases and then decreases over the discussion period, with correspondingly different needs for support from the moderator. Discussion members move from access to socialization, through information exchange, to knowledge construction and finally to development, with the goal of members now being responsible for their own learning.

Table 1 on the following page is based on Salmon's model of teaching and learning online (2002, p. 29), in which learners and moderators have complementary roles in particular stages from joining the discussion to working independently. The sample moderator comments in the table are mine.

In an overlapping approach to such categorizations of moderator behavior before, during, and after online discussion, writers such as Hattie and Timperley (2007) placed feedback at the center of analysis of the moderator's input. Hattie and Timperley define feedback as "information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (2007, p. 81), and suggest four main types: FT (task), FP (processing), FR (regulation), and FS (self). Feedback about how well a task is being performed (FT) includes distinguishing correct from incorrect answers, acquiring more or different information, and building surface knowledge. Such task-

related FT feedback is the most common form in both classrooms and online discussion.

| Stage | Learner Roles | Online Tutor Role | Sample Moderator Comments |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|
| 1. Access and motivation | accessing discussion forum and posting their first message | solve access problems and encourage participation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't recommend typing directly into the forum – you could lose your work. It's better to type on your computer, save, and then copy-and-paste. • Please feel free to comment and help others on the site! • We're having some problems with getting the formatting buttons showing in the editor. • If you put the question at the top of the essay (not in the title) then it will help us to focus on what our answers should be |
| 2. Online socialization | introduced themselves and sharing, sending and receiving messages | Familiarizing, creating bridges between cultural, social and learning environments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfortunately, I can't evaluate the essays by giving an IELTS grade - but others are welcome to! Why don't you post your essay and see what other people say about it, or estimate what other essays should get. • ! I'm excited that you are the first person on this forum to add your Facebook and Twitter links! • Hi everyone! I hope some you can contact Alina and practise speaking! It's the scariest part of the test for some people |
| 3. Information exchange | Searching, personalizing software | Facilitating tasks; organizing productive discussion and use of learning materials | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I've added a 300-word sample essay on this topic at http://writefix.com/?p=3317. I'm not very happy with it - I think the conclusion needs work. What do you think? • Hi Sina I'm glad you posted your essay under Alina's so we can look at related ideas easily. |
| 4. Knowledge construction | formulation of ideas through conferencing, discussion and collaboration | Facilitating processes; building and sustaining the group learning process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks Alina and Zakir and welcome IELTSER! I'm going to look at each of your thesis sentences • Hi Katiss, Linh! Some good ideas in your essays! I like Linh's suggestion.. ... |
| 5. Development | Responsible for own learning and its construction, finding own resources | supporting and responding as required | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid repetition: it is one of the criteria for Bands 4 and 5. See the IELTS Public Writing Descriptors here. • With your excellent level of writing, you don't need to rely on stock phrases like "It is widely acknowledged that..." • Check out the Lexical Density of the sentence on this very useful website: |

Table 1: Moderator Input (Based on Salmon, 2003)

A second, more challenging type of feedback concerns processes underlying tasks (FP). In contrast to the surface understanding of FT feedback, FP involves deeper forms of understanding and constructing meaning which can then be transferred to new or difficult tasks, with learners encouraged to form strategies and to self-assess. The third form, regulatory feedback or self-regulation (FR), stimulates learners to monitor and regulate their activities towards learning goals using autonomy, self-direction, and discipline.

The least effective but most frequently used form of feedback in the Hattie and Timperley classification is feedback related to the self, or FS. Feedback such as “Well done” typically expresses positive or negative opinions about the recipient but little task-related information and is rarely converted into increased involvement or understanding. Hattie and Timperley distinguish between praise focused purely on the self and praise directed to the effort (e.g., “You’re really great because you have applied the concept we discussed yesterday.” Appendix 4 provides a sample of moderator comments along the dimensions proposed by Hattie and Timperley.

In teaching writing, instructors adopt a variety of roles including those of judge, coach, and typical reader (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006), with the evaluative role usually the most frequent. Smith (1997) found almost three quarters of instructor comments to fall into a judging category, with 20% as coaching and 8% as reader response. Hyland and Hyland (2001, p. 187) noted research suggesting that teachers “attend to error more than excellence” and tend to focus their feedback on the negative aspects of writing.

Summary

This section reviewed discussion forums, an established technology that can suit particular purposes, but which cannot guarantee meaningful exchange, more democratic structures, or even interaction, and which has been criticized for the difficulty of synthesizing ideas and for its application in less appropriate settings. The form and extent of moderator input can facilitate or hinder discussion. Most studies stress features that maximize the type of interaction sought, but a key requirement is to define the forum intent, whether for emotional support, social interaction, consensus, brainstorming for new ideas, explication of practice, or developing skills.

While discussion forums are familiar and used for many purposes, alternatives such as synchronous chat or video may be more effective for some purposes. Critical thinking involves a process with an outcome and a stance, reflecting the choices of

members. Too strong a focus on particular discrete skills in critical thinking may blind observers to other, more holistic, forms of learning and knowledge creation.

2.5 Online Behavior, Organizational Citizenship, and Commitment

To gain an understanding of why people contribute to forums and help each other, it may be valuable to step back from educational settings and look at behavior in broader settings. This section will examine concepts from organizational citizenship behavior (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Organ, 1988, 1997) and Meyer and Allen's organizational commitment (1991) as possible lenses for understanding interactions in informal online learning settings.

In 1964, in a frequently-cited paper, Katz outlined three types of behavior necessary in a functioning organization:

- People must be induced to enter and remain within the system.
- They must carry out their role assignments in a dependable fashion.
- There must be spontaneous and innovative activity in achieving organizational objectives which go beyond role specifications. (Katz, 1964, p. 131)

Based on these ideas, Bateman and Organ (1983) outlined an influential set of dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) or "supra-role" or discretionary behaviors – behaviors not prescribed in job descriptions (Bateman & Organ, 1983, p. 588), and also termed pro-social behavior or contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Although regrouped frequently, the most common dimensions included altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, civic virtue, and sportsmanship.

In 1997, Organ redefined OCB as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (1997, p. 86) and "performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place" (Organ, 1997, p. 95).

This revision reflected the difficulty of separating in-role and extra-role behaviors, with citizenship behavior often rewarded indirectly by organizations, for example in performance ratings (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). The 1997 modification also noted the work of Williams and Anderson (1991), who divided OCBs into OCB-I for behaviors directed towards individuals, such as courtesy and

helpfulness; and OCB-O, for behaviors directed toward the organization, such as punctuality, saving resources, or using time carefully.

Examples of OCBs described by Smith et al. (1983) and Bateman and Organ (1983) included punctuality, volunteering, orienting newcomers, giving notice if unable to work, helping co-workers with job-related problems, putting up with temporary inconveniences, making constructive statements about work to outsiders, protecting organizational resources, and minimizing conflict.

For Bateman and Organ (1983), such behaviors “lubricate the social machinery of the organization,” and contribute to the success of organizations through greater teamwork, improved service, cost reduction, increased commitment, and higher output (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997; Reilly, Lojeski, & Ryan, 2006; Yaghoubi, Mashinchi, & Abdollahi, 2011).

OCBs can come at a cost: Peddibhotla and Subramani (2007) noted the costs in time and effort borne by individuals in writing Amazon reviews or commenting on posts. Bergeron (2011) noted that some OCBs can reduce time-on-task and productivity, with some OCB-practicing employees receiving smaller salary increases and advancing more slowly.

Understandings of OCBs may vary significantly between cultures, and Liu et al. (2004) argued for further OCB research in non-US settings (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997; Liu, Chen, & Lin, 2004). In China, for example, Farh, Zhong, and Organ (2004) found helping, for example, to include helping sick colleagues at home, rather than just at work, and behaviors seen as supra-role in the US more associated with in-role behaviors. Lam et al. (1999) found sportsmanship and courtesy viewed as in-role behaviors in Hong Kong (1999), and Paillé (2009) found a greater role for altruism in France, attributing it to a lower score on Hofstede’s masculinity index (1983). Paine and Organ (2000) similarly suggested that positions along individualism-collectivism scales or in power distance may influence OCBs. While Organ’s dimension of civic virtue included being assertive to further the organization’s interest, such assertiveness may clash with the need for group harmony in collective cultures.

Despite frequent regrouping and cultural variation, (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994), Organ (1997) maintained that organizational citizenship was a valuable concept which academics and practitioners can “readily and intuitively” grasp (Organ, 1997, p. 91).

2.5.1 OCBs in Online Settings

Fang and Chiu (2010, p. 236) suggested that it is “reasonable to assume” that citizenship behaviors contribute to performance in virtual communities. Similarly, Bateman, Gray, and Butler (2011) proposed that organizational commitment was an “appropriate theory base” for examining voluntary behavior online (Bateman et al., 2011, p. 843).

Despite such views, little research has been done on virtual OCBs (Fang & Chiu, 2010), and most is recent. In 2010, Chen et al., examining a large Taiwanese fashion website, noted that studies of online pro-social behavior had received only “limited attention” (Chen, Chen, & Farn, 2010), and Reilly et al. (2006), investigating leadership in US virtual teams, also described online OCB as relatively unexplored.

Yong, Sachau, and Lassiter (2011) described virtual community citizenship behaviors (VCCPs) as integral to the sustainability of online community, with dimensions including supporting others in need, addressing other community members’ issues, and knowledge sharing. Altruism in programming has been examined in several studies (Fang & Chiu, 2010; Hars & Ou, 2002; Kwok & Gao, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2000), and spontaneous knowledge sharing behavior was described as an OCB by Chang and Chuang (2011), following work by Yu and Chu (2007).

Borrowing Brief and Motowidlo’s definition, Yong et al. described such spontaneous behaviors online as the “glue which holds collective endeavors together” (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986, p. 712; Yong et al., 2011, p. 683). Kang, Lee, Lee, and Choi (2007) described online community voluntary behavior, or OCVB, as positive community-relevant behavior, and Joe and Lin (2008, p. 367) similarly defined community citizenship behaviors (OCCBs) as “the propagation and advancement of online community norms, as well as the encouragement and development of socially proper conduct.”

2.5.2 Organizational Commitment and Patterns of Interaction

A related and well-known study by Meyer and Allen (1991) examined three interlinked types of commitment – continuance, affective, and normative – which influence decisions to participate in organizations.

Building on Meyer and Allen’s model, a study by Bateman, Gray, and Butler (2011) proposed that online behaviors would reflect particular types of commitment. High levels of continuance commitment, for example, might be manifested in reading more

threads, whereas affective commitment might result in more posting activity. As Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, and Kraut (2007) pointed out, reading threads involves effort, and therefore a belief that the benefits outweigh the costs, providing an example of continuance commitment.

A study by Fugelstad et al. (2012) similarly divided behaviors in a movie review website into basic, discretionary, and social or community behaviors, with logging in and rating movies as examples of basic behaviors, and editing film reviews, applying tags, and activities not necessary for site functioning classed as discretionary. Community behavior included creating personal profiles, writing help files, adding friends, and activities focusing on the community rather than individuals. Members who signed up for utilitarian reasons or for fun generally engaged in the basic behavior of rating films, whereas social and expressive reasons for membership resulted in more social behavior but less rating of movies.

Fugelstad et al. made “no large claims” for this categorization (2012, p. 973), other than noting that it helped them to organize their results, and that it could be used in other online settings.

Online Roles

As seen above, the relationship between behaviors, interactions and roles in online communities in the literature appears to be weighted towards descriptions of fixed roles, rather than towards views of evolving or dynamic roles and membership.

Typical of such descriptions of fixed patterns of participation, Yeh (2010) identified 13 roles in online discussion including opinion providers, information providers, problem solvers, and atmosphere constructors. Using network analysis rather than content analysis, Chan, Hayes, and Daly (2010) proposed eight roles, including popular participant, taciturns, popular initiators, ignored, and elitists. Gleave, Welser, Lento, and Smith (2009) examined social roles such as answer person, discussion person, or discussion catalyst in forums, and experts in Wikipedia (Welser, Gleave, Fisher, & Smith, 2007). Strijbos and de Laat (2010) described eight participative stances, depending on the group size and the individual’s effort and orientation to the group.

Scripted roles are a type of fixed role designed by moderators or teachers for particular outcomes and assigned to individuals, such as starter or wrapper of a discussion (Hara et al., 2000) or starter, moderator, theoretician, and summarizer (De Wever, Van Keer, Schellens, & Valcke, 2010).

Fixed patterns of participation can also result from expectations formed offline or in previous online experiences or particular motivations, or from the structures of a community providing only a restricted range of possible interactions through design or technological limitations.

However, pigeon-holing users into roles such as lurker, contributor, non-contributor (Fugelstad et al., 2012; Panciera, Masli, & Terveen, 2011), answer person (Welser, Gleave, Fisher, & Smith, 2007), or any of various taxonomies of roles (Chan et al., 2010; Strijbos & de Laat, 2010; Yeh, 2010) can restrict the participation choices of members. Identifying members as consumers rather than as contributors (Panciera et al., 2011) may create barriers to other forms of participation, with scripted roles (Strijbos & Weinberger, 2010) restricting newcomers and creating externally-determined hierarchies of roles instead of more emergent or egalitarian structures.

In contrast to views of roles as being fixed, however, Strijbos and de Laat (2010) described a continuum from micro, through meso, to macro. Micro roles are activities at a particular time; meso-level roles are a pattern of behaviors; and macro roles represent a stance or an attitude towards the task. Gleave et al. (2009) noted the ecological setting and symbiotic relationship of roles, with answer people, for example, requiring a larger number of question people: too many answer people can upset the community balance. Strijbos and Weinberger (2010) similarly describe emerging roles which develop spontaneously among members as a result of group and individual dynamics, and evolve over time as the learners' knowledge increases and needs and perceptions change.

Summary of Interaction and Behaviors

This section has suggested that models from organizational theory can help probe how and why people join and why – or if – they contribute. Whether member roles can be described as basic, discretionary, or supra-role behaviors may depend on the virtual community's intent.

Models of commitment and citizenship that grew out of conventional organizations may require rethinking if applied to online learning communities, in which many forms of participation may be regarded as core rather than discretionary activities.

Educational settings often come with ready-made assumptions or established expectations of choices, scripted roles, and forms of community. In informal or autonomous learning settings, however, these roles and assumption may need reexamination.

2.6 Knowledge Conversion and Nonaka's SECI framework

This section will examine the SECI framework for knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994) and its possible application to an online discussion setting in which knowledge about essay writing is created through feedback among members and mediated by the forum and member participation.

The spiraling SECI framework (socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization) is based on a cycle in which knowledge is converted from tacit to explicit and back into tacit. Nonaka (1994) proposed the framework as a model of how Japanese companies encouraged innovation by providing contexts for people to share experiences, make tacit knowledge explicit, combine new and existing knowledge, and reapply it in an ongoing spiral.

This model of knowledge creation contrasts with the more rigid hierarchical problem-solving or "input-process-output" approaches of some Western companies (Nonaka, 1994, p. 14): in Nonaka's view an organization had to innovate, create knowledge and change in relation to its environment (and change its environment in the process), rather than merely process information or solve problems.

In 1998, Nonaka and Konno added the concept of *ba*, translated from Japanese as 'space' but also including time. *Ba*, described by Proudfit (2009) as sounding somewhat 'mystical' to Western ears, provides the energy, quality and place for movement in the knowledge spiral, and is subdivided corresponding to the four knowledge-conversion modes.

The SECI model has not been applied frequently to educational settings, perhaps reflecting traditional assumptions of much school learning as being transmissive and unidirectional, i.e., directed or facilitated by the teacher, and associated with particular scripted roles for learners and teachers rather than with the creation of new knowledge in the institution.

2.6.1 Explicit and Tacit Knowledge

Explicit knowledge, based by Nonaka (1994) on Michael Polanyi's categorization (1966), is defined as formal or systematic knowledge such as data, specifications, or manuals which can be transmitted and stored relatively easily. Knowledge that can be spoken or captured in drawing and writing is explicit, and can be applied in different contexts. Knowledge related to the senses, movement, intuition, unarticulated mental

models, or rules of thumb is tacit, rooted in action, procedures, routines, commitment, ideals, values, and emotions.

Nonaka’s framework suggests four modes of knowledge conversion (Figure 3). Socialization represents the sharing of tacit knowledge through the experiences of individuals. Externalization occurs when tacit knowledge becomes articulated into explicit knowledge through dialogue and imagery. Combination occurs when different forms of explicit knowledge are connected to create more complex or systematic sets of knowledge, and internalization represents the process of embodying explicit into tacit knowledge and applying it in the real world (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000).

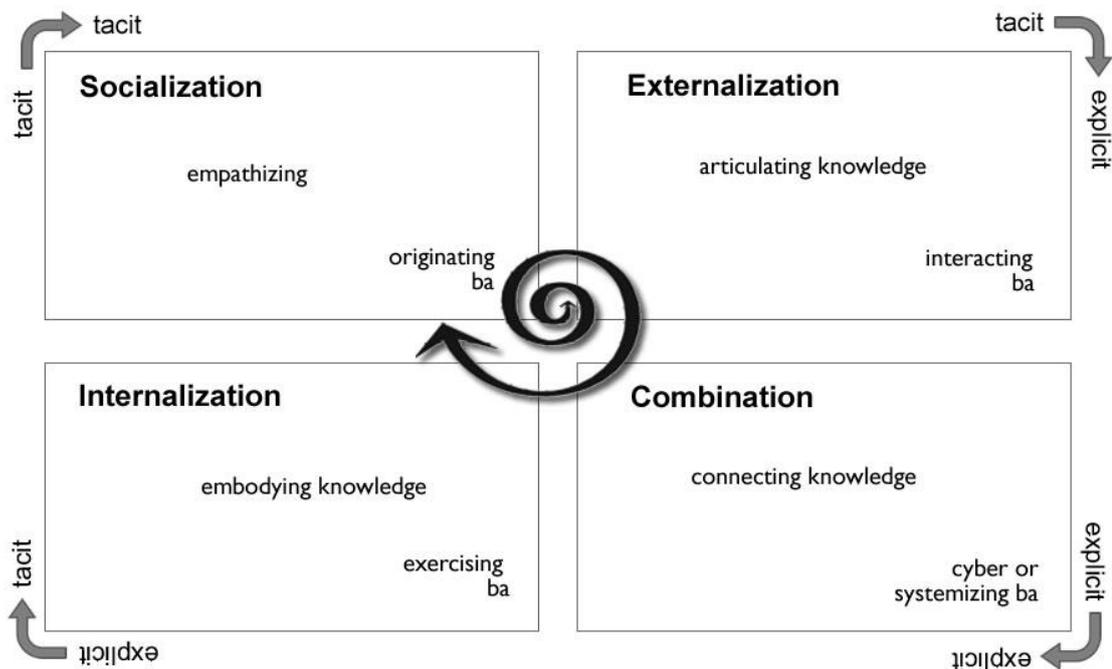


Figure 3: Nonaka’s SECI framework

(Adapted from Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka et al., 2000)

Socialization: Tacit to Tacit

In Nonaka’s description, socialization involves capturing knowledge through physical proximity or direct interaction with stakeholders, suppliers, and customers, or even by walking around a company or shopfloor. By empathizing and sharing experiences with others (not just with peers), a space for trust and sharing develops (Nonaka & Konno, 1998) in which tacit knowledge is acquired.

In the socialization mode, originating *ba* allows individuals to share feelings, emotions, experiences, and mental models. “Care, love, trust, and commitment” are characteristics of socialization (Nonaka et al., 2000, p. 15).

Externalization: Tacit to Explicit

In externalization, tacit knowledge is translated into forms comprehensible by others. As the individual commits to the group, ideas and images become expressed through dialogue as words, concepts, metaphors and analogies, and visuals, forming a common language. Dialogue, listening, and contributing are necessary, and a mix of people with people with different abilities is important.

Interacting *ba* acts on externalization and is more “consciously constructed” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p. 47), involving the juxtaposition of people with a mix of knowledge in teams.

Combination: Explicit to Explicit

The combination mode converts explicit knowledge into more complex sets of explicit knowledge and diffuses it among members. Explicit forms of knowledge are combined, edited, or processed into other explicit forms such as reports or data through online networks, databases, and collaborative environments.

The energy or space in the combination mode is called systemizing *ba* or cyber *ba*. Nonaka and Konno (1998, p. 46) suggested that Cartesian logic dominates – “I think, therefore I am” – as opposed to the “I love, therefore I am” in socialization.

Internalization: Explicit to Tacit

In internalization, explicit knowledge changes back into tacit knowledge and becomes embodied in action and practice. Nonaka (1994) proposed that this change resembles the traditional notion of “learning,” although as an active rather than a merely reflective process. Through training, practice, refinement, experiment, and learning-by-doing, the individual becomes aware of the larger setting and acquires a richer understanding. Exercising *ba* supports learning-by-doing and continuous self-refinement in real life and exercises.

2.6.2 Critiques and Applications of the SECI framework

Among questions arising from Nonaka’s SECI model are the nature of knowledge conversion and queries over starting points and direction.

Nonaka does not specify a starting point in the SECI quadrant, but suggests that “a continual dialogue” between explicit and tacit knowledge drives the creation of new ideas and concepts (Nonaka, 1994, p. 15), with the spiral continuing upwards.

Gourlay (2006), Bratianu (2010), and Hara and Hew (2007), among others, expressed dissatisfaction with Nonaka’s interpretation of Polanyi’s tacit and explicit forms of knowledge and the mechanisms for the conversion of tacit into explicit knowledge and vice versa. Hara and Hew noted that knowledge “exists along a continuum of tacitness and explicitness” (2007, p. 238), with a subsequent review by Nonaka and von Krogh (2009) stressing such a continuum.

Describing Nonaka’s framework as an excellent metaphor, Bratianu (2010) cautioned that it does not contribute to practical analysis. The work has also been criticized for being too focused on Japanese business contexts, and by Gourlay (2006) and Engeström (1999) for the lack of recognition of the controlling role of managers in defining goals and activities.

In applications of the framework to educational settings, Chatti et al. (2007) proposed a categorization of web tools and technologies in each quadrant. Hosseini outlined a step-by-step approach which “controls the sequence” in virtual learning, noting that socialization is often ignored in learning situations despite being “the most significant stage” in knowledge creation (2011, p. 270). In an application of the framework to learning in blogging communities, Martin-Niemi and Greatbanks (2010) noted the need to include virtual environments in both the socialization and externalization modes.

Bryceson (2007), in an implementation with Master’s level courses in Australia, proposed a significantly different modification. The five-stage ESCIE adaptation (Figure 4) of Nonaka’s framework began with online learners encountering course content, termed “explicitization” by Bryceson as “the lecturer’s externalization of his/her knowledge of the course subject matter” (2007, p. 203). This was followed by simultaneous socialization and combination phases as members worked in the forums and gathered and combined information. Following the combination phase, internalization took place, and finally externalization occurred in work reports and final assignments.

Bryceson’s use of the term externalization departs significantly from Nonaka’s usage, which defined the mode as the change from tacit to explicit and the articulation of ideas and images. The modification bypasses the vital role of externalization in

allowing people to articulate their understandings and develop shared understanding.

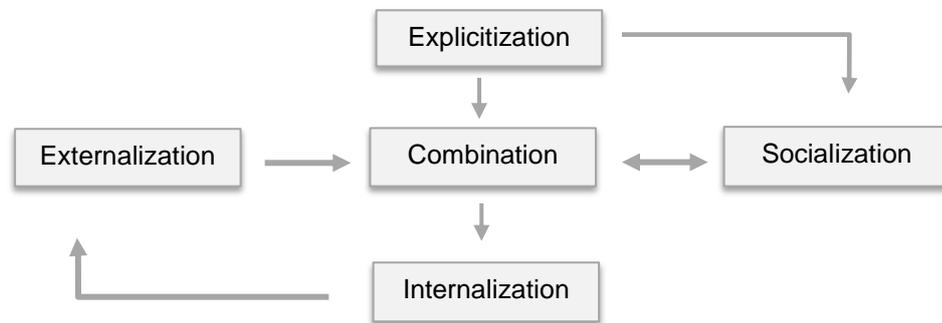


Figure 4: Bryceson's ESCIE model

Haag and Duan (2012) chose to omit the socialization mode, arguing that the in-dwelling and physical proximity required by Nonaka's socialization mode was not possible online. However, noting that externalization and combination both involved elements of socialization, they argued for more examination of the role of socialization in online learning.

From the limited applications of the SECI framework to online and informal educational settings, it becomes clear that questions arise with its unmodified transition from traditional organizations to online settings, particularly for its socialization mode.

2.7 Literature Review: Conclusion

Examining what happens when unrelated people voluntarily share knowledge and feedback online about writing for an exam may require some slightly different approaches from conventional school settings in which duration, enrollment, participation, content, and activities are decided by institutions and largely agreed on by stakeholders.

Figure 5 below is an overview of the chief conceptual elements of this study. The numbers in parentheses following each heading correspond to numbers in Figure 5.

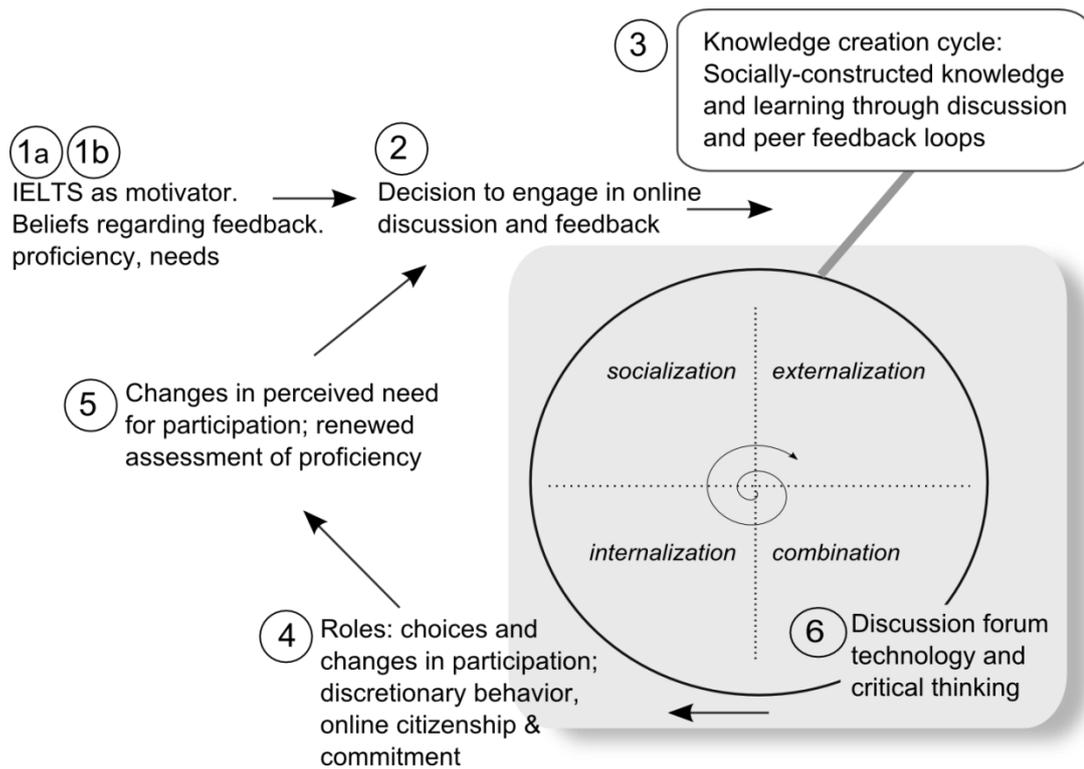


Figure 5: Conceptual Overview

Feedback and Learning (1a)

In synthesis, the literature suggests that peer feedback in writing is a process of socially-constructed knowledge and learning (Berge, 1999; Donato, 1994; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Min, 2006; Ramaprasad, 1983; Scardamalia et al., 1984; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Tang & Tithecott, 1999) in contrast to being solely a product or comment from a more expert or powerful other (Van De Ridder et al., 2008). Feedback is defined as information on a gap, or discrepancy, between a current level and a desired level of performance with the information being used to resolve the gap (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ramaprasad, 1983; Voerman et al., 2012).

Despite reservations on the part of teachers (Hyland & Hyland, 2006c; Rollinson, 2005; Sadler, 1989) and a preference by many learners for teacher feedback (Ge, 2011; Lee, 1997; Saito, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Zhang, 1995), the literature suggests that learners can with practice and perhaps with training (Abbuhl, 2011; Anderson et al., 2010; Carson & Nelson, 1996; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Falchikov, 1995; Hyland & Hyland, 2006c; Leki, 1990; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1993) improve their skills of self-assessment and change negative perceptions of peer feedback (Falchikov, 1995; Hew & Cheung,

2010; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Pond et al., 1995; Zhang, 1995, 1999) to a more favorable ones (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2005; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998).

L2 studies in classroom settings have found that peer feedback can work successfully for both givers and recipients (Antón & Dicamilla, 1999; Boud et al., 1999; Cho, Schunn, & Wilson, 2006; Cho & Cho, 2010; Donato, 1994; Lin, Liu, & Yuan, 2001; Liu & Carless, 2006; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) with sufficient scaffolding provided and with roles being switched and relinquished. However, fewer studies have been carried out for online settings.

IELTS as motivator (1b)

The importance of the IELTS exam as a gatekeeper for new English language and academic or professional communities and for socio-economic progress may lead to pressure on candidates, particularly those preparing alone outside traditional settings (Green, 2007; Merrifield, 2012; Shohamy et al., 1996; Uysal, 2010), partly because of its association with a privileged group of users and history (Bhatt, 2001; Kachru, 1997; Moore et al., 2011; Pennycook, 2007; Tollefson, 2000; Uysal, 2010).

This pressure can lead to anxiety and frustration (Bayliss & Ingram, 2007; MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997) or lack of agency (Mickan & Motteram, 2009), even though the exam is of limited success as a long term predictor (Bayliss & Ingram, 2007; Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Hill et al., 1999; Oliver & Dooley, 2002; Picard, 2007; Rea-Dickins et al., 2007; Yen & Kuzma, 2009).

Roles (2, 4, 5)

Outside formal classroom settings, a voluntary decision to seek feedback (2) may involve some changes in the roles and viewpoints formed by previous experiences with feedback, or the lack thereof, and a willingness to engage with unknown peers, as well as a self-assessment of adequate proficiency.

In giving this feedback, members may need to make choices to take on particular roles, such as giver of feedback or lurker, among others. Many studies have sought to identify particular roles or taxonomies of roles in discussion (De Wever et al., 2010; Fugelstad et al., 2012; Hara et al., 2000; Panciera et al., 2011; Welsler et al., 2007) with an emphasis in the literature on fixed or even scripted roles, rather than dynamic views of roles as stances or continuums of participation (Gleave et al., 2009; Strijbos & de Laat, 2010; Strijbos & Weinberger, 2010).

A choice of a particular role in a voluntary online forum may represent discretionary behavior, with such discretionary choices necessary for the functioning of community (Katz, 1964). Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and commitment in traditional corporate settings (Bateman et al., 2011; Bateman & Organ, 1983; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Katz, 1964; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Organ, 1997), online citizenship (Bateman et al., 2011; Blignaut & Nagel, 2009; Chiu et al., 2006; Fugelstad et al., 2012; Joe & Lin, 2008; Yong et al., 2011) have also been investigated in some online contexts (Fang & Chiu, 2010; Hars & Ou, 2002; Kwok & Gao, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Yong et al., 2011), with knowledge sharing behavior described as an OCB by Chang and Chuang (2011) and Yu and Chu (2007).

In view of the knowledge-sharing and creation in the forum setting, organizational citizenship may contribute to understandings of social interactions among members.

Knowledge Creation (3)

A setting in which forum members share and analyze their writing and that of their peers at progressively higher levels and in different ways suggests that a cyclical view of participation may be more useful than either fixed roles or a view of feedback as an expert comment or product.

Knowledge-creation models such as Nonaka's (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka et al., 2000; Nonaka, 2007) may therefore provide a framework for how new learning and knowledge occurs in particular processes through social interactions and how tacit knowledge can be shared, externalized as explicit knowledge, systematized and then re-evolved as tacit knowledge. Despite criticism that this shift from tacit to explicit and back again is not clearly demarcated (Bratianu, 2010; Gourlay, 2006; Hara & Hew, 2007), Nonaka's framework, perhaps modified for online settings (Bryceson, 2007; Haag & Duan, 2012) may provide a useful metaphor for understanding how feedback and social interaction create knowledge, with its cyclical format supporting emergent roles and changes in self-perceptions of proficiency, perceptions, and needs over membership.

Discussion Forum Technology (6)

While many studies see lurking or low levels of participation as problematic, online discussion can allow more time for reflection and composition which may in turn encourage participation among less confident members, particularly in L2 settings (Amores, 1997; Black, 2005a; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, 2006c; Jacobs et al., 1998; Jacobs & Zhang, 1989; Lee, 2011; Leki, 1990; Liu & Sadler,

2003; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998; Zamel, 1982), and reduce teacher-dominated discussion (Chun, 1994; Dysthe, 2002; Ortega, 1997; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Sunderland, 2001; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

However, some studies have found that online discussion may not lead to agreement or synthesis of information, amounting only to dumps of opinions (Garrison et al., 2001), and that it lacks specific sequences of events or the synthesis necessary for higher level thinking (Bullen, 1997; Cheong & Cheung, 2008; Garrison et al., 2001; Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997; Harrington & Hathaway, 1994; Hew & Cheung, 2010; Kanuka & Garrison, 1998; Maurino, 2007b; Thomas, 2002).

Despite their relatively long history and familiarity, discussion forums may also impose demands on members by being difficult to navigate or use (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2008) by overwhelming users with large amounts of material (Chen, 2005), or by the difficulty of linking between posts and threads (Black, 2005a; Harrington & Hathaway, 1994; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; Thomas, 2002). Forums may also only suit particular purposes (Andresen, 2009; Hong et al., 2003; Kortemeyer, 2006; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2008) and thus be less effective in other applications.

The presence of a moderator also may affect the dynamics of the discussion, either overtly, by controlling membership or establishing rules and permissions, or less explicitly by the extent and form of participation in discussions (Collison et al., 2000; Hara et al., 2000; Lapadat, 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review has suggested that there is more than one model of online discussion; that while knowledge can be shared and created in L2 online discussion, not all forums necessarily require explicit critical thinking; that feedback is a process rather than a product; and that peer feedback in L2 can benefit both recipients and givers.

A second thread in the literature review concerns the role of the individual in the shared enterprise of the forum. Are contributions and various forms of participation discretionary and evidence of organizational citizenship? This challenge of categorizing behaviors into core or discretionary groupings is one of the major challenges in analysis of online groups or organizations.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter reviews the methodological choices and decisions made at various times in relation to my multiple roles of teacher, designer, researcher, moderator, and peer or forum member identified in Chapter 1, Section 5.

A case study approach has been adopted for this research.

Yin (2009) suggests that a case study is appropriate to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and where a range of evidence will be used – documents, interviews, and observations. Case study can also be used to collect and present “detailed information about a particular participant or small group, frequently including the accounts of subjects themselves” (Palmquist et al., 2005). Bogdan and Biklen describe case study as the “detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event” (2006, p. 54), or a “rich and holistic” account of a real-life phenomenon (Merriam, 2009, p. 51), and Stake (2005, p. 443) and Flyvbjerg (2011) describe case study not so much as a methodological choice but as “a choice of what is to be studied.”

Thomas (2011) suggests that this choice of subject for a case study can arise out of local knowledge, from being a key case, or from being an outlier case: in the current study, it was a combination of local knowledge and an outlier case. The local knowledge stemmed from my experience of IELTS preparation and of maintaining a website. A definition of the case as an outlier (Thomas, 2011) emerged from the relatively limited number of studies based around learners aspiring towards formal educational goals such as the IELTS test in informal learning online settings.

The focus is on a single case – a single web-based asynchronous discussion forum aimed at learners of English where hundreds of users read and posted essays and commented on other members’ writing over the space of several months. In this case, the phenomena of the interactions of the visitors and members of the forum are set against the linguistic and academic pressures of the IELTS writing test. In a social, linguistic, metalinguistic, and knowledge-creating exercise, forum members largely inexperienced in giving feedback took on the tasks of reading, analyzing, evaluating, and commenting on their own work and the work of others in a second language.

Thomas (2011) stresses the importance of boundaries, to determine what is being studied, and an analytical frame, to center the case in a framework or theory.

According to Thomas, observation is not sufficient: interpretation or putting the case in a context is also required. In this study, member interaction, viewed through the lens of organizational citizenship and commitment (Bateman et al., 2011; Bateman & Organ, 1983; Organ, 1988, 1997), and knowledge-sharing and conversion, viewed through modifications of Nonaka's SECI framework (1994), contributed to the analytical frame, along with a view of feedback as a process rather than a product.

The boundary for this case study was the observation of a group in its setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), over its entire existence, using content analysis of forum posts and member interviews in conjunction with analysis of structural data from interactions and server data as the primary methods of data collection.

The theoretical frame for interpreting the results was not identified at the outset, as the initial impetus was exploratory and it was not certain whether sufficient visitors would be attracted to the forum. As members arrived, however, patterns of interactions and processes replaced doubts over the viability of the forum, and theory-seeking (1999) or theory-building (1989) began. Eisenhardt suggested that such theory-building should be begun as close as possible to the ideal of no theory under consideration and no hypotheses to test, and this was indeed largely the case at the outset.

3.1 Influences on the Case Study: Ethnography

Since the setting is an examination of behaviors and interactions in an online community over a relatively long period, and since I was actively involved in the business of the community, the format of the research was partly influenced by ethnographic approaches.

Maloney-Krichmar and Preece describe ethnographic research as "telling the story of a community through the words of its members" (2005, p. 220), and Angrosino (2005, p. 733) noted an increased willingness for ethnographers to describe a "membership identity" in the communities they study. In the current research, I was a key member of the community, answering questions from members, providing feedback, and setting up, maintaining and tweaking the forum software and settings. I was responsible for over one-third of all posts in the forum.

Yin, however, suggests that, in case study, the researcher "should not exert control" over the events being studied (Yin, 2009, p. 5). This opinion comes at one end of a spectrum of participation. Clearly, as a member of the discussion community, as an

‘expert’ member and with the powers of a moderator, I was in a position to exert large degrees of control in several ways: in the initial design of the discussion forum, which allowed, encouraged or restricted certain features; in my actions as a normal member, by ignoring or responding to posts or by starting threads, or in engaging in any other behaviors that members could; and in my position as moderator, by being able to move threads, start complete new forums, ban members, or close the forum completely. I also exerted control as a more expert member, since as a native speaker of a privileged language (Pennycook, 2007) and as a teacher my input may have been viewed differently from that of others.

However, after the initial design, very few features were changed, the great majority of new threads were started by other members, and no members were cautioned or banned. The most visible aspects of my control therefore were my status as a teacher, which I did not advertise; my frequency of posting (out of 2,201 posts, 741 or 33% were mine); and my closing the forum in August 2012. I did not control registration, duration of membership, types or frequency of posts, or the responses of others, and no posts were edited for opinion. No major design changes occurred during the lifetime of the forum, and therefore the approach was more an inquiry into what occurred after the discussion forum was established rather than an experimental design with changing variables.

Proponents of case study differ on the relative importance of initial ‘propositions’ (Yin, 2009), or theoretical bases, which Yin describes as required in all but the most exploratory studies, compared to Eisenhardt’s (1989, p. 526) preference for a “clean theoretical slate.” Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Charmaz (2006) suggest that the categories that are used for interpreting what people say or do arise out of the process of data analysis.

3.2 The Role of the Researcher as Participant

In a definition of traditional ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 2) suggest that “the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions.” Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggested that participation is now accepted as a legitimate base from which to conduct observation (2003), and Gall et al. (2007) similarly suggested that involved participant-observers meant more accurate reported data.

However, the form and extent of this participation are important. Ellis and Bochner used the term “complete-member researchers” for researchers exploring groups of which they already are full members (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741). Similarly, Adler and Adler (1994) used the term full membership, and Spradley (1980) the term complete participation. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) warned of the need to be aware of compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectations being made along the continuum of participation: Gold, an earlier writer, noted astutely that participant-as-observers risked spending “more time and energy participating than observing” (Gold, 1958, p. 219).

In participating in the forum, I did not present myself explicitly as a teacher or highlight teaching experience, but rather as a peer with perhaps more proficiency in English. Similarly, I did not highlight my role as researcher. On signing up, members had to agree to the forum’s usage policy, or terms and conditions (a link appears on every page in the forum). These terms and agreements were based on those at essayforum.com, who kindly gave written permission for their use and adaptation (email, June 7, 2010). The terms stipulated a minimum age and an agreement that posts could be identified by search engines. The terms also stated that member posts could be used for academic research, but with names replaced by pseudonyms and personally identifiable information removed. Interviewees signed an additional consent form that clearly outlined how interview data would be used for research purposes.

In a forum centered on peer feedback, my intention was to act as a peer rather than as either a mentor or a remote researcher. In Adler and Adler’s terms (1994, p. 380), I attempted to use my membership so as “not to alter the flow of interaction unnaturally.” Merriam (2009) noted that interdependency between the observer and the observed can bring about changes in both parties’ behaviors. In this study, however, subjectivity and interaction are assumed.

Clearly, my stance as a native speaker and experienced teacher of writing as well as forum moderator placed me in a different position from that of a novice writer new to the forum. I can only speculate that the familiar and readily-understandable role of teacher gave enough leeway or plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) for me to interact with members: at no time did I pretend to be a learner of English or an exam candidate, and most interactions seemed to take on a traditional teacher-student form, even as I hoped for a more muted role as observer.

Gall et al. (2007) suggested that researchers should have free access to a broad range of activities, and that observations should be intense, i.e., conducted over a long period of time. In this case, over a period of ten months, I had access to all posted essays and comments and to server data. However, the essays, comments, and other posts on the website were not consciously viewed as data while they were coming in, but as parts of the normal interactions on the forum. In other words, explicit analysis did not begin until the forum closed. As described in the timeline in Figure 2, my primary role was that of member or peer rather than that of designer or researcher of the incoming data. While I may have been researching feedback in general or methods of analysis, or beginning to struggle with the quantitative data coming from the forum, I was not engaging in academic analysis of the posts, essays, and interactions in the forum in this period. Such analysis did not occur until after the forum had closed and the task of content analysis had begun.

However, since I had read most posts and responded in a large number of threads, I was inevitably aware of many features of the posts before formal analysis began. For example, I anticipated that token responses of thanks (one-line or very short general expressions of gratitude) would be present, and similarly it became obvious that there was much frustration over the difficulty level of IELTS or essay-writing. Naturally, some interactions and member comments stood out, triggering mental notes regarding possible usefulness or importance in analysis or in identifying patterns. For the most part, however, the posts and data that came in over ten months from November 2011 to August 2012 were treated as everyday interaction about essay writing rather than being actively theorized in terms of categories, themes, or codes: reading the messages isolated from context was reading them afresh.

3.3 Research Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (2001) suggest four main criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. The first, credibility, results from long, persistent engagement in the field. Input from peer reviewers is useful, as is openness to incidents or data that challenge emerging hypotheses. Credibility can also be established by having members approve transcripts or portrayals.

In case of this study, data was collected over 10 months, and interviews held over the following two months. My credibility as an 'expert' in IELTS essay-writing comes from over 20 years' experience teaching English to adults as well as from my work on a website with extensive writing and IELTS resources. Parr and Timperley (2010)

note the importance of guild knowledge (Sadler, 1989) and collective examination of learner writing against criteria such as IELTS rubrics in building knowledge among practitioners, and in helping them to explain expected goals or progressions to learners. However, confidentiality agreements and the terms of the IELTS certification do not permit advertising of examiner status or of giving IELTS bands or scores and this was strictly observed on the site.

Lincoln and Guba suggest that transferability can be achieved by providing a sufficiently rich description of the setting to allow readers to determine its relevance to their settings, or in Adler and Adler's terms, by using "verisimilitude" or "varisemblance" (1994, p. 383) - writing that makes the world of the subjects real to the reader.

A third criterion, auditing or dependability, involves clear documentation of methods and decisions made, and the fourth, confirmability, involves triangulation and evidence of reflection.

3.4 Ethics

The data used in this thesis came from a forum on a public non-commercial website, Writefix.com. As such, questions arise over the ethics of using participant information and posts.

Organizations and authors such as Bruckman, (2002), Ess et al. (2002), and Madge (2006) have provided some guidelines for the use of online data, but with the vast range of websites and potential uses, the criteria is evolving rather than definitive. To comply with a code of conduct agreed by Canadian federal agencies in 1994, Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) suggested removing personally identifiable information and using pseudonyms.

Ethical clearance for research involving participant interviews and content analysis of participant writing was obtained on June 14, 2010 from Lancaster University after requested documentation was submitted, including terms and conditions, interview consent forms, and interview information sheets (see Appendix 5).

In the thesis, posts are identified by numbers, e.g. [Post 1456], rather than by poster. Member names in posts and interviews are replaced throughout by pseudonyms. To retain some of the diversity and authenticity of member profiles, pseudonyms were created using similar language backgrounds or styles. Almost all quotes in this thesis

are extracts rather than complete quotes. Very few changes have been made to the English used in quotes or interview comments, other than for clarity or brevity.

Interview participation was invited in emails which included contact details for my supervisor at Lancaster and summaries of interview questions. Participants for interviews signed a second consent at www.surveymonkey.com/s/MXRVMV2, which gave information about the questions and research, links to time-zone tools, and contact details. Interview participants agreed to be recorded and transcripts were made.

Other ethical concerns include plagiarism and the closure of the site. The hundreds of essays in the forum, some of excellent quality, constituted a resource which visitors could use as their own assignments. This is almost inevitable, reflecting the socially-constructed, intertextual nature of writing, and only contributes to the vast amount of writing resources already in existence. Plagiarism was explicitly condemned in the site terms and conditions. In any case, search engines would quickly find material from the site, as would anti-plagiarism services such as Turnitin.

The closing of the forum disappointed many members. However, several weeks' notice was given before the forum stopped accepting essays, and comments were allowed for several weeks afterwards. No guarantees were given regarding responses to essays or questions posted, and the entire intent of the forum was for peer reciprocity rather than for comments by a moderator. A handful of other forums and websites provide similar services.

Backup copies of the server logs and all forum posts were made in MySQL and Microsoft Access database format and in an offline version of the forum, password-protected, and stored separately (Google Drive, external drives) for auditing or future research.

3.5 Procedure and Content Analysis

Following the lead of Kay (2006), Jeong (2005, 2003), and Zhu (2006), both structural data and content were analyzed. Having different types of data and using different strategies and methods can provide better inferences and increased validity and reliability (Akyol & Garrison, 2011; Creswell, 2007).

To examine structure, quantitative data from server logs was imported into Microsoft Access and analyzed using Excel. The forum software, a plug-in discussion forum for

Wordpress called Simple:Press, did not include many features for analysis, a limitation unfortunately only discovered at the data analysis stage.

Data from server logs yielded information such as number of visits, number of posts by individuals, membership duration, timing of interactions, and the number of posts made by individuals. Information about threads included thread depth, lifespan and the number of unique contributors. Other information included the types of posts (whether responses to existing posts or starting new threads), the time between registration and initial posts, and the time between final posts and last visits. IP and email addresses were examined for clues as to the nationality of visitors, and the surprisingly small amount of information such as first language, age, and gender provided by users in public profiles on registration was also surveyed.

Relationships between various factors such as the length of time on the forum and the number of posts were examined, but without sophisticated statistical manipulation of data.

Content analysis was used to investigate the types of interaction, feedback and knowledge-sharing of forum members (Dringus & Ellis, 2005; Fahy et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2006; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Hammond, 2005; Hew & Cheung, 2003a; Marra, Moore, & Klimczak, 2004; Meyer, 2006; Newman, Webb, & Cochrane, 1995; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004; Rourke et al., 2001). Berelson (1952, p. 18) defined content analysis as a research technique for “the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.”

Content Analysis

Content analysis of online discussion has been used in various forms for a wide range of purposes, including examination of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge (Henri, 1992); critical thinking (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Newman et al., 1995); knowledge construction (Gunawardena et al., 1997; Pena-Shaff et al., 2005; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004; Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002; Zhu, 1998); cognitive, social, or teaching presence (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Hara et al., 2000; Rourke et al., 1999), or patterns or sequences of interaction and interactivity (Dysthe, 2002; Fahy et al., 2001; Jeong, 2005, 2003; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Some studies have used several coding schemes to examine multiple factors (Helbers, Rossi, & Hinton, 2005; Kay, 2006; Lally & de Laat, 2002). Other studies have summarized approaches to content analysis (Clark, Sampson, Weinberger, & Erkens, 2007; De Wever et al., 2006; Donnelly & Gardner, 2011; Hew et al., 2010; Marra et al., 2004; Strijbos, Martens, Prins, & Jochems, 2006).

Within such studies, Strijbos et al. (2006) identified two main trends: a quantitative approach in which frequencies of occurrences are used, and a qualitative approach that infers trends from transcripts without computing frequencies. Rourke et al. (2001) also described a division between a focus on manifest content, with variables such as the number of times first names were used in the discussion, and the challenge of analyzing latent content or the more covert processes of higher-order learning. As Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson noted (1997), quantitative analysis alone cannot provide insights on the construction of knowledge or the quality of learning.

Henri's 1992 paper was one of the most influential analyses, forming the basis for many subsequent studies. Her analytical framework comprised participative, social, interactive, cognitive and metacognitive dimensions. Participation was measured by the raw number and timing of messages. Interaction was analyzed by type, e.g., direct response or indirect commentary. Social content included greetings and personal commentary. Cognitive skills included sub-categories such as judgment, inference, and clarification, and were assessed along a scale from surface to deep level processing. Finally, metacognitive skills and knowledge required self-regulation or autonomy, understanding of the perspectives of others, and awareness of task requirements. Henri's model was criticized for being teacher-centered (Gunawardena et al., 1997) and for problems with overlap between dimensions (McLoughlin & Luca, 1999). As a result, while the framework was frequently used, it was almost always modified by subsequent researchers (e.g. Hara et al., 2000).

In response to this teaching-centered instructional basis of Henri's analytical framework, Gunawardena et al. (1997) proposed their interaction analysis model (IAM) of socially constructed knowledge to describe collaborative processes of negotiating meaning in online discussion. Since participants were regarded as having "roughly equal" levels of knowledge and cognitive/metacognitive skills, learning occurred through negotiation, with analysis focused upon transactions among the participants (Gunawardena et al., 1997, p. 406).

Their five-phase IAM model included sharing and comparing of information, discovery and exploration (or dissonance); negotiation and co-construction; testing and revision of ideas; and awareness of newly constructed knowledge. Although the model requires five phases in its complete form, negotiation may remain largely tacit and the process may conclude at one of the earlier phases if there is less disagreement. Comparing the relatively simple IAM of Gunawardena et al. (1997)

model with Newman, Webb and Cochrane's (1995) more explicit and detailed codes, Marra and Moore (Marra et al., 2004) noted the difficulty for reliability and overlap between the two approaches.

Based on a coding scheme by Zhu (1998) examining scaffolding and interaction, Fahy et al. (2001; Fahy, 2001) analyzed interaction and social networking using six primary categories including vertical or horizontal questions; statements of fact or information; direct answers to questions; personal revelations and views; scaffolding and engaging; and references, quotes, and authorities.

The influential critical inquiry model of Garrison, Anderson, Archer, and Walter (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Rourke et al., 1999, 2001) was based on the three elements of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence, in which learners "construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry" (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 11), and described a cycle or sequence for cognitive presence of a triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution. The social presence component includes affective, interactive, and cohesive categories with detailed indicators and examples for each, while teaching presence includes the three characteristics of design and organization, design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Various aspects of the critical inquiry model has been reviewed in hundreds of papers since its publication (Akyol & Garrison, 2011; Akyol, Ice, Garrison, & Mitchell, 2010; Akyol et al., 2010; Anderson, Annand, & Wark, 2005; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Arbaugh et al., 2008; Ice, Curtis, Wells, & Phillips, 2007; Jézégou, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Swan et al., 2008)

Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2004) categorized discussion into questions, replies, clarification, interpretation, conflict or debate, assertion, consensus building, judgment, reflection, support, and other, with a correspondingly large number of indicators. Lally and De Laat (2002) used two coding schemes: one by Veldhuis-Diermanse (2002) to examine social co-construction of knowledge, and one based on work by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) to probe teacher/moderator influence.

In the Veldhuis-Diermanse typology (2002), cognitive learning activities include three subcategories of debating, using external information and experiences, and linking or repeating internal information. Metacognitive categories include planning, keeping clarity, and monitoring, while the affective category includes non-task

reactions to posts from peers but also requests for general feedback or opinions from fellow-students.

In summary, many of the coding schemes for analysis of content in online discussion used in studies in the last 20 years or so have stemmed from three main sources: Henri's five-dimensional analytical model (1992); Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson's interactional analysis model (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997); and the critical inquiry model of Garrison, Anderson, Archer, and Walter (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Rourke et al., 1999, 2001), with its components of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Subsequent studies have blended elements from each, refined the unit of analysis, or used particular aspects for particular settings, and the elements from each of the three will also be compared and mapped with themes and categories arising from the data.

Unit of Analysis

An important step in content analysis is deciding on the unit of analysis. Although there were over 2,200 posts and 650,000 words in the forum, much of the content was in original essays and thus was not the core focus, apart from when being edited or quoted by another member.

Rourke et al. (2001) noted the frustration of defining units that can be identified reliably by multiple coders, but that also fully exemplify the construct being researched. De Wever et al. (2006) provided a comprehensive list of content analysis studies and their units of analysis. Occasionally, researchers have chosen complete messages (Anderson et al., 2010; Bullen, 1997; Garrison et al., 2001; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Rourke et al., 2001; Zhu, 2006). However, as Henri pointed out (1992), online messages frequently have more than one unit of meaning. Researchers can choose from sentences, paragraphs, thematic units, t-units (North, Coffin, & Hewings, 2008, p. 261), and illocutionary units, or speech acts (Howell-Richardson & Mellor, 1996). (Strijbos et al. (2006) provide a very detailed rubric for isolating sentences or parts of compound sentences.) For content analysts interested in the reasons for and results of interaction, however, the essential factor is generally not form but meaning (Merriam, 2001): Henri (1992, p. 126) used the term "unit of meaning."

Budd, Thorp, and Donohew (1967) describes the thematic unit as "a single thought or idea unit that conveys a single item of information extracted from a segment of content" (Budd et al., 1967, p. 34), with Donnelly and Gardner (2011) noting the

growing use of the thematic unit, but Rourke et al. (1999) and Howell-Richardson & Mellar (1996) suggest that it can be ill-defined, in contrast to syntactical units such as sentences or clauses (Fahy et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2001; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004). Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997, p. 407) suggested that using only thematic units could “obscure” interaction, which should be viewed as “the totality of interconnected and mutually-responsive messages which make up the conference” (see also Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997).

Bearing these cautions in mind, thematic units were chosen as the unit of analysis and all 2,201 essays and comments in the forum (1,457 by members, 741 by me) were analyzed. The constant-comparative method was used (Glaser, 1965). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 204) described this as sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of “look-alike” characteristics, which may initially be only “tacitly understood.” Lincoln and Guba suggested that these categories should eventually be “no less rule-defined” than *a priori* categories.

Members’ posts were examined to build emergent categories and themes. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended a starting list of codes to orient the researcher to the conceptual purposes of the study, but I decided to approach the data as openly as possible and allow themes to emerge from the data (cf. Lim et al., 2011).

The 1,457 messages posted by members were analyzed individually, rather than in exchanges (groups of messages between two or more people) or in threads. In each message, multiple thematic units were analyzed, as in the following short example:

Dear Ranjit79, It seems you really work hard. I can notice so much of change in your essay in really short period of time. Good to see thesis sentence on your first paragraph and many illustrations in the body paragraph. I think the first sentence you wrote is not needed. You can start your essay from your second sentence. Hope you will get Mr Write Fix view on this. [Post 1563]

Table 2 on the next page maps some of the categories and themes from this post to the literature.

| Category | Example/sub-category | Notes | Subsequent link to the literature |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Post type | Feedback to other | | |
| Length | Medium | Short= 1-3 sentences of original content), medium = 4-9 sentences | Unfocused feedback (Ellis 2009) |
| Directed at | One person | Name used | Affective (vocatives) (Garrison et al. 1999) |
| Politeness | Polite, formal | Use of "Dear Ranjit" | Cohesion (Lapadat, 2007; Bracketing of feedback with compliments (Lapadat, 2007; Amores, 1997) |
| Encouragement, motivation | "It seems you really work hard." | Compliment, socialization | Complimenting, expressing appreciation (Rourke et al., 1999) |
| Evidence of learning | "It seems you really work hard. I can notice so much of change in your essay in really short period of time." | Perception: ideational or intrapersonal compliment? | (Johnson and Roen, 1992) |
| Specific peer-to-peer feedback | "I think the first sentence you wrote is not needed. You can start your essay from your second sentence." | No reason given | Debating (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002,) |
| Macro-level feedback | "Good to see thesis sentence on your first paragraph and many illustrations in the body paragraph" | Organizational or whole-essay features, use of terminology/jargon (externalization) | Macro and micro level feedback (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Faigley & Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1980) |
| Micro-level feedback | "I think the first sentence you wrote is not needed" | Simple elimination of unnecessary text, no re-organization needed | Macro and micro level feedback (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Faigley & Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1980) |
| Deference to other user | "Hope you will get Mr Write Fix view on this." | Obliquely seeks second opinion on particular issue, alerts moderator, defers/involves other, enlarging participation | Preference for 'expert' feedback ((Ge, 2011; Lee, 1997, 2011; Saito, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995) |

Table 2: Notes on a Post

Table 3 below has some further examples of learner input. Appendix 2 has a complete list of the codes and categories which emerged from analysis, with links subsequently mapped to the literature following analysis and the emergence of themes.

| Category | Example | Literature |
|--|---|--|
| Evidence of reflection, action in response to feedback | “Well because you don't understand my idea, I will rewrite it again” | Commentary (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008) |
| Evidence of reflection, action in response to feedback | “So basically, I just have to cut down the size of the intro and I'll be okay, yeah?” | Exploration (Garrison et al., 2001) |
| Evidence of reflection, action in response to feedback | “Thank you for the feed back. I have made some changes and cut the essay short. I hope it is up to the mark now.... “ | Testing of proposed synthesis (Gunawardena et al. 1997) |
| Evaluation and explanation | “I think that layout is generally fine because you include more ideas on supporting arguments. Perhaps it might be better to place your opposing paragraph at the beginning and follow by the last two paragraphs.” | Offering an approach for the task (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002); Explanation Van der Pol, van den Berg, Admiraal, and Simons (2008) |
| Links to resources, tools, combination | “Your essay is only 246 words in length and it doesn't meet the demand for an IELTS essay which should be at least 250 words.” | Integrating information from various sources—textbook, articles, personal experience (Garrison et al., 2001) |
| Evidence of reflection, action in response to feedback | “Sorry, DanZhu and Katy, i don't have time to response your comments, but i rewrite especially PARA 2 and 3. thank your comments” | Switching and relinquishing roles, ownership (Villamil and de Guerrero (2000; Liu and Carless, 2006) Time, pressure, urgency (Moore et al., 2011; Green, 2007; Merrifield, 2012, Uysal, 2010) |

Table 3: Further Coding Examples

Data was recorded for the 167 members, 2201 posts, 545 topics (threads) and for each of the three forums. Because I was able to work with the original data by seeing it in the same screen as the categories and data, I could maintain a relationship with the original post in its context.

Apart from a range of 15 or more discrete data points such as post length, date, position in thread, and post type (response to feedback, request for feedback, etc.) there were over 30 subjective assessments or categorizations of the thematic units, which ranged from short phrases to entire messages (if also short). Specific themes

were subdivided, with feedback, for example, divided into macro or micro, depending on whether a comment referred to global or macro elements (organization, ideas, rhetorical style) or micro-level such as sentences, word choice, or grammar (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Faigley & Witte, 1981; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Sommers, 1980). Drop-down lists in Microsoft Access facilitated data entry.

Other coding included evidence of self-criticism, references to previous learning, references to change, perceptions of difficulty or frustration, expressions of encouragement, and specific advice. They also included greetings or the lack thereof, and evidence of awareness of community by using terms such as “we,” “us,” “You guys” or “Hi everyone” along with mentions or addresses to individuals – earlier authors in the thread or forum or the moderator, or multiple members. Also noted were informality or formality, gratitude (although this did not prove to be very helpful), expressions indicating opinions of the editing and feedback processes and of English language or their L1 or L2 ability, the sophistication of the feedback (number of criteria used, evidence of organization, whether macro-level or micro-level). For some of these points, a simple checkbox was sufficient, while for others a drop-down box with a range of values or types facilitated data entry. Fields were provided for particularly interesting extracts from comments, and these helped to highlight many of the comments selected as examples.

Once an interesting or pertinent pattern or theme had emerged, it was assigned an initial code and a short note. Developing clear definitions of codes for each category adds validity and allows studies to be replicated (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Glaser (1978, p. 83) defined a memo as “a theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst... it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages.” Beside each post in the Access database, I created spaces for memo fields on my reaction to each post. With iterations, some of these reflective memos developed into codes and allowed me to highlight striking comments.

Analyses were therefore conducted using an iterative process of data collection and memo-making. Open fields were provided in the database for new categories or themes. As thematic units in member comments came to my attention through the process of reading and rereading posts, they were labeled and notes made.

Throughout, the emphasis was on emergent data and patterns, rather than *a priori* codings.

As initial codes overlapped or became less useful, some were dropped and some subdivided into new codes and themes. This frequently meant backtracking and having to re-examine previously-coded data (Peddibhotla & Subramani, 2007), or constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), looking back on previous findings. For example, some expected elements, such as politeness or informality/formality, proved to be poor discriminants and were essentially abandoned, while some new themes were only discovered several hundred messages in, requiring backtracking over previously coded messages.

Analysis of the posts continued until it was felt that categories were saturated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) with new data confirming existing patterns. A further stage of analysis came from re-reading memos and notes made during the first analyses.

Describing her coding system for an analysis of grammar errors in L2 writing feedback, Chandler (2003, p. 274) suggested that “no argument is being made here that this error categorization system is better or worse than other possible ones.” Similarly, Henri (1992, p. 134) suggested that the five dimensions of her pioneering analytical model did not preclude others but were chosen “because they pertain to the work of an educator in dealing with a group of distance learners, and because of our own view of the learning process,” describing a “pragmatic approach” and the need for efficiency. Elegance, although a worthy goal, may have to yield to plausible or pragmatic classifications of themes and interaction.

3.6 Analysis Design Choices

One design choice made was the decision not to use analysis software for the content analysis of forum posts. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 44) cautioned that researchers who do not use analysis software would “be hampered” in comparison with those who do, with the software researchers unable to go beyond the “handicraft” level of much qualitative research. Apart from inexperience with such software, my decision was taken because I wanted to allow data to emerge: the learning curve would have been complicated by constant backtracking for new codes and categories. However, QDA Miner with Wordstat was used to help compile data for the much smaller body of data from the interviews, by which time most posts had been analyzed.

Microsoft Access allowed a reasonably quick and convenient interface for concurrent input of data, first-order analysis, and the addition of comments or memos. Rather

than operate on printouts or on second-level data, I was able to work in a format very similar to the original dataset and add notes to it. Ferguson (2012) suggested that retaining the original forum allows researchers to have an experience similar to that of forum members, and can be easier to negotiate than printouts.

A further design decision concerned the use of an existing validated instrument for coding and analysis. Rourke et al. (2001) suggested that the lack of successful applications of other researchers' coding schemes is a serious problem in research into online discussion. Although many pre-existing coding schemes for content analysis were available, as described earlier, a decision was made to first allow categories and subcategories to emerge from the data and then to map those categories to related concepts from the range of relevant literature.

The primary sources used in this mapping are those of Henri (1992), Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997), and the detailed classifications of Anderson, Garrison, Archer, and Walter for social presence and critical thinking (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2001, 2001; Rourke et al., 1999), along with a more recent coding scheme by Veldhuis-Diermanse (2002), but other literature is also referenced (Donnelly & Gardner, 2011; Fahy, 2001; Fahy et al., 2000; Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Newman et al., 1995; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004; Zhu, 1998). Since many analysis tools were designed for contexts in which members were attempting to convince one another of the acceptability of alternative ideas (e.g., that of North et al., 2008), agreement or argument was not necessarily a feature or goal of the forum, and this rendered many coding schemes less valuable.

In addition, rather than focusing solely on the linguistic aspects of feedback (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008), functional types of feedback (Hyatt, 2005) or the quality of feedback according to scales such as Bloom's taxonomy or Schon's reflection-in-practice (Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998; Holmes, 2004), it was decided to broaden the analysis to include all forms of interaction – affective, cognitive, metacognitive, and other.

3.7 Interviews

While forum interactions and posts comprised a large body of evidence, I wanted to understand more about members' perceptions regarding participation (or lack of it) and knowledge-sharing. The task-oriented nature of the forum made such background information doubly important, since there was little discussion of process. Accordingly, to enrich the data set, interviews with purposefully-selected participants took place after the forum closed.

Participants were invited for interview in four stages: an initial appeal to 20 members with varied participation styles, followed by a reminder. An additional 15 were invited a few weeks later. More informal reminders were sent by email and a small additional group was invited, bringing the total number of invitees to 36. In total, nine were interviewed, with two other participants declining interviews, but providing detailed written responses.

The two participants who provided written responses cited time and concerns about English speaking ability. Both, however, provided written reflections on questions used in interviews with other candidates, and these proved to be very valuable, raising questions about the appropriateness of spoken interviews in a discussion forum about writing.

I did not manage to reach any participants who had not posted or who only posted once. It is hardly surprising that more prolific posters would be more likely to respond to invitations for interviews. The relative anonymity of the forum and the weak ties may also have made it easier to decline participation.

Semi-structured interviews were held via Skype and the transcripts analyzed for themes. The interviews, which lasted 35 to 60 minutes each, were recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed. The invitations sent by emails included links to my supervisor at Lancaster and summaries of interview questions.

Participants for interviews gave consent at www.surveymonkey.com/s/MXRVMV2, which provided information about the questions, links to time-zone tools, and contact details.

3.8 Interview Transcript Analysis

The 11 interview transcripts were first coded by hand with about 55 codes emerging. As in analysis of comments in the forum, thematic units were used – parts of sentences, sentences, or occasionally paragraphs with one main meaning. No initial codes or categories were decided before analyzing the transcripts. Frequent back-tracking and comparison was again necessary as new codes were found or new groupings emerged.

Since the interviews were semi-structured and most respondents were asked most of the same questions, many familiar themes emerged, echoing comments made previously in posts. However, re-reading them provided a much more nuanced picture.

The most frequent or most detailed areas of response in this initial hand coding were to do with preparation by the participants for the IELTS test, opinions on peer editing, their approach to peer editing, experiences of peer editing, the effect of L1 on writing in L2, the behaviors of other members in the forum, and criticism or suggested improvements for the forum.

The interview transcripts were then coded using QDA Miner/Wordstat. Codes from the initial hand-coding were grouped into main categories. More were added on a further reading, and some were collapsed, resulting in 71 codes in 8 themes - autonomy, identity, social and community, stated reasons for taking IELTS or participating in the discussions, roles and behaviors, feedback, writing, and tools. A total of 415 coded snippets or thematic units were identified (12,600 words).

A more detailed description of each interview theme is given below (Table 4).

| Theme | Sub-Themes | Examples of unit |
|-----------|--|--|
| Autonomy | Preparation for IELTS, themes of independence, working on own compared to working with others, awareness of learning strategy or style, identification of feedback strategies, pragmatic or utilitarian approaches to using the forum, statements of planned IELTS goals or required bands, and statements of motivations or purpose for taking IELTS. | Yes, I want to get band 7, but Band 6.5 is OK. I already can apply to the universities in the UK, so I got enough, because each part is over six, so it's enough, I guess... [DanZhu] ...the students who go to the website don't have much time to discuss the ideas or contents. [AliceXi] believe, me... more than 80% of IELTS class in Iran are - I'm sorry to say that - are bullshit [HectorMc] |
| Identity | Perceptions of efficacy in L1 or L2, descriptions of habit in study or use of the forum or in applying a learning strategy; personal disclosure (family status, economic status, work, professional status); identification as busy or under pressure from time work or study; statements regarding personality, nationality, culture; aspirational statements regarding the future, change, or opportunity. | Of course, you feel if you look at my beginning essays, you can easily how poor I was at the beginning, and step by step, you know, my confidence improved. Really improved. [HectorMc] Yes, of course, I can find it, if the writer is a Chinese, I can find the, theI've forgotten the word, the characteristic. [DanZhu] No, in Lao language, I think I'm so poor. [WatNhat] |
| Community | Community aspects; statements indicating a sense of community (the use of "us," "we,"), identification with a group of candidates, learners or users; contact with other members on or off-line; mentions or uses of social networking tools; remembered interaction with specific users | Yes, to be honest, you know, people prefer to have social network on some site like Facebook. [HectorMc] Honestly, except Lester, I couldn't remember anyone else [Colin92] I remember some of them like Colin92. Actually I got his Skype [Lester] |

| Theme | Sub-Themes | Examples of unit |
|---|---|---|
| Stated reasons for participation or other behaviors | Statements indicating reasons for posting, for responding, or for other forms of participation; indicators of norms of reciprocity, gratitude; opinions regarding the motivation of others on the forum and explanations or suggested reasons for some behaviors. | I think the reason is you know because some people are very busy and they try their best to prepare for the exam and they think that giving comments might not really be helpful to them. [Lester] And in my opinion, the forum should be for very motivated people, because they are members who really pay attention [Rosita2001] |
| Roles and Behaviors | Descriptions or specific information for particular behaviors or actions on the forum, such as starting threads, responding to threads, thanking others for feedback, applying feedback, questioning feedback; how decisions were made to participate in the forum; strategies for choosing essays, lurking, time taken to write comments, length of time waiting for comments. | I pick the topic which impressed me, the topics which were different from others. [AliceXi] I prefer to read more the other's essay and comment on that, learn more from that. I don't have much time to prepare a lot of essays, and sometimes I think if I post a lot of essays, I'm not sure if the others have the time to respond. [ChariseZ] |
| Feedback beliefs | Explicit statements regarding the importance of peer feedback, the need or otherwise for native speaker feedback, the effect of receiving peer feedback from lower or higher proficiency peers, the relative benefit of giving or receiving feedback, reactions to peer feedback and emotions associated with giving or receiving it; experience of peer editing in school or college; the number of peers. | Both, spotting errors in somebody else's writing can help improve your own [Hilda84] People who give feedbacks will learn many things from the writing. [Rosita2001] In my country, when people study at university, we didn't do a lot of team work [Lester] |
| Writing beliefs | Statements regarding proficiency in L1 or L2 writing; beliefs regarding grammar, vocabulary, organization, or style of writing; types of feedback (macro or micro) preferred; the link between L1 and L2 writing | However, in English, we often go straight to what we intent to express. It is the difference in the ways of thinking. [Rosita2001] Once I asked my teacher and she said that is worse idea. So I try to think in English, not to think in Lao. [WatNhat] No, I'm not good in writing, both Chinese and English. [DanZhu] |
| Resources, Tools, Usability, Formats, Improvement | Statements regarding interfaces, tools and resources, including usability, accessibility, formatting; suggested improvements for the forum; the combination of multiple resources or the use of other resources; and issues of credibility and usefulness of resources | If you want to improve your forum - you could open two sections...[Colin92] It may be easier if we design a format paper for members to give comments. [Rosita2001] You know sample essays is also very useful [Natalia] |

Table 4: Themes in Interviews

In this study, there would be several concerns regarding semantic content analysis of interview transcripts. First of all, as members were non-native speakers at varying levels of proficiency in spoken English, analysis of their word choice and collocations might be prone to errors if compared to a corpus from standard US or British English. Secondly, even semi-structured interviews could be regarded as overly directive, influencing word choice and responses of the interviewees.

Another limitation was the breadth of the interview questions, which militated against in-depth exploration of topics such as identity, autonomy, self-efficacy or responses to feedback. Despite lasting from 35 minutes to one hour, interviews provided only 2000-3000 words each for analysis (these were at most upper-intermediate learners, so pauses and restatements were frequent), and this may not have been enough to provide in-depth data on a single issue.

Summary

In summary, both structure and content were examined, and multiple types of interactions were analyzed. Server logs provided basic quantitative data. The content of 2,201 posts received over ten months, and separately the transcripts of eleven interviews with participants in different countries were coded, recoded, and categorized using thematic units into themes. Microsoft Access, and Excel (and, in the case of the interviews, QDA Miner/Wordstat) were used to help compile and search data.

Chapter 4 Presentation of Data

This chapter presents findings regarding participant profiles, types of interaction, feedback and knowledge creation, and member perceptions, approximating the order of the research questions.

The first section compares member profiles with those of IELTS candidates described in Chapter 2.

The second section examines the chief forms of interactions in the forum – the posts, threads, and the effects of forum structures – and how participation changed over time.

The third examines the sense of community in the discussion, and feedback and evidence for learning and knowledge creation is examined in the fourth section.

The chapter concludes with member perceptions regarding peer editing, proficiency, IELTS and change.

Role of Moderator

Before the chapter proper commences, a short

4.1 Participant Profiles and Identity

Chapter 2 proposed that IELTS candidates can usefully be divided into two groups: one in formal educational settings, and the other a group of slightly older candidates, often more highly-educated, married, or working professionals, typically preparing autonomously for the test. Overall, information from registration profiles, posts, and interviews suggests that most forum members were in this second group.

Most forum members were in their early 20s or older, had at least a primary degree, were preparing for IELTS alone or outside formal educational settings, and were juggling work, study, or family commitments while preparing to study or move overseas. The bulk were from Asia (China, Vietnam, Laos, the Philippines, India, Pakistan), or the Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE), although some were from Europe, Africa or South America. Some had already moved and were working or studying in countries such as Australia, the US, or the UK. Many had taken IELTS at least once and were struggling to reach a desired band. Studying overseas and emigration were the most common reasons for taking the test.

4.1.1 Identity from Registration Profiles

From the forum launch in October 2011 until its close in August 2012, hundreds of thousands of people visited, and over 1,350 registered as members. Membership was not required to read posts, but was required for posting and for some search, private messaging, and alert functions. Out of the 1,357 members, however, only 167 members, or 12%, became active (i.e. uploaded one or more essays, feedback, comments, or questions).

On registering, users accepted the terms and conditions, and had the option of supplying information about their first language, location, Facebook and other social media, reasons for taking the test, and photos or avatars. Although only 10% of the 1,357 members added more than a user name, profiles revealed a wide range of backgrounds and concerns.

Many indicated nationality as an aspect of identity and their purpose for taking the test, including a Chinese postgraduate “looking forward to studying overseas,” and a 34-year old Iraqi engineer in the United Arab Emirates “trying my best to achieve the required scores in the IELTS” to migrate to Australia. Some had already moved to intermediate or final countries, such as an Indian doctor in the UK or this London-based Nepalese member:

I have taken ielts three times before but I could not succeed to get the required marks in writing. So, I would like my essays to be scanned and to get some feedback for the improvement. And i am sitting for the test of June.

Some were undergraduates, including a Burmese nursing student in Australia and a 19-year-old Saudi planning to study civil engineering, but the great majority had at least a primary degree.

Many profiles noted family identities, such as these Indian and Egyptian members:

I'm mom at home. I love to learn academic writing for excellent communication skills. I want to be a teacher and also taking some courses in order to be that.

I'm an Egyptian doctor, have to pass IELTS with score 7 in all bands, to progress to set medical exams to work in the UK. I'm a wife and a mother to 3 children, living in the UK.

Members who added optional information to profiles posted more frequently than those who did not, and respondents to time- and goal-oriented profile questions became among the most frequent contributors. However, not all active members added information to their profiles.

Gender was not a required field. The breakdown was 60% female, 40% male, as determined from profiles, avatars, or references in their comments and essays: Hawkey (2005) found a 55% female, 45% male distribution.

While most members used generic emails, local domains indicated a range of nationalities. An interactive map of IP addresses of all posts at tinyurl.com/bpg6x2b, on the BatchGeo website, shows that over half the posts came from China and South East Asia, another 10% each from South Asia and Australia, and approximately 16% from Europe, paralleling patterns in the origin of IELTS candidates.

4.1.2 Identity in Comments and Essays

Although almost all post content was task-oriented, member interests and experiences could occasionally be glimpsed in comments accompanying initial essays.

Hello everyone, I'm Yel from Philippines, a newbie here in writefix. It is a very interesting site and lots for information that will help me to improve my writing skill for my IELTS exam, in which writing is one of my weakest link and also speaking. I post my essay as much as possible and hope some members will help me and correct my mistakes. [Post 296]

I used to study in ACET Hanoi, now I'm living in Australia. I'm going to take the test on 26th this month. You can post more essays here; I'll try to have a look in my free time :) [Post 951]

I am an old man! 33 years old, with busy working life. Learning English or getting ready for passing IELTS needs concentration, restful mind, and tranquil environment that I do not have! I did not say it for show off, I said it for encouraging other candidates. [Post 764]

Almost a quarter of all posts (22%) mentioned IELTS band scores. The level of IELTS required by candidates varied from as low as 5.5 for immigration to over 8 for some universities. Most members with earlier IELTS results had between Band 5 and Band 7, a range from "modest" to "good" (Band 9 indicates an "expert user", while Band 4 is described as "limited"). A small number reported higher scores of up to Band 8.5.

A very common theme in comments and interviews was the need to achieve a particular band, and the frustration of not succeeding, often despite several attempts.

I need 7 each band and for migration. Right now, I can get sponsorship from Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia. But as far as I am concerned, Sydney and Perth are far more developed. So I should practice more. [Post 766]

Hi Hilda84: Your “rant” really resonates with me!!!!!! my overall score is 8.5 too and i do have the same issue with you. In my last two tries for ielts, either reading (7.5) (absolutely too careless) or writing (7.5) drags me down. [Post 1573]

Members occasionally provided glimpses of their backgrounds in comments on essays. Post 1491 is an extract from a post on L1 and L2 writing differences:

First I am from China. But my maternal grandfather is from Indonesia (overseas Chinese), and my father’s father is Japanese. Despite from different culture backgrounds, I think their thinking modes are similar. Comparatively speaking, people from these countries can easily come to an agreement in many topics. (Not including those politicians in political aspect). [Post 1491]

Although IELTS Writing Task 2 asks candidates to use examples, surprisingly few essays revealed personal information. Some members, however, did refer to local experience: “the media is getting more and more ‘Amarillista’ as we say in Spanish,” or, “in the Netherlands medical treatment is accessible for everybody and I think this is a great asset.”

With little information in profiles, visitors and members alike had to build a picture of the identities and backgrounds of other members from such references.

In interviews, members described experiences with learning English and peer editing.

You know I study in Australia, for my Master’s degree, but I come from China... I came here a few years ago, but in China we don’t have any opportunity to discuss or talk English during the class, but the Australian educational system provided me with a fantastic opportunity to improve my English, as well as other skills. [Colin92]

The Russian local teacher, they are not native speaker, they do several mistakes. [Natalia]

Civil engineering did not require me to have a lot of English skills. [Lester]

Given that most members were intending to study abroad or to emigrate, future plans might have been expected to appear in comments or interviews, but this did not occur. Apart from members stating that they needed particular bands, there was almost no discussion of majors, destinations, families, or of socio-economic or other reasons for moving or for studying overseas.

4.2 Types of Interaction

Before the forum launch, it was not known what the response would be or whether visitors would register, let alone post feedback on other members' writing. Initial numbers of members and interactions were low, but from March 2012 the forum became much more active, with between 75 and 80 posts a week.

In total, of the 2,201 posts on the forum, one-third were by me, and the remaining 1,457 posts were by 167 active members in 545 threads. After ten months, the forum closed and stopped accepting new essays, but some comments continued on existing essays.

Lurking

The chief form of engagement with the forum was lurking in various forms.

In the first and largest group, up to 300,000 visitors viewed forum pages over the ten months, based on Google Analytics figures, with the 545 threads being viewed an average of 600 times each and four threads reaching more than 10,000 views. While visitors often returned, only 1,357 registered as members.

A second group of lurkers comprised members who registered but never posted. Only 12% of the 1,357 members who registered became active by posting at least once. The remainder of registered members (88%) never posted (see Figure 6).

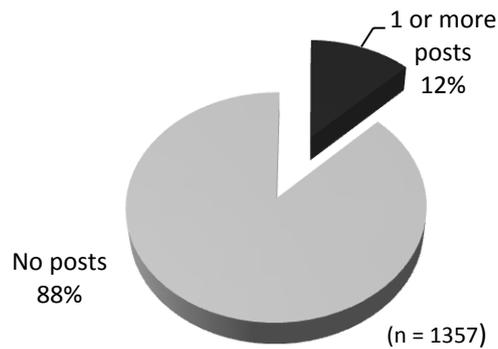


Figure 6: Active Members

These members who never posted logged in for just 1.6 days on average, compared to an average 34 days for active members.

A third form of low-level participation was in the many single posts. Out of the 167 members who registered, 28% only made one post. Shorter membership was associated with fewer posts: members with only one post were active for 10 days on average, compared to 43 days for members with more than one post.

In most cases, single-post members uploaded a 250- to 350-word essay with no greeting, salutation, name, request for specific feedback, or comment. Although most of these posts received replies, the original posters chose not to respond.

In addition to the three groups described above (casual visitors, registered members who did not post, and members with only one post), active members displayed many forms of lurking in their everyday forum activities, before joining, after joining, choosing which posts to engage with, and when leaving the forum. Lurking and other forms of less-visible participation thus represented a highly significant activity in the forum.

4.2.1 Membership Duration and Posting

On average, members (including those with just a solitary post) were active for 33.8 days between registering and their final logged-in visit. Members with more than one post were active for longer – 43 days on average, uploading a typical 8.7 posts.

In conventional educational settings, membership is normally determined by enrollment and course duration. In the forum, however, members were able to come and go, with this turnover influencing forum dynamics extensively. Later members could not interact with earlier members other than by reading previously-posted

essays or comments, and there was significant repetition of similar issues as new members joined. No members were active for the entire period.

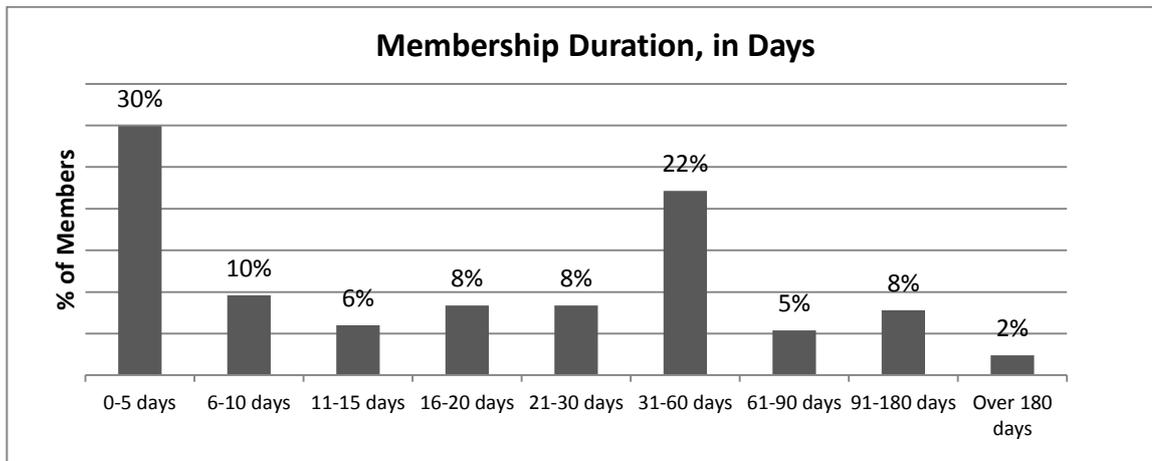


Figure 7: Membership Duration in Days

Figure 7 shows a significant number (40%) of members active for under 10 days and a similar proportion of long-term members (37%) active for between 1 to 6 months.

Figure 8 shows the influence of turnover on possible interactions for a sample of members. Horizontal bars represent the duration from registration to final recorded visit, with the inset representing days. The vertical axis shows user names followed by their number of posts in brackets.

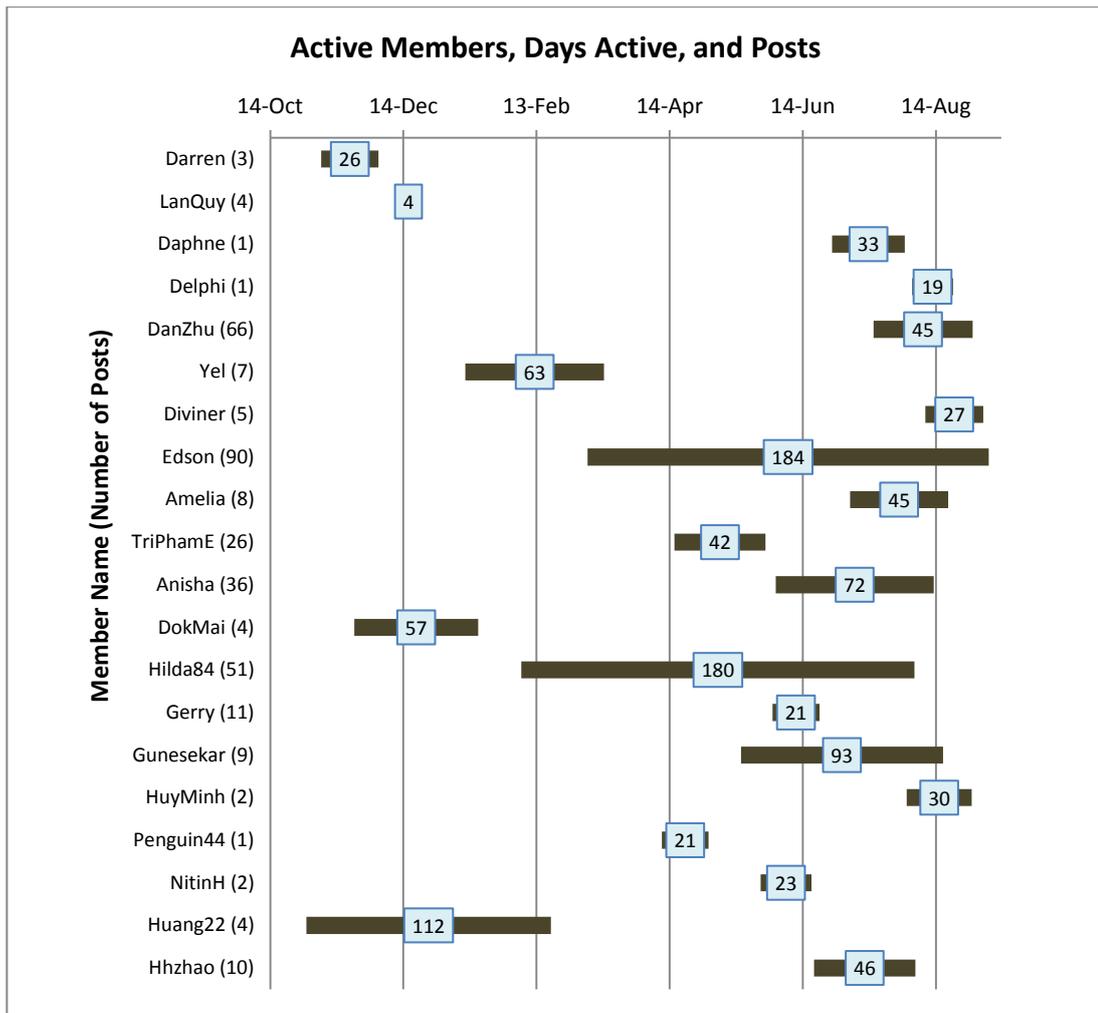


Figure 8: Active Members, Posts, & Days Active (Sample only)

Yel, for example, joined in January 2011, and made 7 posts before his last visit in mid-March, 63 days later. Amelia registered in July 2012 and posted 8 times before her last visit in mid-August, 45 days later. Although discussion between them could not have occurred, Amelia had access to Yel’s essays and comments.

The longer that someone was active, the greater the number of possible interactions, particularly as more members joined. Edson could have interacted with 151 of the 167 active members over his six-month membership from March to August, and members commented in interviews on changes in interactions with forum growth.

There were striking differences in the number of posts made by members, with a small group of very active contributors generating content and giving feedback, and a large number of users participating much less visibly. The most prolific member posted 90 times, and almost a quarter of all members (24%) posted over 10 times. At

the other end of the spectrum, 60% of members contributed three or fewer posts (Figure 9).

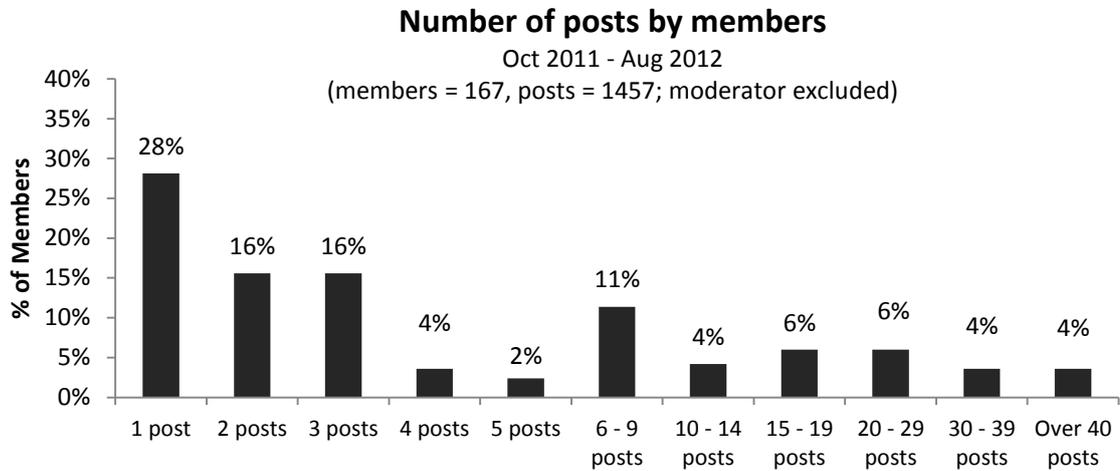


Figure 9: Number of Posts by Members

Almost a quarter of all posts came from the top five contributors, and the top ten members contributed 51% of posts. Overall, the top twenty percent of posters produced about 72% or almost three-quarters of content on the site – a figure reasonably close to the rule-of-thumb 80:20 Pareto figure (Azad, 2007).

Longer-term members were responsible for a very large proportion of all posts (see Figure 10). A tiny proportion of members (5%) who were active for four to seven months contributed over 22% of all posts, and almost half of all posts (49%) were made by members active for over two months. In contrast, members who were active for under 20 days contributed only 14% of all posts.

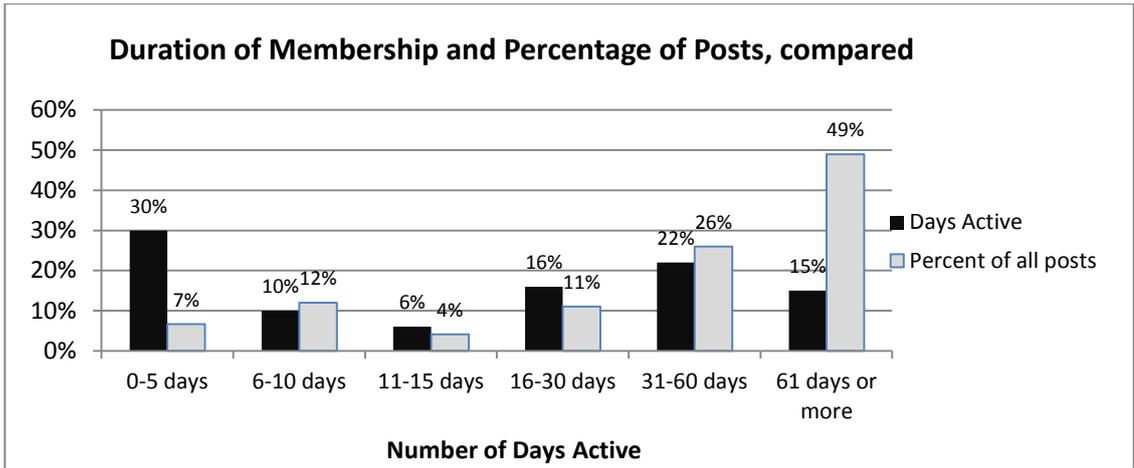


Figure 10: Comparison of Days Active and Number of Posts

Although longer membership was clearly associated with more posts, individual participation varied greatly (Figure 11). HectorMc, for example, made 90 posts over 183 days, an average of one post every two days, while BaoHeng made just 4 posts over a relatively long membership of 112 days, or one post every 28 days.

The top ten most frequent posters remained active for four months on average, and members with between five and ten posts were typically active for 53 days. In contrast, members with only 1 or 2 posts averaged only 11.7 days from registration to final visit.

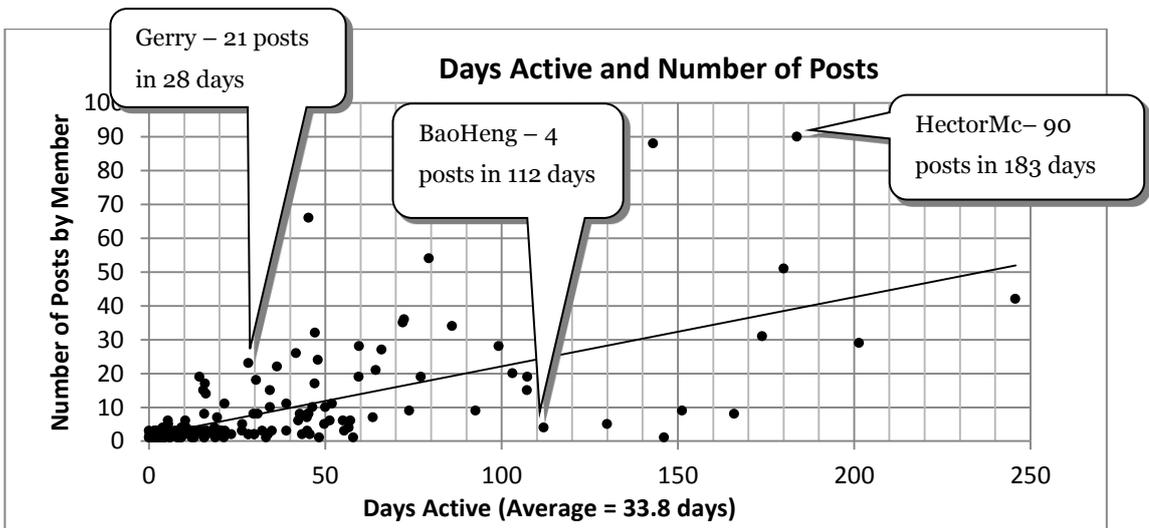


Figure 11: Days Active and Number of Posts

In summary, length of membership varied greatly, with longer membership strongly associated with more posts. A large number of members were active for just a few days, producing only a small proportion of content, while a relatively small number of long-term members contributed almost three-quarters of all posts.

4.2.2 Thread Format Outcomes

An early, unwitting choice of thread format on my part had a major influence on forum dynamics.

My earliest threads were model essays or feedback on member essays. While alternative thread formats might have focused on grammar points, ideas, organization, vocabulary, or discussion, the vast majority of subsequent threads followed my format of an essay and related comments.

This format placed complete essays at the center of discourse rather than specific language features or member concerns. Members did not initiate alternative thread formats, other than occasionally to post results, look for speaking partners, or ask questions.

Threads were overwhelmingly started by members (95% of 545 threads, with 501 threads in the main forum and 41 other threads in two smaller forums for general comments and results). No guidelines were given for posts: members could join an existing thread or start a new one. There were no suggested essay topics for members to choose from: members posted essay questions from textbooks, recent IELTS exams, and other websites, and most were similar in style to the argument or opinion essays required for the test, showing member familiarity with exam and genre requirements.

A tendency to start new threads was noticeable among newer members. In contrast, longer-term and more active members frequently chose to give feedback in existing threads, with members with over ten posts starting an average of 8.6 threads and responding in 18.8 threads. Examples include HectorMc, who started new threads with only one-sixth of his posts, while only 12.5% of AliceXi's 88 posts initiated new threads.

Some prolific contributors, however, also preferred to start new threads rather than to respond. Almost half of Hilda84's posts, or 49% of her 51 posts, started new topics while Nico started 22 topics in 39 posts (56%). In contrast, other users started very

few threads, with Rosita2001 starting 2 threads out of 27 posts and Colin92 starting just 3 threads in 35 posts.

In summary, posting behaviors ranged from almost exclusively starting new threads to only responding in existing threads. With some exceptions, longer-term members tended to both respond to and start threads, while newer members started more new threads.

4.2.3 Thread Interactivity

A longer thread lifespan, greater thread depth, and more unique contributors can indicate interactivity.

In some forums, threads can last weeks or months, but this was not the case here. Given that time for reflection is frequently cited as a benefit of L2 discussion forums, the short thread life is significant.

With some outliers removed, the average thread lifespan was 7.7 days, with a depth of 4.5 posts. Around 14% of threads lasted just one day, with an average thread depth of 2.8, and 75% of threads were completed in one week (Figure 11).

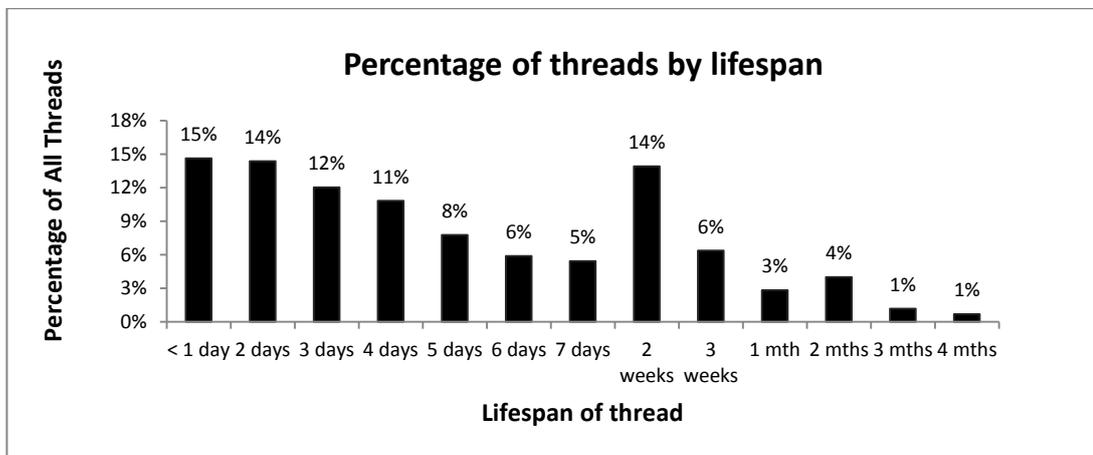


Figure 12: Percentage of threads by lifespan

However, some threads lasted much longer. About 17.5% of topics lasted between 10 days and three months, and greater thread depth required more time. For the 18 threads with between 10 and 20 posts, the lifespan was 30.4 days on average.

Thread depth (i.e., the number of responses plus the original post) has also been used as a measure of interactivity. The average thread depth was 4.53. Almost 15% of

threads had no response (Figure 13). Just under a quarter (24.2%) had a solitary response, while 46% of posts had between three and 21 responses.

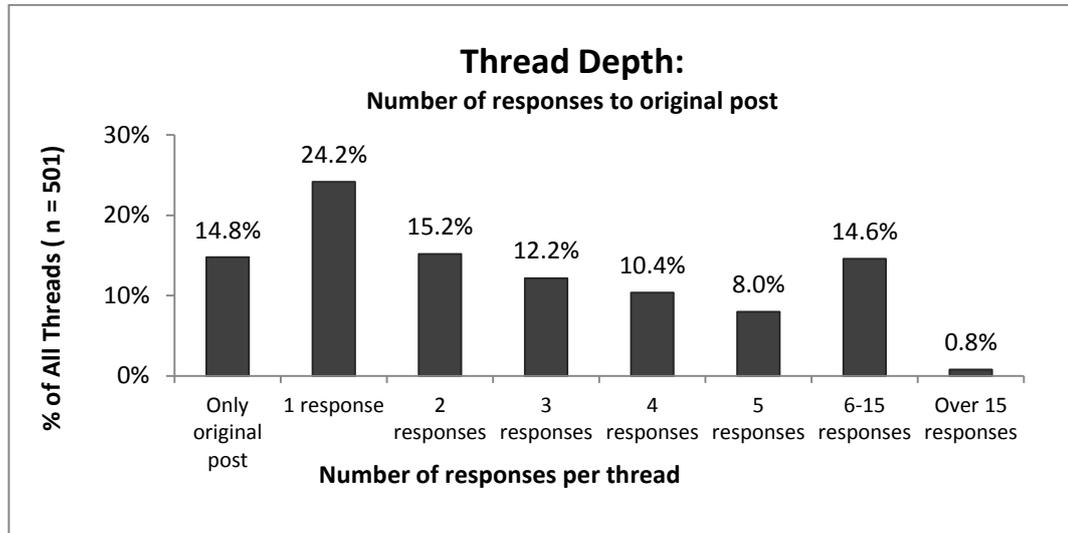


Figure 13: Thread Depth

As the forum grew, thread depth rose markedly as more members provided feedback to each other, and average time between responses dropped. From May 2012 onwards, the average wait fell to 1.9 days between first post and a reply, and 1.4 days between the second and third posts.

4.2.4 Unique Contributors per Thread

A third indicator of interactivity may be the number of unique contributors to a thread (Figure 14).

Over 40% of threads had three or more unique contributors, and 17% of threads had four or more different contributors. These threads with four or more contributors accounted for a disproportionately large 34% of posts (Figure 14).

Having more respondents was also associated with greater thread depth. Threads with two unique contributors had just 2.98 posts on average; the 23% of threads with three different contributors had just under 5 posts on average; and the 13% of threads by four different members had an average depth of 9.9 posts.

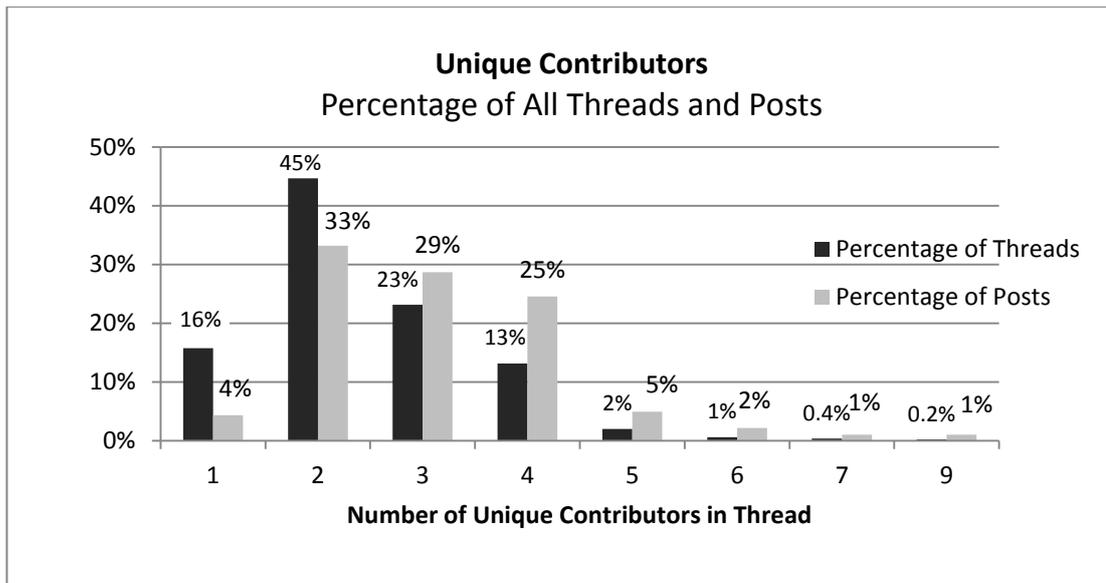


Figure 14: Unique Contributors, Threads and Posts

Summary of Thread Analysis

In summary, three crude indicators of interactivity – thread lifespan, thread depth, and the number of contributors – were analyzed. Significantly for literature on L2 discussion, many threads had short life spans, with three-quarters of threads concluding within a week, and 29% within two days.

Threads were relatively shallow, at 4.53 posts, but average depth rose sharply as the forum developed, with members responding more and starting proportionally fewer threads.

The unintentional choice of thread format of an essay followed by responses almost certainly affected interaction and thread depth. It may have encouraged some members to start new threads rather than continue existing ones, and it reified the essay as the focus of the discourse, rather than grammatical or rhetorical patterns or member concerns.

4.2.5 Turn-Taking and Interaction

Members could choose a range of interactions such as requesting feedback, giving feedback, starting new threads, or responding to feedback. Following Thompson and Ku (2006), analysis of sequences of interactions indicated changes in the participation of members over time, with many members moving from seeking feedback to providing it to others.

As an example, the interaction patterns within threads for one member (Lester, member ID 521) are shown chronologically in Figure 13. Lester posted 42 times in 21 threads in the main forum over 173 days, starting seven threads (Thread IDs 215, 260, 290, 301, 348, 356 and 391).

In the ‘Interaction Pattern in Thread’ column, **X** represents the moderator (member ID 1); **A** represents the first unique contributor in a thread; and **B** or **C** the second or third unique member contributors, etc.

| Date | Thread ID | Member IDs | Interaction Pattern in Thread | Posts in Thread | Number of Contributors |
|-----------|-----------|--|-------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 6-Apr-12 | 215 | 521, 521, 1, 521 | aaxa | 4 | 2 |
| 17-Apr-12 | 255 | 786, 786, 521, 786, 1, 1, 786, 581 | aabaxxac | 8 | 4 |
| 19-Apr-12 | 260 | 521, 1 | ax | 2 | 2 |
| 24-Apr-12 | 272 | 1, 786, 521, 786, 1 | xabax | 5 | 3 |
| 3-May-12 | 287 | 786, 521, 786, 521, 786, 521, 786, etc. | ababababab | 10 | 2 |
| 5-May-12 | 290 | 521, 1 | ax | 2 | 2 |
| 12-May-12 | 299 | 786, 521, 1, 665, 1, 1, 786, 665, 1 | abxcxxacx | 9 | 4 |
| 13-May-12 | 301 | 521, 1, 521, 1 | axax | 4 | 2 |
| 21-May-12 | 318 | 671, 886, 898, 886, 649, 886, 886, 521, etc. | abcbdaaeaxfgexxhxhxfx | 21 | 9 |
| 26-May-12 | 325 | 786, 521, 898, 786, 786, 521, 1 | abcaabx | 7 | 4 |
| 3-Jun-12 | 348 | 521, 521, 896, 1, 896, 521, 1 | aabxbax | 7 | 3 |
| 3-Jun-12 | 349 | 949, 949, 521 | aab | 3 | 2 |
| 5-Jun-12 | 356 | 521, 1, 521, 521, 1, 1 | axaaxx | 6 | 2 |
| 21-Jun-12 | 390 | 994, 521, 959, 1 | abcx | 4 | 4 |
| 22-Jun-12 | 391 | 521, 959 | ab | 2 | 2 |
| 26-Jun-12 | 401 | 1013, 1013, 521, 1013, 521, 1 | aababx | 6 | 3 |
| 13-Jul-12 | 460 | 581, 1157, 521, 581 | abca | 4 | 3 |
| 19-Jul-12 | 482 | 1168, 521, 665, 1, 1168, 665, 1168, 1194 | abcxacad | 8 | 5 |
| 24-Jul-12 | 499 | 1126, 1126, 521, 1126, 1, 1 | aabaxx | 6 | 3 |
| 29-Jul-12 | 521 | 1214, 521, 1214 | aba | 3 | 2 |
| 31-Jul-12 | 527 | 1013, 521, 1013, 1 | abax | 4 | 3 |

a= first member, b = second member, etc; x= moderator

Figure 15: Patterns of one member’s interactions: Lester

Lester’s initial posting (Thread 215), four months after joining the forum, was in an **AAXA** pattern. As **A**, he posted an essay seeking feedback, appealed in another post for feedback 12 hours later; the moderator (**X**) replied with detailed feedback; and Lester (**A**) concluded the thread with some thanks for the feedback and a short comment:

Thank you very much for your comments. I am really appreciated. I think having enough ideas to write is one of my main problem, and this essay is the one which I find it hard to generate ideas.

Also, I will try my best to help others. Thanks again!

In his second thread (Thread 255: **AABAXXAC**), 10 days after his initial post, he joined an existing thread as **B**, the second contributor, and gave detailed feedback on a new member's essay.

In Threads 260 and 290, Lester did not respond to feedback, a common response by new members.

Over time, however, Lester began to respond in more detail to feedback, whether from the moderator (Thread 301: **AXAX**) or to give detailed feedback to other members (Thread 401: **AABABX**). Later threads saw greater independence from the moderator, with Lester responding to other members more often (e.g., Threads 401, 460, 482 and 499) and starting fewer new threads.

This delay before an initial post and the change in participation from requesting to giving feedback and to responding rather than starting discussions were significant features of many members' interaction patterns over time.

Such structural patterns do not automatically indicate actual interaction between posts or members, but provide a visual representation of patterns which can then be checked against post content.

4.2.5.1 Joining and Leaving the Discussion

Learning how a new forum or online community works requires time and effort, and one possible indicator of this may be the time before initial posts. A pattern emerged that members who posted immediately after registering uploaded fewer posts overall, whereas longer-term or more prolific posters tended to wait longer.

Members with only one post waited an average of 1.7 days after registering before uploading their first post, with a clear tendency for many newcomers to post quickly and then never post again. In contrast, members with over five posts waited an average of 3.6 days before uploading their first essays or comments.

Overall, members waited – or lurked – about 4.3 days after registering before posting. Seventeen members (10%) waited for over two cautious weeks, and 5% waited for over a month between registering and making their first post.

Not everyone waited for as long, however; just over half the members (56%) waited less than a day. This would indicate two main trends: impulsive joining and posting, perhaps hoping for immediate feedback, or a more measured assessment of and entry

into the online discussion – in effect, a form of lurking. One member, in the first group, waited just long enough to write his first essay:

Hi folks, I am a newbie and stumble upon this fantastic website today then write one essay to share with all of you straight after registration (SOooo excited.lol) and be greatly appreciated if anyone can “criticize” and comment on my writing. i haven’t practiced for ages and hope that you can comment on anything. thank you so much. [Post 1245]

Despite – or perhaps because of – his enthusiasm, this member became one of the most active contributors, uploading 35 posts over 72 days, and giving extensive feedback to other members.

Members also changed their participation significantly in their final visits to the forum. From seeking or giving feedback, members reduced their participation to reading only – a further form of lurking. On average, members stayed active (logging in to view essays and comments, but not posting or responding) for 9.6 days following a final post.

4.2.6 Moderator Participation

Moderator involvement seemed to both extend and reduce thread depth.

Out of a total of 545 threads, I participated in 79%. Threads without the moderator were shorter, at just 1.9 posts, compared to 4.6 for threads with moderator involvement. Over half of the threads (57%) without moderator involvement began and ended with just the original post.

However, moderator involvement was not always necessary. In 43% of threads without moderator input, an average of 2.5 unique contributors provided feedback, with an average thread depth of 3.7.

For threads in which I replied as second contributor (**AX**, where **A** was the first member and **X** the moderator), the average depth was 2.31 and the average time to respond was 4.76 days. On the other hand, when I was slower to respond, or other members were quicker, the depth increased to 3.42, and the average time to reply dropped to 1.45 days.

Similarly, in the 40% of threads with three or more contributors, a post by the moderator as third contributor in the thread (**ABX**) frequently closed discussions.

4.3 Social Presence and Community Interaction

Although there were almost no purely social exchanges, posts contained multiple social elements.

One-fifth of all posts explicitly indicated a sense of community or others, ranging from terms such as “we,” “guys,” or “us” and greetings to the expression of shared goals or concerns:

Colleagues, Please evaluate my writing I need a band of 8. Please do help me out by letting me no my errors. Thank You. [Post 1078]

Hi All, Hi Yokama, I have the same situation. I hope finally we can get score what we need. [Post 1057]

Thanks for creating this greate place for all of us to practise. May I know how we can comment and help each other in the future if the website closed and not accepting the new essays? It reeeeealy help us to improve the writing skills, hope it won't be closed :-). [Post 2220]

Hello everyone! I'm a newbie and this is my first post in the forms. I'm going to give the IELTS for the first time in a under month, so I'm rather worried about it. I'll be needing a pretty high score on it so please be as harsh as you can in your feedback/criticism. Thanks in advance! [Post ID 1661]

Hi, folks, long time no see. AliceXi and Lester, you guys got impressive scores. I've been hitting the books recently. I'm going to take IELTS on July 7th. It's only a week away, I need to work harder. [Post 1577]

In interviews, however, community was not explicitly described as a major theme.

4.3.1 Task Orientation

Most discussion centered on the essay task, with very little discussion of non-IELTS topics. Members differentiated between the task-orientation of the forum and social networks such as Facebook.

For me the reason why I am on the forum is to study, to learn, writing skills or whatever, and so I think it's ... it's not my intention to look at other people's information... so for me it's not really about certain people, it's about the essays they present. [Colin92]

No members started threads for general discussion, and in sub-forums for results and questions or comments, all topics were related to IELTS or English: some members sought Skype speaking partners, while some asked about grammar, vocabulary, or textbooks. There was no discussion of family, jobs, friends, nationality, religion, education, future plans, or personal topics, other than the challenge of achieving IELTS scores, and work or study pressure.

Although there were over 550 essays and rewrites, there were almost no comments on essay ideas, other than to note if ideas were relevant or supported. The following comment was highly unusual in mentioning another writer's ideas:

Hey HeiWo, nice essay with great ideas. Well...the first thought that pops into my mind is this topic must be written by one feminist...lol..just kidding...i just wanna amuse myself a bit...hahaanyway, i just wanna share my comments with you.1. *your first paragraph is a bit top-heavy...* [Post 1469]

Comments on essays indicated an instrumental or task-oriented approach towards ideas:

I am not fully convinced about what I write in third paragraph for second part of the question. More ideas regarding the second part of the question is highly welcomed. [Post 1641]

Finding or developing ideas was a frequent source of frustration:

And the ideas is important as well. Because if you haven't any opinion, any good opinion...you don't know what they are talking about. It's more difficult than the grammar mistakes. Because we can understand the sentences although some grammar mistakes. But if you don't have the good ideas, we never can do the essays. [DanZhu]

Many interviewees and members noted this challenge of developing ideas, and the forum's large bank of essays tagged by topic almost certainly attracted visitors with writing assignments.

In lieu of a focus on ideas, members discussed patterns and organization, using metaphor and analogy to describe structures and rhetorical patterns in academic English writing:

This is my first essay, I was following the rule of 3773.... Please fix it for me!
[Post 149]

just like MR writefix said “ESSAY just like a burger.” [Post 647]

funny parable, haha. I got it. [Post 395]

Interview comments appeared to support task orientation rather than personal ties:

Yes, I remember one I think she is the number one of posting essays: I forget her name, but I really liked her style. [HectorMc]

4.3.2 Names and Social Presence

Increased participation was linked to greater use of names.

Despite there being a username beside every post (or photo, if uploaded), more than half of the members (54%) never used a recipient’s name when posting or responding. In total, over 56% of posts were not addressed to anyone and did not contain greetings.

More frequent posters such as Lester, HectorMc, AliceXi, DanZhu, and Colin92 addressed posts to named others more often than did less prolific posters. The 46% of members who addressed others accounted for the vast majority (87%) of all posts in the forum.

Hi Hilda84, I’m also an IELTS taker, I’d like to offer some observation here, hope you wouldn’t mind. And please correct me if I was wrong... [Post 769]

Hi AliceXi thanks for you correction! you know what, its really helpful, I think I should... [Post 787]

Not all frequent posters used names. Hilda84, a prolific poster and very proficient writer, uploaded 42 out of 52 posts without using names. Newcomers also avoided using names, and almost 90% of the 48 members with solitary posts did not address individuals.

Occasionally posts were addressed to two recipients, with a handful of posts addressed to three, possibly indicating interactivity or synthesis:

Hi, AliceXi and writefix, I find your comments really accurate and valuable. The following is the revised version, according to your suggestions. I am really delighted to find that it’s much more “audience friendly” than the first edition! Thank you very much!!!! [Post 1549]

Occasional uncertainty arose over the appropriateness of usernames:

Hi, RoshanIELTS (I don't know ur given name, so forgive me call u in this way)... [Post 2116]

Over one-third of all posts were general (not directed at particular individuals and without using salutations such as “hi everyone” or “guys” or “hi all” or similar forms). However, this did not necessarily mean abrupt:

I want to share my work.. feel free to comment and suggest.. thanks!!! [Post ID 1053]

In contrast to the many essays uploaded without comments, requests, many other posts were chatty or informal. “Hi” was used 742 times by members, “guys” 56 times, “hey” 14 times, and “hello” 231 times.

Over time, some members began welcoming new members or giving advice about forum procedures, echoing a moderator role. Some members asked for Skype speaking partners and several used the forum's private messaging, with some Chinese members meeting face-to-face later in Australia.

4.3.3 Politeness

One of the most noticeable features of the forum was politeness. No instances of aggression were observed. Comments were appealed for, but rarely demanded, with some exceptions:

HELLO HELLO!!!! [Post 2053, complete post, a day after posting an essay]

Feedback was almost always couched politely or qualified with comments about the giver's ability. When responding to feedback, members usually thanked and complimented each other, rarely expressing open disagreement.

Well done and very pleasant to read your essay. I have noticed a few “slips” but open to discussion regarding these. [Post 1254]

I think this is a very useful essay from which would be useful to learn many phrases and words. ...[*Analysis*]... Thank you Rangeetha to this essay. You errors, in my view, do not affect your meaning and still very organized essay. [Post 504]

Compliments and politeness extended to empathy, shared frustration or experience, or motivation and aspiration:

Hey, DanZhu, Good Luck~~! I believe you can make it! I am also nervous for the speaking part....terrible experience last time... Not sure if I can improve it in a shot time. [Post 2287]

Hello Lester I really enjoy your writing. It really esay to follow. I've notice you develop it from a small scale (individual) to a large ones (society) with a clear level. Overall, it's very logical and well develop essay. I just marked a few words... [Analysis]...Very well done!! Can't wait to see your next post!

Thank you all for the precious comments on my first post. I've adjust some of it and share it here. I hope any one who is working on the test will get the score that they're looking for. [Post 1150]

4.3.4 Reciprocity and Pair Interactions

Although there were few instances of dyads with reciprocal patterns of post and response, some members did form repeated patterns of interaction.

Lester directed 11 of his 42 posts to TriPham, who responded in 8 of his 26 posts. RoshanIELTS directed DanZhu directly six times out of his 32 posts, while DanZhu addressed RoshanIELTS 7 times out of 66 posts.

Members interviewed did not describe peer reciprocity as a significant factor. However, one member did describe paying back or paying forward at both a generalized and dyadic level:

If you want people to help you, you need to help each other, the other. So if you want to make it better or anything, any organization better, you need contribute something. So if you want someone to help you the correct answer, you can help other first. [Lina]

Two members from similar IP addresses who registered almost at the same time confined their editing almost exclusively to each other's work. This may have represented a face-to-face relationship, an interesting but legitimate use of the forum.

4.3.5 Help and Helpfulness

Apart from seeking feedback on complete essays, members frequently requested peer help on organization, grammar, website usability, and strategies for writing or for IELTS preparation. The word 'help' and its variants appeared in over 36% of posts.

could anyone help me? i know that there are 2 popular layouts : 3773 vs 35553. in my case: i have an essay which i oppose as well as support. however, i support more than i oppose. So, i divide the essay's body into 3 paragraphs. two first paragraph for supporting and the third for opposing.is that layout ok? [Post 969]

Hi, JacquiL My pleasure to help you. Unfortunately, my grammar is so poor that I can't help you. [Post 706]

Hi Ranjit79, Could you please help me to conclude this essay? [Post 1586]

The explanation of articles is very helpful. Sometimes I got confused about that too. [Post 415]

About 14% of posts sought non-essay-related help, including clarification, help with specific writing-related questions such as introductions or use of linking words, and usability issues (a small number, at about 0.6% of member posts). Members advised peers on posting procedures and on quoting others, as well as on the need to use spellcheckers and to include essay prompts if omitted. Many such instructions appeared to echo advice I gave as moderator.

Summary: Social Presence and Community

The high turnover, the absence of profile data, and the almost complete absence of non-task discussion indicated a highly task-oriented environment. Ties appeared to be weak, rather than strong, with generalized rather than dyadic reciprocity, and little explicit discussion of community in interviews.

However, the constant use of terms such as “we” or “us,” and frequently-expressed empathy and encouragement demonstrated a social presence. Members shared frustrations related to IELTS and essay-writing, and the forum almost certainly provided members or visitors with a sense of connection.

The use of names among longer-term members, a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers, and the absence of aggression may have encouraged socialization and contribution, even if politeness or uncertainty reduced critical feedback.

4.4 Feedback and Knowledge Creation

This section examines how feedback was requested, given, and responded to, and investigates changing styles of participation, with members moving from simply requesting feedback to providing it in increasingly sophisticated forms.

4.4.1 Requesting Feedback

Members sought feedback in three main ways: by simply posting essays; by posting an essay with a separate post appealing for general feedback; and by posting essays with guidance on specific feedback required.

The first type was the most common in the first few months, consisting of essay-only initial posts, with no greetings, comments, requests for specific feedback, or introductory or concluding remarks. The 437 such posts constituted almost 30% of all member posts, representing an important form of participation and members' perceptions of the feedback process.

Over time, such essay-only posts became less common. From mid-November to mid-December 2011, 24 out of 27 posts (89%) were essay-only posts, but the proportion dropped steadily to just 24% in August, with increasing membership and more posts giving and responding to feedback.

Members often requested feedback if time had elapsed without a response:

Hope that someone can help me fix this essay. i posted this 1 week ago. :(my ielts test is coming soon. [Post 942]

Members displayed different strategies for posting essays. Sometimes unrelated essays were added to existing threads but most members either opened a new thread (particularly newcomers) or made some attempt to integrate new essays into the discourse:

Hello Aruna and sir, I have taken some ideas from Aruna's and have prepared my version of an essay under this topic. [Post 1338]

This is really a nice topic.. and the discussion is going on really good.. This website really helps us a lot.. Thanks to everyone.. I would also like to submit my essay.. Kindly somebody comment on this... [Post 1367]

I found this topic unusual. So I decided to work on it. As for the essay by FengLi, the essay is great. I don't have any comments but I think there could be more lines in conclusion. Here is my try... [Post 1577].

A commonly-used member strategy was to give some quick or unspecific praise to an existing essay and then add their new essay:

Well done, AnnHuang. Nice essay. i write this essay as well and hope that you can continue to criticize it. [Post 1452]

Over time, more members requested specific feedback on essays. In one thread, a member asked about readability analysis tools mentioned earlier in the thread:

hello friends here, i have revised it for an hour but i still can't improve its readability. i need your opinions and instructions. [Post 1670]

Most members put requests for feedback at the start of their essays, with about 14% adding a request at the end. Over time, some members offered alternative versions of sentences or paragraphs, or added interjections in their own essays where they were unhappy with phrasing or ideas.

However, we should also not neglect the drawbacks of a gap year (*or* However, many people are concerned about many disadvantages of taking a gap year.....*the second is better? hmmm need your suggestion*). [Post 1572]

I wrote the main body in other way. Which one is better? [Post 1882]

Requesting specific guidance and drawing the reader's attention to particular points in an essay may provide evidence of growing self-assessment and critical thinking.

4.4.2 Giving Feedback

After essay-only posts, the second most common type was feedback to other members, at about 20% of all posts, followed by responses to feedback, at 12%.

Together, almost one-third of member messages represented interactivity and substantive constructive feedback at a macro or micro level, or evidence of reflection as a result of another member's comment. These figures exclude the large number of essay-only posts described earlier and very short or token feedback.

Out of 167 active members, 41% engaged in clearly-evidenced, substantive feedback of another's work or edited their own work based on feedback. These members did

not necessarily engage in feedback in all posts, but were responsible for more than 80% of all forum posts. In other words, 41% of the forum members produced 80% of posts and 100% of peer edits. Members who gave feedback therefore represented a disproportionately small but active group of participants.

In contrast, over a quarter of members (28%), posted just once (usually just an essay) and never responded, whether their essay was responded to or not.

The remaining 31% of members did not visibly respond to feedback despite posting two or more times. They may have thanked peers or promised later feedback, but they did not give substantive feedback to others or engage in visible revision or clarification following feedback from others.

The average number of edits was over 9.5 (excluding members who made only one peer edit). Giving detailed feedback represented a significant investment of time, often exceeding an hour per essay:

For my part it depends on how many time I have to spend on the forum, because if I very available, probably I will spend more time editing on other people's essays, from a broad way, from the structure point. If I have very limited time to spend on the forum, probably I will just briefly change or modify as many minor mistakes as possible, like the phrase or sentence, if I detect them. [Colin92]

I usually take 1 hour to check one essays of my friends. For me, English is a second language, so when I see something strange...to me, I must check it on Google, examine whether it is right or wrong, use it in this situation [Lina]

In general, the more posts that users made, the more they tended to give feedback. Colin92, one of the more prolific posters, edited peers' writing in 80% of his 35 posts, while Rosita2001 commented in detail on the work of others in 70% of her 27 posts. However, less frequent posters also engaged in peer editing, with CleoChen giving feedback in five of her seven posts.

In contrast, some members were generally recipients rather than givers of feedback. One of the most able and active writers, Hilda84 posted 51 times over 180 days but provided feedback in just two short posts.

In contrast to much literature on L2 feedback, members gave more macro-level than micro-level feedback. Almost 20% of feedback posts were macro-level, 10% were micro-level, and a further 19% of posts included both. Macro-level changes included

comments on reorganization, support for ideas, topic and thesis sentences, and task response (the degree to which the writing met the question requirements). Micro-level changes included repairs to tense, conjunctions, prepositions, word choice or usage, sentence syntax, and other elements at the word, phrase, or sentence level. Micro or macro feedback was not directly related to response length.

Hi YunXi, I agree with Frank. you already deviated from the topic. “What should education consist of to fulfil both these functions?” You need to include what should we do on content of our education today e.g subject at school, syllabus, What is the basic subject should student learned for better personal...Just an opinion...:) [Post 2169, extract]

I think the introduction should be shorten. The background introduction should be related to the topic, so I think the first two sentences could be canceled. Besides, the last sentence should be the topic sentence telling readers what you are going to talk about. One possible introduction could be... [Post 2040, extract]

Most feedback did not use formal language. In fact, there was often a marked difference between the accuracy and formality of the language used in essays and that used in feedback:

Hey, Martin, your sentences is way tooooooooooooooooooo long, and the style of sentences is samiliar. You made several grammer mistakes due to the long sentences. ...[*Analysis*]... I guess your priority is cut down your sentences, under 15 [words] per sentence would be better. Then, fix, rewrite and paste it here. I guess Enda and some decent authors would come here to help you. Best regards. [Post 2024]

But there r also something that im not sure r they can be improved a little more. 1. Is this an essay for IELTS? coz 402 words seems too much for IELTS task2. 2. Paragraph2 can have a better topic sentence ... [Post 1260, extract]

hmmm....a bit wordy? Hmmmm. [Post 1319, extract]

Many members were clearly aware of the different uses of language that the discussion provided. Several commented on my use of language:

Just want to say please use more idioms and phrases in your comments as we benefit greatly from them in spoken language or speaking module. [Post 2256]

4.4.3 Responding to Feedback

Recipients responded to feedback in various ways. Some never responded at all, some responded once after several instances, and some responded immediately, with responses ranging from token comments to detailed comments or rewrites. These are extracts from longer responses:

thanks for your essay, Vickyqiu310, and your reply, Mr Writefix. it help me walk out the confusion. [Post 2010, extract]

i would like to read your comments and instructions, which are valuable for me. (i don't want to leave you a bad impression like a people who refuse correct his/her mistakes) [Post 1779, extract]

In contrast, these are complete responses:

It is excellent nice use of mature words [Post 248]

Hi LanQuy, A wonderful essay, let's see more. Alina [Post 186]

In only one out of 1,457 posts did a member explicitly reject peer input:

here, I would like to stick to the way i write. let's wait for other comments :P [Post 1093]

Other members may have accepted or ignored suggestions, but they rarely drew attention to disagreement, other than to request clarification.

A considerable number of posts giving feedback received no response from the original poster. These included almost a quarter (22%) of all posts in the main forum, mainly of the type **AX** or **AB** (where **A** and **B** are members and **X** a moderator). A small handful of members were responsible for most of these no-response threads, with Alina, Summer25, Hilda84, Nico and JacquiL alone starting 30 such threads.

Members occasionally wrote rewrites of all or part of their essays and those of peers, but most attempts at incorporating feedback appeared in subsequent essays rather than in rewrites. There were in total only about 40 complete or partial rewrites, such as one with this comment:

I've made intensive modifications, especially in para2. the num. of total words is 301 now. i feel i am lack of capability to make a sentence shorter without distorting my ideal. in china, my teacher said some appropriate long sentence can be accepted by markers as long as its idea is clear and logical without

grammar mistakes. but my teacher still do not encourage too many long sentences (that is the same method with you and administrator of this web). so, i will try my best towards that.... [Post 1506]

4.4.4 Thanks and Short Responses to Feedback

Very short responses to feedback accounted for 115 messages, or just under 8% of all messages.

Although the term ‘token feedback’ is easily understood, it can indicate unfounded assumptions of the proficiency and perceptions of the giver and recipient, the criteria used to evaluate the writing, and the quality of the work being evaluated. Short feedback may in fact satisfy both parties:

Thanks so much DanZhu for ur useful comments. Bye. [Post 2159]

Hi, HectorMc, Rangeetha, Thank you for your time. And thank you for commenting my essay. Very useful advice. I will draw on your suggestion. Wish we all can make progress on the writing. [Post 500]

However, some short responses highlighted specific areas, providing evidence of learning or new strategies:

Yes. You’re both right. I need more examples to explain my idea. Thanks. [Post 598]

Thank you HectorMc. I will work on my sentence formation and try to keep it short. please review my other essays so that I know my progress. :) [Post 2217]

Rather than write a long response, some members rewrote their essay:

Hi AliceXi thanks for your correction! you know what. It’s really helpful, I think I should consider my essay after I finish it, because it may seem weird sometimes. By the way, your rewrite ones is exquisite that is one I try to make it! and here is my rewrite:.... [Post 787]

A very common response in over 20% of posts was a “will” clause, such as “Hi, Lester. Thanks for giving me comments. I will rewrite and pay attention to these mistakes” [Post 1948]. The writer of Post 2020 below never posted again, whereas other members who used “will” clauses later posted or gave feedback.

After finishing my IELTS test, I'll try to add some comments on other essays. This is also a way to communicate with other writers. I have made up my mind to improve my writing skills in English no matter what result of my IELTS test is. I believe this forum is where I make my dream come true. [Post 2020]

Responses of this type often finished with requests for more comments:

Hi. Thanks for your comment. Its nice that you have pointed my mistakes.. I will make sure I will correct all those... Dont hesitate to comment my other essays too. [Post 307]

Other members and the moderator were almost always thanked, with the moderator being thanked slightly more often. The word 'thanks' or 'thank you' was used by members in 51% of all posts with comments. Without specific details, estimating the meaning of expressions of gratitude was problematic: a coding subcategory of "effusive thanks" included the following:

thanxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx so much for your advise. You know i always use these phrase, but know i will not use them ever ever. [Post 476]

thank you for your brilliant, fabulous, and comprehensive analysis and advice. [Post 717]

i am kinda speechless to express how grateful am Ilol..... I rewrite the whole essay and please continue to criticize my essay. [Post 1341]

4.4.5 Change, Knowledge Creation, and Learning

Four main changes in participation were noticeable in the forum:

- changes in participation e.g., from requesting feedback to giving it;
- real and perceived improvements in essay writing along several criteria;
- changes in feedback given, from short responses to much more sophisticated responses combining a variety of tools and descriptors; and
- overall increases in the amount of feedback given.

Changes in Participation

The amount of feedback given, received, and responded to on the forum increased markedly over time. In the forum's first months, most activity consisted of members

submitting essays and the moderator replying. However, after six weeks, the first peer feedback appeared:

Hi Alina, and Hi Enda, Would you mind if I add my comments about this essay? Firstly: Can you write it in... [Post 224]

The author had responded to my feedback on several occasions, but this, her twenty-second post, was the first peer feedback. In the forum's later months many other members also displayed similar changes in feedback roles, but more quickly.

As with Lester (see 4.2.5), many members' first posts were requests for feedback, followed by responses to feedback, with a gradual move over the next few days or weeks to giving feedback.

On average, members who gave feedback did so 5 days after an initial post seeking feedback, but almost half of members (47%) waited ten days before giving their first feedback. Lily gave feedback 12 days after a first post and then proceeded to give feedback in 10 of 23 posts over 28 days, while TuanND gave feedback for the first time almost two months after his initial post.

Not all members followed this trajectory: members such as Harris and Semper gave feedback as their first post, and almost 29% of members who gave feedback did so within a day or so of joining. It appears that a small number joined with the intention of giving feedback, while a much larger number gave feedback only after some time on the forum.

Change: Perceived Improvement

Members commented on improved scores and perceived learning in their own writing and that of others:

Here are the results I received this morning. Listening: 7.5 Reading: 7.0 Writing: 7.0 Speaking: 6.0 (Overall: 7.0 Thanks a lot for your help. My writing has been improved by 0.5 band since the last time. However, I still need to take another test next week due to low band score in speaking. [Post 1299]

Extracts from posts and interview comments indicate perceptions of change:

Thank you for your continuous encouragement. Me too, I feel my writing becomes mature more than before. It means that my efforts start to give their fruits. [Post 234]

Getting faster but still takes me more than 40 minutes. [Post 351]

Thank you for your feedback. I think in some languages some errors appear more. For example, I do myself never care about ARTICLE because in my own language omitting articles does not alter the meaning a lot. I think considering article should become a habit in writing. [Post 466]

Change: Type of Feedback Given

Over time, some members began to combine multiple tools and criteria when giving and requesting feedback. These included official IELTS banding criteria, and links to readability and word count tools, pages elsewhere on Writefix, and external sources. Some members began to use terms such as ‘coherent,’ ‘generic,’ or ‘lexical resource’ from the IELTS descriptors, or began to echo advice I gave:

I think as Mr.Enda says avoid from generalizations [Post 832]

our dearest admin suggests that DO NOT use “clichés.” “It is certainly true” is one of them. [Post 1342]

Members frequently asked for IELTS bands. For contractual and other reasons, I did not assign bands to essays, but directed members to banding criteria on the IELTS website. Over time, some members began to use these complex descriptors to assess their own or peers’ writing.

Very good essay. I think it easily gets Band 7+ (If Im wrong Mr. writefix please helps me). However, I see some old-fashioned words like simpleton and etc that I do not know higher the score or not. You also used a variety of grammars... [Post 485]

Several members recognized patterns in peers’ writing as originating from textbooks used in China:

There are also plenty of tired, overdue and meaningless phrases in your essay... Yep, admittedly, some books in China is good, like the book of Pat. BUT it is overused. I found that so many people use the same style of words in their essays. Just imagine what the examiner would think when they evaluate your work. I had the same problems with you, and I think we should get rid of that book... [Post 2043, extract]

A small number of members recommended commercial textbooks, sometimes critically:

Thank you, DanZhu! Your comments have pointed out two drawbacks in my essay: one is overuse of overdue and meaningless phrases, and the other is lack of concrete content. Actually, the book Writing Academic English (Longman) tells us that in order to achieve coherence in a paragraph, using transition signals to link ideas is one of four ways. The problem is how to avoid overusing them... [Post 2045]

In response to comments I made regarding over-reliance on memorized phrases, HectorMc cited relevant extracts from a detailed IELTS research article which argued for a balanced approach to memorization. Hamad also used materials from the official IELTS website to support feedback:

Hi Rachel, This is a good question. Definitely, you can use “I” and “we” when you are asked to give your opinion. I see many IELTS teachers make a mistake when advise student to do not be a subjective in their essays... To prove that, you can simply take a look at Cambridge’s essays [on their website]. [Post 2248]

Colin92 [Post 1290] combined the term ‘risk-taking’ from the IELTS banding criteria with an online readability tool:

Firstly, i would say that Hilda84 and i are what you referred to as “risk-takers” who adventure to adopt some complex words but both of us are not 100% sure of their correct usage/choice. i reckon this is one good point to share with everyone. Use the words you feel comfortable and sure of in the exam, well, i also suggest that we can “take the risk “ for practice like what we are doing here and accept the difference voices then correct them. Secondly, Hilda84 and i have the common mistakes like LONG sentences and essay with average words per sentence 20.2. [Post 1290]

Over time, some members began to establish minimum standards for other members’ contributions:

Hello AnnHuang, I tried to read your essay and found out some problem along with it. Have you study any of other model essays before you did yours? Are you familiar with the rules? I don’t think you meet the test request. Maybe you should review more details of the requirement from the official [IELTS] website first. [Post 1417]

Very occasionally, members used hyperlinks to their own previous posts or other members' profiles in the forum, and even less often to other essays on related topics.

Responses to feedback also indicate a move from simple thanks to more detailed analysis of feedback:

Oh, I get what you're saying.. but I face this problem in essay writing all too often- the lack of ideas! I wrote this one when my nerves were almost burned so it's even emptier than usual (I realized that after reading your feedback and rereading the essay a few times). Any suggestions on how to develop a lot of ideas quickly? I'll make sure to rewrite that using your suggestions! :) [Post 1694]

Changes in the type of feedback requested also indicated an awareness of self-assessment and self-regulation. Requests for guidance on aspects such as coherence or layout suggested that members were taking a more active role in the negotiation and developing an awareness of audience. Some members also described strategies used in writing:

To be honest, i find this topic not easy to get it started, especially racking my brains to "glean" the arguments..lol guess i really need to spend some time on analyzing different topics and making a list of supporting arguments.....sigh. [Post 1387]

Change and learning often involved reconciling old and new information:

I had some IELTS writing classes before, the teacher told me to use long sentences as much as I can. When I did my last two IELTS writing test, I followed his rule, and got 5 and 5.5. I was surprised I only got such bad results because I think I am better than this. Now maybe I find the reason. I did a test last week, changed my writing style. Now I am more focusing on how to build nice logic for my essay... I will let you know the result when it comes. :) cheers. [Post 1415]

No guidelines were given on presenting feedback. A variety of styles of commenting, formatting, bullets, and highlighting were used, sometimes leading to confusion as later members quoted earlier posts. Some members used formats similar to mine in terms of color, bolding, and grouping of issues (e.g. organization, word choice, etc.). Several candidates in interviews called for a set of guidelines or standard formats.

Not all members seemed be aware of Microsoft Word tools in the L2, but the bulk of essays had been spell-checked, either manually or using readability tools. Several members advised others to spell-check before uploading.

Change: Increase in Peer Feedback Activity

From March 2012 onwards (four months after the forum started), the number of members giving feedback rose sharply. Figure 16 shows the change from the moderator (X) being the first to comment on posts (AX) to other members being first (AB).

Threads in which the moderator (X) was second (AX, AXA, AXB, etc.) were very common in the first few months. As more members joined and began giving peer feedback, however, threads with patterns such as AB, ABA, or ABACA became much more common.

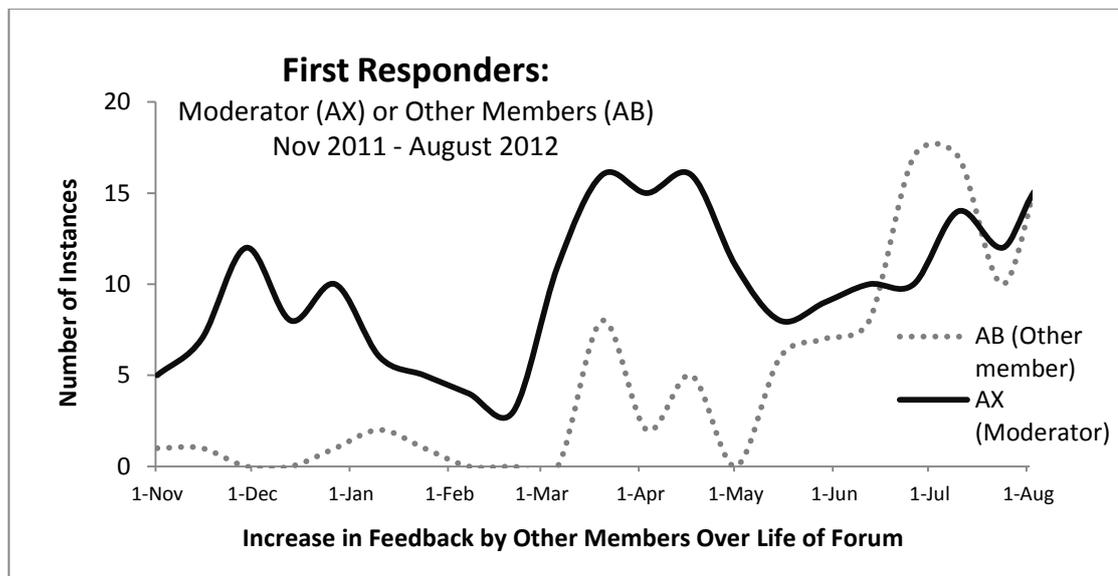


Figure 16: Increase in Feedback by Members

Summary: Feedback, Learning Evidence and Change

Feedback was a core activity, and a significant proportion of members provided or responded to useful and generally accurate feedback, predominantly at the macro-level, displaying an accurate understanding of IELTS academic writing. Over time, many members moved from requesting to giving feedback.

Without training or explicit guidelines, members provided helpful and relevant comments, with some combining increasingly sophisticated criteria and resources to

analyze the work of others, or posting rewrites of all or part of their essays or those of others.

The 59% of members who did not provide detailed feedback nonetheless demonstrated an interest in receiving feedback, with many thanking givers, promising reciprocal comments, or apologizing for a perceived inability to comment or engage in peer editing due to low levels of proficiency or time pressure.

4.5 Perceptions

This section examines members' comments regarding the IELTS exam, learner identity, peer editing, self-efficacy and proficiency, and community.

Outwardly at least, members did not express concerns over the role of English and the IELTS exam held by critical language theorists. No candidates expressed anxiety over potential weaknesses in English in future academic or professional environments. Several students suggested that English was necessary for 'modern life' and that their forum participation was not limited to just improving test scores. Links between globalization and English were frequent:

English is the second language of us. And English is very useful... In China, I use English every day with the foreigners. [DanZhu]

If one cannot use English properly, he will face major hurdles. [Post 766]

Some members distinguished between exam requirements and existing English use:

IELTS is different from someone that can speak English fluently or very well. It's different. IELTS is an exam and you need to have a variety of tips about IELTS. [HectorMc]

If only IELTS was about English. I dont want to be a journalist or anything like that really. [Hilda84]

While no negative opinions towards English were expressed publicly, there appeared to be little intrinsic motivation towards writing or English in general and instead a pragmatic, or at least a silent, acceptance of its necessity. No members were planning further studies in English or writing, with almost all having other majors. However, several members noted a change in attitude towards their L1, with some advising others to "forget their mother tongue" during test preparation.

4.5.1 Perceptions: Frustration and Anxiety

A very noticeable theme was the pressure and anxiety caused by forthcoming IELTS tests, with comments such as “so nervous,” “scares me to death,” “I find myself quiet depressed,” “nervous for the speaking part....terrible experience last time” or “I REALLY WANT TO GET THIS OVER (IELTS) NOW.”

...I urgently need IELTS score for my university entrance. My IELTS exam date is 26.May. I need to get at least 5.5 for the university entrance. I think I cannot get this score only with two-month preparation. What should I study and how should I study? Could anyone give me a piece of advice? With my heart-felt thank, Moza. [Post 902]

Candidates used terms such as “fight,” “struggle,” or “frustration,” and few expressed confidence in their ability to succeed in writing:

I feel that I probably never could achieve band 6.I am looking forward to get band 7 before the latest examination, but only 5.5. Of corsue, my essay cannot get 6 in that exam, loads of repetition and the exetremely obnoxious long sentences. I feel upset and already lose heart to write essay now. [Post 1966]

Well, I had taken the exam on 28 of July and I need at least seven in each section. Infact this is my fifth times. hmm.... Mine story is also the similar kind of thousands of others who are struggling with the ielts essay!!!! [Post 2095]

Many members cited work or study pressure as a reason for not giving feedback:

good luck my friend Im going to have my test soon so I cannot help you to correct! However, I will help you when I finish it !!! [Post 1074]

In addition to that, I'm on exam season now :(I even dont have free time to write an essay carefully (Poor me!:() Hope that in Tet holiday when I will take day off and have much free time, I can help others. [Post 186]

4.5.2 Perceptions: L2 Proficiency

Another common theme was perceived weakness in English, either compared to forum members or to the band required by the test.

Almost no members portrayed themselves as expert or even good users, despite some already having scores matching those descriptions. Feedback was often prefaced with

remarks such as “I am not an English speaker” or “I am not an examiner” and many members stated low levels of L2 proficiency when declining to give feedback.

Members could, of course, choose not to comment on their level, with Hilda84, a prolific poster with a very high overall band of 8.5, not using such qualifying comments.

Members often placed themselves at a lower level in relation to other members’ English proficiency (at least publicly: interviews provided a more nuanced picture):

Congratulations Anisha, I’m so jealous about your score. I found that in this forum everybody have a high score except me. What a tragedy. Anyway, I need hardworking. [Post 2125]

...This essay is way better than mine, and my work is 5.5, so I guess u can achieve a high score. In my opinion, its better than 5.5, maybe the examiner is strict. I’m afraid so. I hope Enda could come here to evaluate ur essay. [Post 2195]

Hope you can get a good grade in your exam~~BTW, I have a feeling that your English is very well, at least better than me. Haha. [Post 2058]

Members frequently described moderator input as being ‘better’ or more accurate. Feedback was often qualified with remarks asking for support from the moderator or more proficient members:

dear Jacquil I found some points on your essay. may be I am wrong. But I hope Mr. Writfix correct me whether My points are wrong or not. [...*Analysis*...] I write this essay in my own way and will put in the next point. I would be happy if you or Mr writefix correct it. best wishes. [Post 628]

Hi Alice Thank you for your essay. I know it is really challenging to write an essay. The situation get worst if we want to write it, in foreign language... Therefore I ask Admin to read this comments and correct them if there is an error. *Introduction: you wrote*... [Post 1444]

Clearly, there was a strong awareness of a formal ‘expert’ presence and a range of proficiency among peers.

Sometimes members described difficulties with writing or with a particular topic, rather than IELTS in general:

I know I wrote a bad essay...it is because I have no idea in this topic. anyone can tell me the good ways to describe this topic... Thanks. [Post 621]

Words won't come out easily. I need to think although I know a broad range of vocabularies but still I think and think like an idiot. [Post 1949]

There are many problems in my essay but I dont know how to correct it. Please help me with this 'cause I need an 8. Please help me on coherence and cohesion, is it affected by writing style of other culture or lack of sound reasoning Does it sounds smooth and are sentences linked to each other? [Post 1930]

Opinion among members varied on their ability in writing in their own language, with some citing weakness in L1 ("In Lao language, I think I'm so poor"), some describing weakness in both L1 and L2 ("No, I'm not good in writing, both Chinese and English") and others more comfortable with both ("I write a lot, in Vietnamese, and I am very keen on writing"). One Chinese member described a user identity in L2:

I don't write in my first language for a long time, because I work in a company that uses email in English. [ChariseZ]

Forum members had different opinions on the relationship between writing in their L1 and in English, with some not noticing any differences and others identifying particular exam requirements:

I think the IELTS exam is different - we have to respond to the question. [ChariseZ]

I think if your writing is good, for example if you have clear organization and if you have some ideas that will reflect in your English writing. [AliceXi]

There is a big difference between the two... In Vietnam we are write everything as flowery as possible... They think that who can write more flowery is a better person. [Lina]

I find it is totally different between Chinese and English writing, and I have to abandon the way of Chinese. Because the words and the structure is totally different. [DanZhu]

4.5.3 Perceptions: Peer Editing

Very many comments mentioned a perceived inability to peer-edit other members' essays, or a reluctance to take on the task.

I'm afraid my English is not so good, to comment on other topics. [Post 1028]

I'm not an examiner so it's really difficult to mark your essay. [Post 1483]

Sometimes I want to give my own opinions to the essays written by others but I'm always afraid that my comments may not be correct. [Post 1465]

A dialogue between DariushV and Rosita2001 summarized this common perception:

I would be really happy if I could make some comments on the other people writings. But as you can see from my writings, It is full of mistakes. Therefore I think I am not quified to do this. I afraid maybe make some wrong comments. Anyway I will try this but please give me some times to improve my writings first and after that I will do this for sure. Because I owe this website. Thanks. [Post 1246]

Rosita2001, a key advocate for peer editing, replied:

Hi DariushV, in my opinion, giving comments on others' writing is a good way to improve your writing skills. so feel free to do give your ideas for the essays, like me. I think you are qualified enough to do that. just believe in yourself. Sharing your opinions is to create more interesting forum for learning writing. best wishes. [Post 1262]

Peer Editing: A Positive View

Despite concerns over proficiency, many members expressed a positive view of peer editing, either given or requested. Reasons given included better final essays, an opportunity to practice particular skills in writing, improved overall English, and personal development.

I know good essays are made by correcting... [Post 807]

I believe that correcting mistakes from each other is one way of learning so no worries about that. [Post 955]

I really want to help others to improve their English skills. I just want to, to want all my companions to improve their skills and my English is not that

good but I want to help others to improve. Yeah, we want to have the mutual benefits. [DanZhu]

Giving comments on others' writing is a good way to improve your writing skills. so feel free to do give your ideas for the essays. [Post 1262]

Maybe sometimes you want to post your essays to show your abilities, how strong you are in writing, or grammar. [HectorMc]

However, not all members gave feedback, with some preferring only to receive it.

For me, it is my priority for my essay to be checked. I will say. When I write an essay I know my mistakes, I am more careful when read my checked essay and say "Ah here, it is wrong." ... When I read others, very difficult for me to find out what was mistake. why is incorrect, how to say it, so I don't feel that - I should check them. [Natalia]

Although members sought feedback, it could frequently be disappointing:

But sometimes I can be down because... when you see there are a lot of errors in your essays, you feel very down and upset. [AliceXi]

I practice my essay everyday, that's why, I come here to check whether my work is better than it used to be. Each time I make many mistakes in my essay, and I never achieve praise from [the moderator]. I realize that I have a huge disparity to achieve my goal. I need keep training. I lose my confident. But I appreciate the comment from [the moderator], if I don't come here [...] I would never improve myself. [Post 2135]

Others were more sanguine about receiving feedback:

I wanna say about the criticism and compliment in my mind. I guess one criticism is much more useful than thousands of compliment. [Post 2234]

Maybe some advices that were not - that I cannot understand. But it didn't make me angry. [WatNhat]

In interviews, a slightly different picture emerged of members' perceptions regarding responses to feedback. Four interviewees expressed disappointment at not receiving responses to feedback, or about the behavior of others:

But I actually came across one person, who kind of offended me a little bit. He was kind of like more than expectation, very expecting people's comments,

desperate for people's comments to him, so I was... the public forum where people can share their opinions, so it's other people's rating or choice to comment on our essay. [Colin92]

In fact, I posted some essays; I didn't receive many comments from other member. In the forum, I see that new members just join to post their essays and receive comments from the admin. [Rosita2001]

However, some participants seemed to view lurking as a practical member choice:

I think the reason is you know because some people are very busy and they try their best to prepare for the exam and they think that giving comments might not really be helpful to them. [AliceXi]

Short responses to feedback were attributed in some interviews to time pressure on members. Some members suggested that writing feedback benefitted the giver with no expectation of a detailed response from feedback.

First, there's no doubt that the essay writer will draw the benefit, but I think if we learn how to comment the others, then we also learn a lot, from the practice. Because when we read the other's essay, we also need to think about the topic, how I write the essay, and also learn a lot from others. [ChariseZ].

However, some members who gave extensive feedback expressed disappointment at receiving short or no responses:

People just posted their essays and waited for Mr Writefix to comment; many didn't comments on other and cared about other's comments on their writing. Even though some people gave comments, but didn't have discussions between writer and commenter about the essay. [Rosita2001]

maybe the people who receive the comment think the comments are not that important. [AliceXi]

Perceptions of Peer Proficiency

In interviews, members were more ambivalent than in public about peer proficiency, requiring peers to "be at the same level or higher" (Rosita2001) or at a "much higher level" (AliceXi). Almost no members suggested that less proficient members could generate useful feedback.

Probably they will look at it briefly, but not really take very seriously. I think, because you are sort of subconsciously thinking “I’m better than you...” they will take some of the advice if it is really helpful, for example, the argument. [Colin92]

A detailed response from Colin92 described the difficulty of accepting feedback from less-proficient peers:

People with a different level of English, you know, a different proficiency of English level, probably have some trouble assisting each other. For example, if I am a person with IELTS level for example Band 7.5, if I post an essay on the forum, it’s really hard for them to swallow, maybe, you know, digest the advice from a person with a level like Band 5. ...they probably think ‘you are only a person with level 5’ and probably think it [the advice] is not right, so they will like to listen to a, the authority, for example people like you, you know, the native speaker. [Colin92]

Members suggested that the forum format might not benefit all candidates and that particular styles or greater contribution should be required:

I guess there are different learning styles. Not sure if [the forum] helps everybody but quick feedback is good generally. [Hilda84]

And in my opinion, the forum should be for very motivated people, because they are members who really pay attention to writing. [Rosita2001]

Change in Perceptions of Peer Editing

Although most members initially posted to receive feedback, a significant number described changed perceptions of giving feedback and their move towards giving feedback.

I have to admit that at first I don’t want to comment others’ essays, out of many reasons. Like I am busy, lazy, it takes time and I am afraid that I would have errors when editing. But now I think to help people is ... and I shouldn’t be so selfish. I think some people might have the same reasons as I did at the beginning. Other students might out of the reason of privacy. [Post 925]

by this way, my writing skills are improving, so do others. giving comments also helps to learn new words, expression, especially ideas to write in the same topic. [Post 1125]

When I was rating other people's essays, I can find, if I can detect, you know, the mistakes they have made, which is basically self-revision of my study so I can also get something out of it. [Colin92]

Others stated that a balance between giving and receiving feedback was necessary or that a combination of roles gave practice with a range of skills:

But you know if you do it a lot, if you do just write comments on other's essays without any writing essays, you lose some benefits in this case. [HectorMc]

Summary of Chapter 4

Members' registration profiles and information suggested a close match with previous studies on IELTS candidates as a diverse group of generally older postgraduates preparing alone for the test, with many balancing study with work or family responsibilities.

Hundreds of thousands of visitors and over 1,300 registered members engaged in lurking, one of the most significant activities on the site. Active members lurked before joining, before posting their initial posts, when choosing what to comment on, and before leaving the forum.

The study found a disproportionately large contribution from a small group of generally longer-term members who used more names and greetings, started proportionately fewer threads, responded to others more, and gave and applied feedback more. In contrast, a large number posted just once or a few times, had much shorter membership, used names less, and sought rather than gave feedback.

Despite concerns over proficiency and time pressure, many active members changed their participation styles from seeking feedback to giving it. More feedback was provided at a macro level than at a micro level. Member feedback increased sharply over the life of the forum, and the type of feedback given became increasingly complex, combining multiple resources and tools.

The anxiety and pressure caused by the exam was tangible. Members expressed frustration and described weaknesses in proficiency generally or in writing. A sense of community appeared to exist, sharing encouragement, politeness, and frustration, and an extensive use of terms such as "we" and "us," despite a lack of purely social posts.

Because of an early pattern initiated by the moderator, threads, almost all started by members, were centered around essays rather than ideas or particular issues,

affecting the content, task-orientation, and depth of threads. Threads had a short life span, with many completed in a day and the great majority in less than a week. Over 40% of threads involved three or more unique contributors, and increased interactivity was also displayed over time by the increasing depth and changes in the patterns of interactions.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter presents an overview of the main findings by revisiting the research questions. It then outlines a conceptual framework for analysis of some of the findings in the study. Next, it focuses on two of the main interactions, lurking and feedback; examines the sense of community in order to propose a key role for socialization; looks at participant perceptions; and finally proposes an application of a knowledge-creation framework along with a modification for online settings.

For convenience, the research questions from Chapter 1 are repeated below.

Overarching Research Question

To what extent do feedback and interactions in an asynchronous online forum support informal peer-to-peer learning of English as a second language?

Research Question 1

1. What types of interactions occur in an online discussion forum on essay writing for language learners?

The most common forum interaction was lurking, with hundreds of thousands of viewers visiting and revisiting; over 1,350 members registering, but only 167 posting; over a quarter of new threads receiving no response; and even the most prolific members engaging in and describing lurking at specific points in their membership.

Feedback was the second most common forum interaction, with over 40% of members giving feedback or responding to it in detail. However, this figure underestimates the amount of feedback which took place, and represents a view of feedback as a product rather than as a process. Even without a visible product or comment, the thousands of visitors, the many members who registered but never posted, the members with solitary posts, and the significant proportion of members who consistently preferred to seek rather than give feedback were united in seeking feedback and, at least to some degree, in a view of peer feedback as part of a socially-constructed process of writing. The effort involved in writing an essay and posting it, regardless of whether it received a response or not, indicated a desire for feedback. A decision not to respond to feedback may have been based on perceptions of the roles

of teachers and students, previous classroom experiences, experiences of online community, or the immediate needs of the original poster.

While most members' participation in the first few months was limited to just seeking feedback, over time a much greater variety of overlapping roles emerged, including giving simple or detailed feedback, asking for specific feedback, helping others, offering multiple versions of a text, rewriting peer work, welcoming new members, asking for speaking partners, encouraging, empathizing, reporting results, guiding new members, suggesting improvements, and stating community norms.

Discussion in the forum was almost completely task-oriented, and there were no purely social members. Threads were generally short in time and in depth and were almost all centered around essays rather than on specific L2 or rhetorical issues or debate about the purpose of the exam.

Research Question 2

2. What types of feedback on essay writing indicate learning and knowledge-sharing among forum members?

In over 1,400 posts, members posted over 550 full essays seeking feedback, with or without requests for feedback on specific issues. Many members, particularly those with longer membership, moved from seeking feedback to providing it to peers and to responding in increased detail. Feedback given ranged from short general reviews or vague praise to detailed feedback, generally at the macro-level, combining information from multiple sources including IELTS descriptors, textbooks, suggestions from earlier forum posts, and other websites, often presented in groups of related issues. While there were few hyperlinks between posts, many posts quoted or applied information from earlier posts or threads, combining sources of information in new ways and applying it in new writing either in the same thread or more often in subsequent writing. Feedback given was generally more accurate at the macro level than at the micro level, and norms evolved of having simple grammar or spelling errors removed before posting.

Some members reported improved IELTS scores during membership, but other changes described by members included shorter times needed for writing essays, greater ease of structuring essays and developing ideas, and specific instances of improvement in their own writing and that of peers, as well as changes in their perceptions of peer feedback (see Research Question 3).

Feedback from peers prompted rewrites by some original posters, and some members rewrote all or part of other members' essays, indicating flexible, interchanging roles and an atmosphere of trust.

Research Question 3

3. What perceptions do users have of the feedback and interactions on the forum?

Despite inexperience in peer feedback, members described generally positive perceptions of feedback for both recipients and (over time) for the giver, and described a relief at having a “place” for their writing. Over time, many members changed from perceiving feedback as being too difficult or time-consuming to seeing its value and beginning to comment on peer essays. This change appeared to be associated with a spiral of increased engagement and visible participation which funneled back into perceptions of improvement and increased proficiency.

Unlike in public comments, members stated in interviews that they gave more credence to feedback from more able peers and expressed reservations about input from peers below their level. Some noted, however, that feedback initiated dialogues about standards, regardless of the giver's level, leading to greater self-assessment or self-regulation.

A strong sense of community was evident from greetings, tone, compliments, use of names, appeals for feedback, informality, empathy, and identification of group goals or challenges. Member interactions appeared to be group-oriented rather than dyadic, with a focus on task and on content rather than on specific intra-personal relationships.

5.1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 17 proposes a conceptual model for analysis of the interactions and knowledge-creation reported in Chapter 4. The following six sections (Sections 5.1.2 – 5.1.6) briefly describe each part of the model.

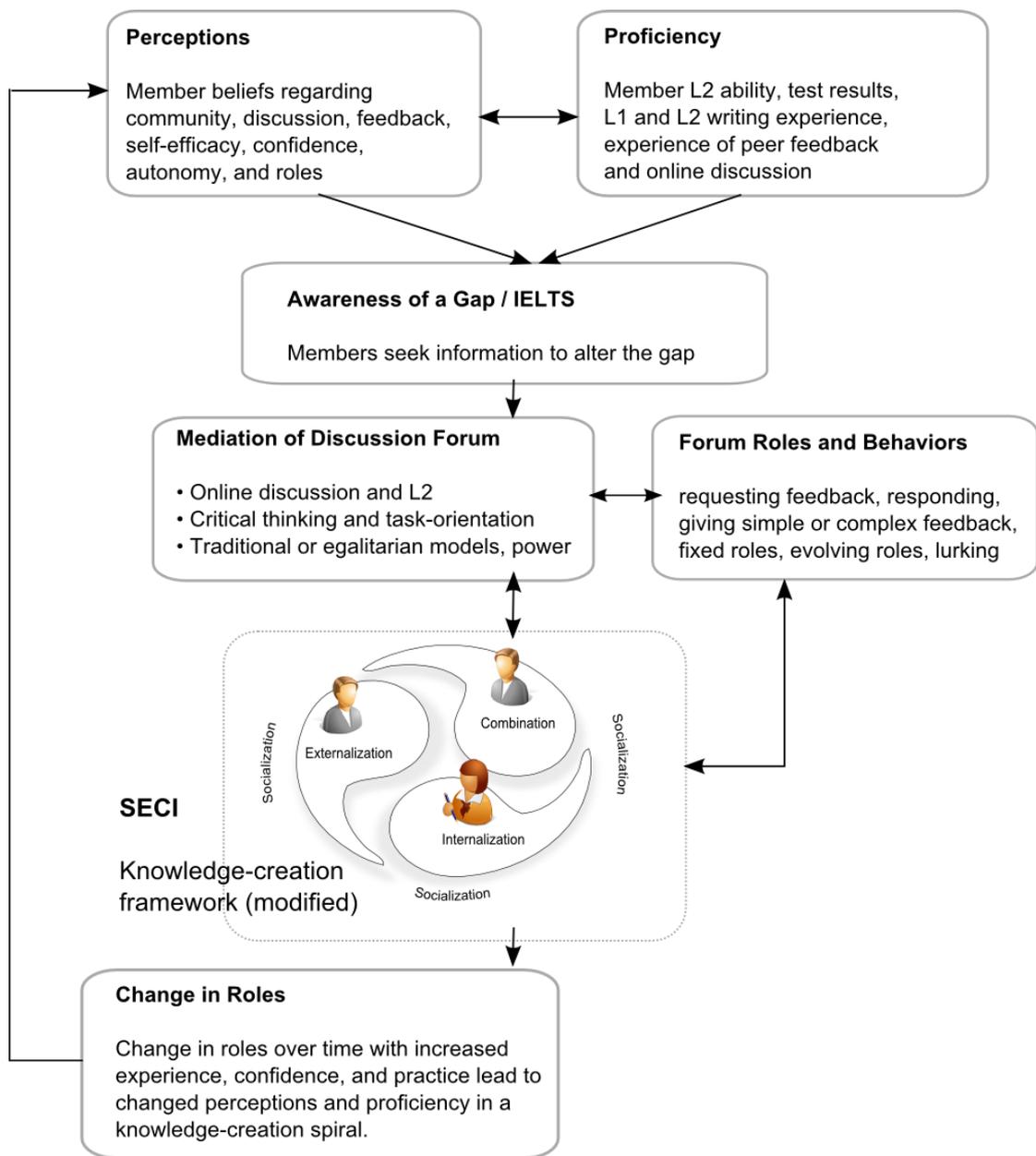


Figure 17: A Framework for Analyzing Feedback on Essay Writing in an Online Forum for Learners of English

In essence, the chief difference between the broader conceptual framework in Chapter 2 and the model presented here is the central position for socialization in a modified SECI framework. Socialization is proposed as being central to knowledge construction because of its importance for creating the environment for sharing and trust. As newcomers learn from observing peers and begin to seek feedback, they learn about functioning in the community as about learning about the domain. The epistemic activities of scaffolding and mentoring occur as people are socialized in the

learning community. Perceptions by members change over time, rather than remaining fixed, resulting in new roles and forms of participation and interaction. In the forum, such roles appeared to be dynamic and multipole rather than single or static, and the roles or stances adopted appeared to benefit the individual as much as his or her peers and community, with member reports of improved language ability and self-regulation.

5.1.1 Member Proficiency and Perceptions

The interactions on the forum necessarily began with the forum members and their interlinked proficiency and perceptions. While previous IELTS scores illustrated some members' proficiency, members often described English levels in relation to other members or IELTS band targets.

Whether by disposition or circumstance, members displayed features of autonomous learners, preparing alone for the test, seeking out resources that suited their learning needs, and setting goals that would see them enter new academic or professional communities, often involving major life changes. Frustration and worry were frequently expressed about the test, but members did not express concerns about subsequent English use.

Although few members had experience of peer feedback, most perceived it positively with some members moving from perceiving feedback as being too difficult or time-consuming to seeing its value and giving feedback. As members became conscious of what they were doing by explaining their decisions to peers, they learned new also strategies for their own writing (Lindemann, 1982).

Increased engagement and more-visible participation appeared to generate perceptions of increased proficiency, in line with literature which found increased commitment linked to more helping and community-related behaviors (Bateman et al., 2011; Li, Browne, & Wetherbe, 2006; Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

5.1.2 Awareness of a Gap and the Power of the Exam

Participation by members and visitors stemmed from a perception of a gap between their level and a desired level in the IELTS exam, a high-stakes gatekeeper test of entry into new communities.

The concept of a gap stems from Ramaprasad's definition of feedback (1983) as information about a gap which is used to alter the gap, a definition emphasizing

feedback as a process rather than as a product (Van De Ridder et al., 2008). Whether real or perceived, the nature of the gap varied greatly: visitors or members may have wanted social or affective support (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), general tips on English writing, essay ideas, or specific exam information, as well as help with essay writing. Members preparing alone may have felt a sense of community, however weak (Donato, 1994). Within this gap, other drivers for contributing may have included norms of reciprocity, a desire for recognition or publicity, dimensions of organizational citizenship such as altruism or conscientiousness (Organ, 1988), or antecedents of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Visitors, members who never posted, members who never responded to feedback, and active members all acted on information about the gap in particular ways. What united users was an acceptance of a socially-constructed setting for knowledge construction: although not all members engaged in visible feedback, the very act of visiting or posting was an act of articulation or externalization (Nonaka, 1991, 1994), indicating a desire for feedback through social interaction.

Despite members' frustrations over the exam and concerns by language theorists over the role of IELTS and English (McNamara & Shohamy, 2008; Pennycook, 2007; Shohamy et al., 1996), members did not explicitly question or discuss the exam's role.

5.1.3 Discussion Forum: Mediation

As in Kay's study (2006), learners provided feedback which resulted in improved performance. Despite limitations of online discussion such as the difficulty of synthesizing ideas from multiple threads or of establishing consensus (Kortemeyer, 2006), there was evidence of critical thinking in analysis and evaluation of peer writing and in the application of feedback. Synthesis, renamed as creation in Krathwohl's revision (2002) of Bloom's taxonomy, occurred in later writing or occasionally in rewrites in the same thread.

These critical thinking processes occurred despite the absence of sequences of trigger events (Garrison, Anderson, et al., 2010), guidelines for participation, scripted roles (Strijbos & de Laat, 2010; Strijbos & Weinberger, 2010), discussion of ideas in essays, or challenging topics for discussion (Dysthe, 2002).

The forum displayed some features perceived negatively in studies (Fahy et al., 2001; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Many new threads received no response, there were few links between threads, threads were generally shallow and completed quickly, and the

number of unique participants in threads was relatively low on average – all frequently-cited indicators of a lack of interactivity. Gunawardena et al. (1997) cautioned that models of analysis such as Henri's (1992) or that of Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) which link messages in threads of successive, specifically-joined responses focus on mechanical relationships rather than on a gestalt or total learning experience: interactivity alone may not indicate new knowledge.

Despite this, however, there was also evidence of loops of peer feedback, changes in writing strategy, and increasingly sophisticated analysis. Even posts without responses represented a desire for feedback, with their essays providing a valuable resource for the community and the individual.

As in previous studies (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2004; Zhang & Fulford, 1994), the number or frequency of interactions did not appear to be directly related to outcomes. However, longer membership and more posts (Akyol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011; Bateman et al., 2011) in a supportive environment (Tagg & Dickinson, 2008), along with combination were associated with change, along with internalization and reflection. Members with longer membership contributed more, scaffolded their peers more often, combined information from multiple sources, responded more often to peers, took on moderator roles of welcoming newcomers, expressed concern for the forum's future, and suggested improvements.

Not all members changed their participation style, but a sufficient number engaged in a range of activities to suggest an emerging ecology (Gleave et al., 2009) and sustainability.

Thread Structure and Engagement: Focus on the Essay

Having essays as the focus of threads influenced forum interactions, placing entire essays rather than issues such as grammar, vocabulary, organization, or learner concerns at the center of discussion, and reifying essays as products or artifacts (Wenger, 1999). Waldron (2012) similarly described Youtube videos in a music learning community as artifacts around which conversations were centered.

Threads based on essays and the use of models (Abbuhl, 2011; MacBeth, 2010) may have emphasized writing as a product rather than as a process. For some members, the forum may have represented a dialogic process of writing and feedback, but for thousands of visitors, the hundreds of essays and rewrites provided a useful resource of ideas and structures without requiring active participation.

The focus on essays in threads may also have encouraged members to start new threads rather than respond to existing topics. Hewitt (2005) found that forum users responded more to recent entries: new forum threads were frequently started by newcomers or members less likely to give feedback, with Fahy, Crawford, and Ally (2001) noting that participants who posted earlier made fewer postings overall.

Threads, Interactivity, and Critical Thinking

The length and structure of threads can influence discussion. Thomas (2002) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (2008) suggested that branching threads made it difficult to synthesize ideas. In the forum, however, because threads were relatively short, flat rather than branched, and generally based around one or more related essays, divergence was not common.

Although most forum threads were relatively short, Burnett, Dickey, Chudoba, and Kazmer (2003), suggested that longer threads did not necessarily result in knowledge creation. Having participants returning to the same threads indicated greater involvement or persistence (Fahy et al., 2001), and many longer forum threads had more unique contributors.

One frequently-cited advantage of online discussion is the ability to build on previous member contributions by linking or quoting (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). However, as in a Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) study, there were few links to previous forum posts. Finding earlier comments on issues or problems dispersed through hundreds of essay-based threads was difficult: essays were tagged by the topic of the essay rather than by language issues or other problems.

The significant negotiation and analysis within threads demonstrated a desire for improvement. Apart from clarification of simple errors, many decisions regarding writing are subjective, particularly in a horizon model rather than a goal model, which suggests that the skills necessary to be good at English are known, quantifiable and reducible to a systematic teaching program (Marshall, 2004). As such, feedback from peers represented dialogues about standards (Ertmer et al., 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), or viewpoints, possibly reducing or de-emphasizing the requirement for consensus (Andresen, 2009; Hong et al., 2003; Kortemeyer, 2006).

5.1.4 Roles and Behaviors

With open enrollment, high turnover, and few guidelines, the setting differed from many formal educational settings. Because of this difference, theory from

organizations was examined, including organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988), organizational commitment (Katz, 1964; Meyer & Allen, 1991), online citizenship (Blignaut & Nagel, 2009; Chiu et al., 2006; Fugelstad et al., 2012; Joe & Lin, 2008; Yong et al., 2011), and online community commitment (Bateman et al., 2011).

Fugelstad et al. (2012), Bateman, Grey, and Butler (2011), and others described roles based on forms of commitment, with continuance commitment, for example, proposed to result in more reading of posts. As with citizenship behavior, such role-based approaches might describe requesting feedback as an in-role activity and giving feedback as a supra-role activity. Indeed, in the first few months, there were very few roles for members other than requesting feedback, with many essays simply requesting feedback and the great bulk of that feedback coming from me, as moderator. In the absence of clearly scripted roles (Strijbos & de Laat, 2010) or guidelines, it may not have been clear what roles were required, leading to uncertainty (Tu & Corry, 2001), and members being funneled into or choosing particular roles and behaviors based on their experiences or as a result of limited forum structures (Gleave et al., 2009; Welser et al., 2007).

However, over time, forum roles became much more varied and overlapping, with members giving simple or detailed feedback, asking for specific feedback, helping others, offering multiple versions of a text, rewriting peer work, welcoming new members, asking for speaking partners, encouraging, empathizing, reporting results, guiding new members, suggesting improvements, and stating community norms. With multiple roles and interactions, it became difficult to distinguish between in-role, discretionary or basic behavior, or roles indicative of forms of commitment (Bateman et al., 2011; Meyer & Allen, 1991).

As proposed for traditional and online organizations in Chapter 2, the forum benefitted from citizenship behaviors such as courtesy, altruism, conscientiousness, civic virtue, and sportsmanship (Bateman & Organ, 1983). Among other dimensions and examples, evidence of civic virtue and cheerleading was found in comments about the forum's usefulness; sportsmanship in the infrequent complaints about site speed or formatting; and altruism in welcoming new members, reporting scores, and suggesting strategies. Courtesy was displayed throughout in tone, the use of names, and politeness in comments and responses, and conscientiousness in the time taken to give detailed feedback on essays.

The study found that members were multifaceted rather than one-dimensional in terms of role. Active members changed their participation, with many lurking on joining, seeking feedback, moving towards providing feedback, and finally lurking again on exiting the forum. Such changes in participation allowed members to work in different types of knowledge creation rather than from remaining in any one mode (Huang & Wang, 2002). As in a Kobayashi and Rinnert study (2001), members who gave excellent feedback were not necessarily good at implementing it. Members who expressed community-oriented sentiment were generally but not always frequent posters, and not all long-term members were frequent posters. Over time, behaviors overlapped and changed with members' changing perceptions, increased repertoire, and proficiency.

Strijbos and de Laat's (2010) continuum of roles from micro, through meso, to macro provided more flexibility than views of roles as being fixed. Meso-levels of behavior adopted by members included giving advice to others, encouraging others, describing weaknesses in their own L2, or welcoming new members. Macro-level participative stances were also evident, with some active members consistently seeking feedback or preferring to receive it.

Members who gave feedback or who engaged in community-oriented activity may have been viewed more favorably by other members and the moderator than those who only requested feedback. More active members encouraged others to join them in giving feedback, while some members who did not give feedback aspired to do so:

I think my writing is not good enough to also fix others' essays, though I would like to. [Post 179]

However, while giving feedback may have seemed more useful to the community than 'merely' seeking feedback, both activities were necessary and required each other.

The forum structure did not provide opportunities for members to become moderators, form groups, or have contributions recognized. The absence of chat or video forced members to post asynchronously, even if alternative forms of participation might have been more effective.

Roles may also have been delineated by previous experiences with online or face-to-face learning or by perceptions of proficiency and self-efficacy. A perception by members that peer editing was not their role, or that it was a teacher's role, may have limited participation to seeking rather than giving feedback. The lack of an explicit

requirement to give feedback may also have resulted in only risk-takers or more confident members attempting the activity.

5.1.5 Models of Knowledge Creation

An adaptation of Nonaka's (1994) SECI spiral of knowledge conversion (see Figure 18) is proposed as a framework for a dialogue of tacit and explicit knowledge in discussion and feedback. Forum visitors and members did not merely access data (Thomas, 2002) or dump information or opinions (Garrison et al., 2001): they observed the work of others, empathized, shared experiences and goals, and learned about forum practices through socialization; articulated their understandings of problems or weaknesses and sought feedback in externalization; analyzed writing using multiple criteria and recombined it into new forms; and, in internalization, reapplied new understandings at progressively higher levels.

Within the framework, it is proposed that explicit forms of feedback occurred most visibly in the externalization and combination modes of Nonaka's spiral, as members moved from simple descriptions to increasingly sophisticated use of multiple criteria. However, less visible and more tacit forms of participation also occurred in socialization and internalization.

5.1.6 Changes in Roles

While early forum roles were limited due to forum structures and member perceptions and experiences, changes occurred over time in both perceptions and proficiency as members engaged in a greater variety of interactions. Some members reported perceptions of improvement in writing or higher test scores. Others moved from seeking feedback to giving it, despite initial reluctance or stated perceptions of inadequate proficiency or experience. Such role changes concurred with Salmon's model of online learning (2003) which described changing needs of learners in online discussion over time. Such changes in perception and increased levels of participation in the forum fed back into new assessments of proficiency and self-efficacy, or metacognitive knowledge (Henri, 1992).

5.2 Lurking

Paralleling literature on user-generated content sites (Faraj et al., 2011; Peddibhotla & Subramani, 2007; Whittaker et al., 1998), the main forum activity was lurking, in various forms.

Lurking, or “social loafing” (Thompson & Ku, 2006, p. 373), is often seen in education as undesirable, both for individuals (e.g., Black, 2005a; Salmon, 2003), and the community (Rovai, 2000, 2002). However, in the forum, lurking (loafing, marginal participation, peripheral participation, “read-only participation” (Williams, 2004), or less-visible participation) or other low levels of participation appeared to represent not just a frequent form of participation but perhaps a necessary one, and one that almost all members engaged in, rather than a separate role.

From the activities of members in waiting before initial posts, in determining which posts to reply to or comment on, and in reducing participation before leaving the forum, it is clear that lurking was a common and deliberate choice of active members, as well of the tens of thousands of non-members. As Nonnecke and Preece (2001) noted, lurking is a strategic activity. Active members lurked selectively when choosing what to respond to:

When I was replying to an essay, I was not intentionally targeting a certain people, so I just came across the topics which intrigued me, and then I just write my comments based on the topic, so not really writing for someone.
[Colin92]

I pick the topic which impressed me [AliceXi]

Many members changed participation by engaging in less-visible behavior for days or weeks before leaving the forum. As members changed perceptions and proficiency, their use and need for the forum may have changed: Andergassen et al. (2009) noted that reasons for starting and for not continuing were not necessarily related.

Lurkers may have benefitted from feelings of social presence, with the literature noting feelings of community around blogging and other sites, even without contribution (Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2008; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010) or formed before fuller membership (Agarwal & Liu, 2008). Reading others’ IELTS experiences may have provided sufficient emotional support to make more active membership unnecessary.

The effect that watching others engage in giving feedback has on subsequent writing is difficult to determine. Observing interactions between members may allow lurkers to learn new strategies, make their own assessments, or attempt essays or rewrites outside the forum (Dennen, 2008; Guzdial & Carroll, 2002; McConnell, 2002). As DiPardo and Freeman (1988) pointed out, however, little is known about what is transferred from one writing task to another: direct causal links cannot be claimed,

and Black (2005b) similarly noted that reading essays may not translate into improved writing even for active participants.

Visitors seeking quick ideas for essays or assignments may not have benefitted fully from the many excellent member-contributed essays and rewrites. Such model or exemplar essays (Abbuhl, 2011) may require detailed explanation of their structure and limitations (MacBeth, 2010). While lurkers may have perceived reading others' essays as being useful, they may not have benefitted as fully as if they had written their own or responded to feedback.

A view of writing as a process would also seem to disadvantage lurkers. Many authors suggest that the process of writing or typing messages online can develop critical thinking skills (Lim et al., 2011; Mason, 1998; Rivard, 1994; Scardamalia et al., 1984; Thomas, 2002) with its sub-processes of planning, monitoring, drafting, and revising (Flower & Hayes, 1981). If forum lurkers did not act on reading by "thinking on paper" (Mason, 1998, p. 361) then visiting may have been less beneficial than fuller participation, and members themselves suggested that giving feedback was more valuable than lurking.

Despite these drawbacks of low-level participation, members interviewed did not seem overly concerned by the extent of lurking, and described engaging in it themselves. While some frustration was expressed over poor responses to comments, there appeared to be a norm of generalized reciprocity rather than an expectation of a dyadic, reciprocal response to feedback (Chen & Hung, 2010; Ekeh, 1974; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Wasko, Teigland, & Faraj, 2009; Williams & Anderson, 1991), perhaps reflecting a group identity and purpose rather than an individual one (Garrison, Anderson, et al., 2010).

Lurking allowed scalability in the forum: responding to posts or maintaining the forum would have been impossible if all users had sought or given feedback. In conventional classrooms, an evenly-matched number of givers and recipients might be desired, but work by Welsler et al. (2007) and Gleave et al. (2009) suggested that there may be dynamic or symbiotic relationships rather than fixed ratios of answer people to question people, among other online roles.

As increasingly open forms of formal and informal learning appear, greater cognizance may have to be taken of user choices of styles of engagement. While lurking may not provide as many benefits as more active participation, it may need to be recognized as a normal form of interaction or behavior at particular times for all

members, rather than as a static, marginal role for a separate group. It may also be useful to avoid Ferreday and Hodgson's "tyranny of participation" (2008, p. 640), in which approaches that appear emancipatory or that demand dialogue can be oppressive for learners.

5.3 Feedback

After lurking, feedback was the most visible form of participation, whether being requested, given, responded to, discussed, or implemented.

Despite the lack of experience described by Graner (1987), forum members began interacting with peers and gaining new perspectives on the writing process over time (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). Although many members claimed to be too weak in English or in writing to comment, and despite the absence of feedback training, over 40% of members gave feedback or responded to feedback by revising or in subsequent writing. This was despite almost no reported peer editing experience, with many members describing large classes and lectures in prior language learning. Many members moved from only seeking feedback to giving it, and from providing simpler forms of feedback or token feedback to more complex forms, involving IELTS writing criteria, readability tools, styles of formatting and layout, and external resources such as websites and textbooks.

Most forum members wrote at IELTS levels between Band 5 ('modest' users) and Band 8 ('very good' users). Within this range, even members at lower proficiencies (Band 5 or 5.5, as evidenced by previous IELTS scores) were able give useful feedback at both the micro and macro level. In the great majority of cases, as also found by Caulk (1994), feedback was surprisingly accurate, particularly at the macro level. Results also echoed positive findings from Dobao (2012) and Tang and Tithecott (1999) regarding feedback among learners even at similar proficiencies.

Not all feedback was accurate, but conversations began that were perhaps more useful than a teacher's or peer's 'expert' feedback:

When it comes to advice [from the] teacher, I think it's quite correct, but when it comes from us members, I quite suspecting the validity of the information. So I'm usually using Google to check it out. [Lina]

Such questioning supports the Liu and Carless (2006) definition of feedback as dialogues about performance and standards (Ertmer et al., 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Only one member suggested her primary focus was to receive feedback: for many others, giving feedback had made them more accurate assessors of their own writing (McConnell, 2002) and contributed to their own learning (Butler & Winne, 1995; Liu & Carless, 2006):

I have to admit that at first I don't want to comment others' essays, out of many reasons. Like I am busy, lazy, it takes time and I am afraid that I would have errors when editing. But now I think to help people is fun (after I saw your selfless, hard work), and I shouldn't be so selfish. I think some people might have the same reasons as I did at the beginning. Other students might out of the reason of privacy. [Post 925]

by this way, my writing skills are improving, so do others. giving comments also helps to learn new words, expression, especially ideas to write in the same topic. [Post 1125]

5.3.1 Feedback as a Process

So if 41% of members actively engaged in feedback, what about the majority, the remaining 59%?

The low interactivity in many threads appeared to contradict a view of feedback as a core forum activity. Over 14% of initial posts did not receive any response, and over 29% of posts consisted of unadorned essays, unaccompanied by greetings or requests for feedback. Additionally, 100 threads were either **AX** (a member post, followed by a moderator response) or **AB** types (a member post and a peer response), both lacking responses from the original poster. Such interactions certainly do not seem to indicate “a communication process” (Liu & Carless, 2006, p. 280) or Lundstrom and Baker’s “meaningful interaction with peers” (2009, p. 30).

However, a focus on the lack of response may reflect an interpretation of feedback as a product given by an expert, rather than as Ramaprasad’s looping process. While uploading a bare essay or a lack of response to feedback could be interpreted as poor etiquette or a failure in communication, the act of posting an essay demonstrated a desire for feedback, and the absence of any comment or request for guidance may reflect members’ educational experiences. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) point out,

many types of help-seeking behavior, such as posting an essay for feedback, can be regarded as forms of self-regulation.

In many conventional classrooms, it may be neither necessary nor expected to request feedback, with the teacher perceived as the one whose role it is to give feedback. Not requesting specific feedback (for example, on aspects of organization or use of vocabulary) may therefore indicate a simple transfer of posters' previous educational experiences and perceptions of the teacher's 'expert' or authority role. Directing a teacher may also be culturally inappropriate, since the teacher is "the one who knows" (Hu, 2002, p. 99; Sengupta, 1998; Tseng & Tsai, 2010). Learners, of course, may not know which areas of their writing need improvement, with some requests either vague or overlooking more serious issues than those raised in the request.

It is difficult to know why some members continued only to seek feedback. A lack of time and perceptions of a lack of L2 proficiency or experience were mentioned frequently in comments, but with only one interview with a member who did not give feedback, isolating underlying reasons was speculative. Non-givers of feedback may have found better resources elsewhere, or may not have felt the effort involved was valuable, as in Ge's study (2011) – Hattie and Timperley use the term "transaction cost" (2007, p. 94). Whatever the reason, it is important to realize that feedback as a process may have still been taking place, with hidden engagement from less-visible members. The absence of visible responses to feedback does not mean that feedback was not taking place.

5.3.2 Presentation of Feedback

Feedback used both formal and informal language, with many comments organized using groups, headings or bullet points, unlike the unorganized narrative reviews of peers' work described by Guardado and Shi (2007).

Formatting became problematic as threads grew longer, with quotes within quotes, varying colors, and font styles. Distinguishing original writing from later repairs became difficult and units of analysis difficult to isolate (Ferguson, 2012). Simpler text editors, with fewer formatting options, as on a similar website, essayforum.com, with just bold, highlight and strikethrough, might have loaded faster, but several members stressed the need for a fully-featured text editor.

Some members adopted my use of headings, colors, and bullets in feedback, while others asked for clear formatting guidelines. Interview suggestions also included palettes of comments or drop-down buttons with frequent comments or links to forum resources or elsewhere.

Some members rewrote other members' paragraphs or essays completely. For such an appropriation to be acceptable, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect was necessary (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Smith, 2008), and a highly task-oriented climate with flexible roles (Tuckman, 1965).

5.3.3 Feedback, Learning, and Change

How can learning and change in L2 writing feedback be measured? Members reported higher IELTS scores and less time needed to write essays, and described perceptions of improvement in their own writing and that of others as well as perceptions of community and satisfaction.

A common theme in the literature, however, is the difficulty of attributing change directly to peer feedback (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Cho, Schunn, & Wilson, 2006; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; DiPardo & Freedman, 1988), with Truscott (1996, 2007) similarly cautious about the effect of teacher feedback on error correction. Rewrites based on feedback may indicate action taken but not mastery, and improvement may not appear in writing until much later, if at all. Nelson and Murphy (1993) warned that success could not be measured "solely by the incorporation of peer comments in the final draft" with revisions possibly weakening drafts (Nelson & Murphy, 1993, p. 140), and Ware and Warschauer (2006) also questioned the authenticity of endless revision, asking whether students who posted revision after revision were becoming stronger writers.

Clearly, improved scores in IELTS could be used as an indicator of learning, and about 30 members reported improved (or unchanged) scores during membership. However, scores may have risen due to preparation classes, information from other websites or resources, or increased exposure to the L2, among other factors.

Other quantitative measures such as the number of interactions (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2004; Zhang & Fulford, 1994), thread length (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007), time spent interacting (Zhang & Fulford, 1994), or greater encouragement from tutors (Tagg & Dickinson, 2008) may also not be enough to indicate engagement and learning. Andresen (2009) noted that numerical

analysis of time online or posting frequency is not always representative, and duration does not necessarily indicate strong ties or high quality exchanges (Akyol et al., 2011).

However, the quality of interaction and engagement can contribute to both achievement and student satisfaction (Guzdial & Turns, 2000; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2004), and such affective measures reflect the importance of socialization and community in building confidence and lowering anxiety (Bayliss & Ingram, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 1997). Longer presence can lead to more posts (Bateman et al., 2011), and greater commitment (Li et al., 2006), and longer forum membership was clearly associated with higher posting, changes in participation, and increased feedback.

5.3.4 Feedback and Critical Thinking

It could be argued that much forum feedback appeared unfinished, with members saying their piece in short responses or simple thanks instead of engaging in depth with peer ideas or suggestions (Dysthe, 2002, p. 349). In the absence of debate, as in Rourke and Kanuka's dialectic thesis-antithesis-synthesis form of discussion (2007, p. 107), visible examples of critical thinking such as consensus (Kortemeyer, 2006) may not have been evident.

However, viewing critical thinking as a process with its main outcome in later essays rather than in immediate rewrites may allow a more holistic view of knowledge creation in the forum. Component skills of critical thinking were in fact necessary to evaluate peer writing against the complex IELTS criteria or to synthesize advice from several threads and online resources. In addition, the act of writing academic essays required Glaser's critical thinking component of "knowledge of methods of inquiry and reasoning" (1941, p. 5), while active forum participation provided evidence of "being disposed to consider problems and subjects thoughtfully." Engagement in a range of feedback activities also bore similarities to the cycle of Garrison, Anderson and Archer's Practical Inquiry Model, with the test or an essay as trigger rather than a teacher's topic or a thought-provoking argument.

In summary, therefore, the evidence for critical thinking lay partly in the discrete cognitive skills needed to analyze and evaluate peer writing, but also holistically in the later creation of new writing based on self-correction or self-assessment (Scriven & Paul, 2004) and in the increasingly evident disposition or stance of the member to consider problems thoughtfully (Glaser, 1941).

5.4 Community and Social Presence

Despite the task-orientation of almost all posts, and the fact that no members described purely social reasons for participation or engaged exclusively in social behavior, the forum had a significant social role.

For members preparing alone, it may have provided social support (Donath, 1997) and increased confidence, with Green's study (2004) finding that positive attitudes to writing improved IELTS candidate scores. Macintyre et al. (1997) similarly found that anxious adult L2 students underestimated their proficiency, and anxiety among forum members caused by isolation may have increased their desire for social support, with some members describing a lack of access to teachers or native speakers to assess their work. Mickan and Motteram (2008) suggested that preparation courses offered a form of socialization or acculturation into IELTS, and many members expressed their pleasure at having a "place" for sharing essays. Social interactions also included citizenship behaviors such as welcoming new members to the forum, helping new members, and encouraging others.

While forums such as StackExchange or StackOverflow try to replace affective responses and phatics (Lapadat, 2007; Rourke et al., 1999; StackOverflow.com, 2013) with voting systems in order to remove 'noise,' many educational settings, particularly in L2, view such communication as contributing to social presence.

Vercellone-Smith et al. (2012) found that "core" students, as identified by network analysis, used words such as "like," "glad," "support," or other words with positive emotions in feedback. The many such remarks on the forum and the frequent use of greetings such as "guys," "colleagues," or "everyone" would seem to concur with Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's definition (2010, p. 7) of social presence as participants identifying with the community, communicating purposefully in a trusting environment, and developing interpersonal relationships.

Garrison et al. (2010) suggested that a first priority for most students in a formal educational context is shared social identity (i.e., the purpose of the course), rather than personal identity (i.e., interpersonal relationships). The average membership of just 33.8 days could support literature findings that groups with restricted time may set aside some social behaviors and focus on task-related communication (Nguyen-Ngoc & Law, 2009). Walther (1997) similarly observed that perceptions of longer involvement led to greater social interaction, and forum members with longer membership engaged in markedly more social activity.

In Nonaka and Konno's terms, the forum provided a space for *ba*, "a shared space for emerging relationships" which "serves as a foundation for knowledge creation" (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p. 40). Haythornthwaite described social networks in education as providing social support and socialization for distributed learners (Haythornthwaite, 2002), or a space in which users can learn together while retaining control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity, and relationships (Leslie & Landon, 2008), and the forum appeared to satisfy these requirements, even in the absence of purely social participation.

5.4.1 Task Orientation

As described in Chapter 4, forum discussion was predominantly task-oriented, as in studies by Kay (2006), Hew and Cheung (2003b), and Schellens and Valcke (2005). The lack of discussion of ideas may reflect members' understanding of IELTS assessment criteria, in which the quality of ideas is less important than language, organization, syntax, or rhetoric.

...the students who go to the website don't have much time to discuss the ideas or contents. The most important thing they have to do is improve their grammar or expression, and the teachers in China told us the content and ideas are not that important. [AliceXi]

Discussing the content or merit of ideas could have placed an undue load on members' L2 or changed the forum intent from a focus on the instrumental use of English in essay writing to one centered around member opinions. Additionally, taking stances on controversial topics may have been deliberately avoided to maintain group harmony and avoid conflict in the mixed cultural setting with Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Iranian, Middle Eastern, and European members, among others. In interviews, however, members welcomed the presence of different cultures as a possible source of new ideas or for future work in cross-cultural teams.

Task orientation may also have arisen partly from thread structure, with complete member essays as the focus of almost all threads rather than Dysthe's "interesting and challenging" initial assignments (2002, p. 346) or Kay's "controversial and thought-provoking" topics (2006, p. 772) to promote critical thinking and discussion.

5.4.2 Politeness and Tone

A noticeable social feature of the forum was politeness. Johnson and Roen (1992) distinguished between ideational and intrapersonal compliments, with ideational compliments deserved primarily on merit, and intrapersonal compliments used more socially. It is not always easy to separate these, particularly with an asynchronous forum's reduced cue environment, less-proficient L2 language use, and differing cultural backgrounds. However, the great majority of feedback posts used patterns very similar to those in Johnson and Roen's work with native speakers and Guardado and Shi's (2007) with L2 learners, with opening compliments, analysis, and concluding compliments as a common template.

The overwhelming politeness evidenced in expressions of gratitude, the careful softening of criticism, and disclaimers by members ("I'm not a native speaker, so my comments may not be correct") were in contrast to the tone of many forums or user-generated content communities. However, a participant in Rourke and Kanuka's (2007) study found politeness at any cost to be "disconcerting" and a barrier to discussion or growth, and Amores (2001) similarly noted a preference for social process over task. Out of four categories of feedback, Hattie and Timperley (2007) found that feedback related to the self (praise or approval, or negative criticism) was the least effective.

Again, cultural issues valuing collective harmony may preclude active disagreement. In L2 classrooms, agreement may be easier than the effort involved in expressing disagreement. The fear of even casual comments being misunderstood may also contribute to more formality or confrontation avoidance, with Kim and Bonk (2002) finding Asian-American students asking fewer questions, and Lim, Cheung, and Hew (2011) urging facilitators to consider cultural and social norms if using aggressive facilitation techniques with Asian participants.

Regarding the apparent absence of consensus or conflict, Gunawardena et al. (1997) suggested that negotiation may not appear to occur if members accept other members' statements as being consistent with what they already believe: conflict may also not be visible with participants taking away differing meanings, for later reflection or use.

Politeness and formality can be associated with interactions in the early stage of groups, both online and face-to-face. Tu and Corry (2001) suggested that new participation in online community creates uncertainty regarding roles, behavior, and appropriate interactions with others. Tuckman's sequence of forming, storming,

norming, and performing (1965) suggested that conflict is often avoided as members get to know each other and the group. In the forum, elements of Tuckman's "storming" mode can perhaps be found in member expressions of frustration with IELTS, with members reacting as "a form of resistance to the demands of the task" (Tuckman, 1965, p. 386) rather than against each other – again perhaps exemplifying Garrison et al.'s initial community identification (2010).

The relatively low use of names, particularly among newcomers, may also have suggested uncertainty (Tu & Corry, 2001) or initial over-politeness. The lack of detailed personal information in profiles may also have contributed, with names containing numbers or phrases leading some posters to ask "what can I call you?" Perceptions of the forum as being task-oriented may have resulted in less use of names and greetings, as may unfamiliarity with online forums or cultural issues relating to the use of first and last names.

While names were not always necessary for clarity, and with informality replacing politeness with longer acquaintance, even longer-term members used names less frequently over time.

5.4.3 New Structures and Roles

Independent self-organized structures did not develop within the forum, and the control wielded by the moderator in the forum design may not have permitted different forms of participation.

If anything, however, there appeared to be a desire for tighter control and more moderator intervention, rather than looser, peer-managed structures. Several members called for small groups with activities such as weekly essays to ensure commitment and improve responses. Some proposed that members be grouped by proficiency, or that newcomers be allowed to post essays only after first giving feedback, a reversal of the predominant pattern in the forum.

No members asked to become moderators. As moderator, I was uncertain whether members would work in such groups independently or whether they would take on moderating or management roles. Subgroups would have increased the roles available, allowing members to become knowledge managers or enablers (von Krogh, Nonaka, & Rechsteiner, 2012), but might also have fragmented the forum or upset the balance of roles (Gleave et al., 2009). While some members might have expressed a desire to take on responsibility, they might not have anticipated the work involved

in maintaining subgroups or forums. If membership had continued to increase, however, such structures would almost certainly have become necessary.

5.4.4 Intent of the Community

As described in Chapter 1, distinguishing between core and discretionary behaviors in online knowledge communities is challenging. Most studies of OCBs in online communities portray knowledge creation as at once an outcome, a valuable resource, an activity, and as a central function for the community (Chiu et al., 2006; Fang & Chiu, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Yu & Chu, 2007). However, the literature does not convincingly distinguish between in-role and supra-role contributions which lead to such knowledge creation, perhaps stemming from the view of Chen, Chang, and Liu (2012) of virtual communities as entities without formal contracts.

In the absence of clear, online role expectations, Yong, Sachau, and Lassiter (2011) warned that because virtual community participation is voluntary, “it is tempting to think that all participation is a form of citizenship behavior” (Yong et al., 2011, p. 685). Such a view of participation as being discretionary is unhelpful for community designers or leaders for whom some forms of participation may be more valuable than others, and also for members who may prefer clear expectations, and may dismiss the need for collaborative creation suggested by Wenger’s participation-reification duality.

With most interaction in the early forum consisting of member essays being posted for moderator feedback, it was a relief when the first member offered feedback to a peer. However, the work involved in posting an essay – the role of ‘merely’ seeking feedback – should not be underestimated or undervalued. While some members may have repurposed existing essays, others spent hours synthesizing information from essays, comments, or other information on the site or elsewhere to write new essays in the hope of receiving feedback. Members who did not receive feedback on these essays may have felt undervalued and marginalized. Even without feedback or comments, essays provided a visible record of individual proficiency and member perceptions of the essay form and community intent, as well as providing other users with a valuable resource for calibration and analysis of their writing.

For the forum, however, requesting feedback was merely one part of the feedback process described by Ramaprasad (1983). Giving feedback was also essential – without it, the forum would not gain momentum, and the participation-reification balance described by Wenger would be disturbed. Waldron (2012) distinguished

between intentional communities and more informal groupings without a formal teaching intention, such as review forums on Amazon or Tripadvisor's restaurant reviews. In this forum, the intent was to share and create knowledge on essay writing, and joining or even visiting indicated a degree of intent to engage in feedback in some form. Appeals for feedback were explicitly made in splash screens and in comments by the moderator and some members, with Panciera, Masli, and Terveen (2011, p. 190) noting the effect of such "appeals to reciprocity" as motivators. Once the user accepts the intention of a community or group, new responsibilities arise.

5.5 Participant Perceptions

The interactions in the forum were intertwined with the IELTS exam and its gatekeeper status for entry into new academic, professional and socio-economic communities (Green, 2007; Merrifield, 2008; Moore et al., 2011).

Critical language theorists (McNamara & Shohamy, 2008; Shohamy, 1997) and studies with candidates in the UK (Rea-Dickins et al., 2007) and Cambodia (Moore et al., 2011) suggest that IELTS has significant effects on participant identity and on members' communities, and that the effort expended in preparation – even for the forum's 33-day average membership – represents a leap towards participation in new language communities (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012).

Despite this effort, however, members did not discuss forthcoming upheavals in their personal, professional, or academic lives in comments or interviews. There was almost no discussion of the purpose of IELTS, and instead, posts revolved around essay forms, rather than the purpose or power of the test, broader aspects of writing as a process, or the activity of learning English. A few registration profiles mentioned planned moves, e.g. from Iraq to Canada, or UK or Australian university entrance, but with most members taking the test for immigration or further study overseas, the elephant in the room may have made comment superfluous.

In comments and interviews, members expressed few of the concerns voiced by Pennycook (2007) or Tollefson (2000) regarding the privileged status of English, the privileged backgrounds of some members relative to many compatriots, or the social or political background of the test.

Perceptions of Proficiency

The frequent comments such as "my English is not that good" or declining to give feedback would, at face value, suggest that almost no members presented themselves

as adequately proficient or experienced. Such declarations may represent politeness, deference, or accurate assessments of ability (Johnson & Roen, 1992; Johnson, 1992), or may simply have been a safer or easier option than proclaiming an expert status. However, Bayliss and Ingram (2007) noted the importance of self-confidence in improving student proficiency, with member perceptions of lower proficiency possibly lowering potential scores.

Although an Australian study by O'Loughlin (2008) found that most participants felt that IELTS scores measured English proficiency accurately, Bayliss and Ingram (2007) found that after a short period in Australia, 36% of test-takers rated themselves at a higher level and 39% at a lower level than the test indicated. Forum members did not seem concerned about their English proficiency for future academic success, despite university and employer concerns about the weak long-term predictive value of IELTS (Bayliss & Ingram, 2007; Hill et al., 1999; Lai et al., 2008; Rea-Dickins et al., 2007).

5.5.1 Perceptions of L1 and L2 Writing

Forum members were divided on the relationship between L1 and English writing, with some not noticing any differences, some identifying major differences (Connor, 2002; Hirose, 2003; Liebman, 1992; Uysal, 2012), and others identifying particular requirements in writing for the exam (Mickan & Slater, 2003; Mu & Carrington, 2007; Zhang, 2010).

This spectrum reflects the debate over contrastive rhetoric between theorists such as Kaplan (1966) or Mu and Carrington (2007) who identified major differences in organization or reasoning, and those such as Friedlander (1990) and Matsumoto (1995) who de-emphasized differences but suggested that L2 strategies be taught explicitly. In the forum, such explicit demonstration of target forms was clearly appreciated by the members, with several noting that sample essays were “very useful.” Abbuhl (2011), Macbeth (2010), and Silva (1993) also supported the use of models, once explained and discussed fully. Such IELTS-style essays by members were at the center of threads and discussion, rather than writing in general. As such, the forum sat uneasily between views of writing as a process or writing-as-thinking (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004; Mason, 1998; Rivard & Straw, 2000; Rivard, 1994; Scardamalia et al., 1984) on the one hand, and the academic requirements of the IELTS writing task and the use of models on the other.

5.5.2 Participants and Autonomy

As described in Chapter 4, forum members were preparing alone, were already graduates or professional employees, and were taking the exam for study overseas or for immigration. The narrow focus of the forum, voluntary participation, and filtering power of the internet resulted in a highly-focused group of such autonomous users attracted by receiving feedback, providing feedback to others, watching feedback interactions, the resources in the posts, and the social reassurance of encountering other test-takers.

Comments and interviews showed a range of concerns about the exam and about writing in particular, and varying strategies to deal with the exam, some similar to those associated with autonomous learners (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Boud, 1988; Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003; Haythornthwaite, 2008; McConnell, 2002). While many members were close to their required band, that one- or half-band deficit could mean the expense of resits or preparation classes, and delays or cancellation of university entry or emigration. Many users had taken the exam several times within a short timeframe, a common practice not recommended by IELTS and shown not to result in improvement (Green, 2004).

Many candidates had negative experiences or views of preparation classes, echoing those of Zhengdong (2009) in Hong Kong:

they just want to make money in China so it's waste, not good. I think most people just done it by themselves. [DanZhu]

if I register into one class it would not be able to help me much and in Australia it costs an arm and a leg to attend such course. [Lester]

more than 80% of IELTS class in Iran are - I'm sorry to say that - are bullshit. [HectorMc]

Mickan and Motteram (2009) also found frequent resits and similar themes of frustration and lack of agency among candidates in Australia. Instead of preparation classes, members combined activities and resources such as websites or textbooks; advice from friends; English radio, films or television; social media in English; or use of the L2 socially or at work, occasionally with L1 speakers. Sockett and Toffoli described such activities as characteristic of autonomous users rather than dependent learners (2012), echoing Wenger's forging of identity as a member of new communities (Wenger, 1999, p. 5):

As English is not my first language, I can't always produce a sentence as native as you do. That frustrates me a lot. To make up this, I read *The Age*, which is one local Melbourne based tabloid, and try to learn from it. [Post 1875]

Because I watched some radio in the UK - you heard about *Downton Abbey*? I hear the BBC radio in the morning every day. [AliceXi]

Some members described long-term study rather than last-minute preparation, matching characteristics of autonomous learners (Benson, 2007; Boud, 1988; Hyland, 2004; Little, 2003), and the amount of time before a test almost certainly influenced participation, with members such as HectorMc engaged in measured activity over six months, in contrast to others such as Gerry, who was extremely active for just 21 days before an exam.

5.5.3 Perceptions of the Forum Technology

Most members' descriptions of forum features and usability were reasonably positive, with comments focusing on dealing with feedback tasks rather than on interface or usability. While interface improvements such as improved text editors, easier formatting, templates, or better use of tags were suggested, the main proposed changes concerned the management and running of the forum.

Members frequently suggested more control, smaller structures, fewer essays, and more detailed roles, rather than freer or looser groupings. Proposals included smaller tutorial-style groups, possibly with deadlines for writing activities; sub-moderators; membership levels with varying privileges; and awards or rating systems for contributions. However, very little use was made of an existing rating feature, with participants either not noticing it or not understanding its purpose.

In interviews, several members suggested that membership be restricted in order to increase the quality of the posts and responses, to encourage interaction between 'serious' members, and to avoid overload. Given the short average membership, however, it is questionable whether members would have had the time or commitment to take on time-consuming leadership roles and structures. Smaller groups might have improved contribution quality, with Constant, Sproull, and Kiesler (1996) finding that superior information and resources were more important than the increased number of weak-tie participants.

While a large number of essays might appear to indicate a vibrant forum, it may also have been daunting for L2 readers and swamped moderators or members who had developed norms of commenting frequently on essays. Chen (2005) found better results in asynchronous discussion with fewer rather than more essays.

Minor changes were suggested for the interface:

I think it can be good if we can invent some additional features, like giving comments... For example if there is any automatic button, that we click on this - 'this is good' or 'this structure needs to be edited,' so, it can reduce time for people to give comments. [Lester]

I think it would be better on the main page if there is some links to highlight where to get started. [ChariseZ]

By making such pro-social behavior more visible and requests easier to respond to, online forums can leverage the “kindness of strangers” (Constant et al., 1996).

5.6 Knowledge Conversion and Creation

This section suggests an application of Nonaka’s socialization, externalization, combination and internalization (SECI) model of knowledge creation (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka et al., 2000; Nonaka, 1994) to the forum, with a proposed modification to deal with questions raised by Bryceson (2007), Haag and Duan (2012), and others for online settings.

Several characteristics of the model suggest its application to the informal learning setting of the forum – Nonaka’s claim (2009) that *ba* can be present online, a much-diminished role for teacher presence, and the spiraling nature of the knowledge generated, with some members progressing upwards from Band 5 and others aspiring towards Band 8. Engeström’s criticism of Nonaka’s model as being limited by being a “relatively defined task” (1999, p. 380) and externally-determined goals strengthens the appropriateness of the framework, given the external constraint of IELTS.

The forum provided a space and time, or *ba*, for visitors and members to socialize, learn about the forum and the exam, and share information and perspectives with others. Members articulated existing understandings of writing, the test requirements, and the feedback process, thereby building transactive knowledge (Wegner, 1987) and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1999) in externalization. Forum

members then connected multiple resources in new ways and in increasingly complex feedback in the combination mode, before internalizing and embodying this knowledge in learning-by-doing in the exam (Nonaka, 1994). This spiral then continued upwards as members reported back after tests or returned over weeks or months to improve their knowledge of essay writing.

5.6.1 Socialization

Nonaka's atmosphere (1994) of care, support, and trust, provided by originating *ba* in socialization, lowered uncertainty, allowing feedback to be given and accepted (Tu & Corry, 2001); lowered the affective filter for learning (Krashen, 1982); and provided an atmosphere of trust (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Smith, 2008). Members who posted essays and comments were making a considerable effort, with essays often requiring over an hour to write, and were also taking a risk, since language, ideas, and L2 proficiency formed important components of their evolving identity and self-efficacy (Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Wenger, 1999).

Despite different language and cultural backgrounds, the learners shared experiences of learning English and the challenge of the high-stakes exam (Green, 2007; IDP.com, 2012; Moore et al., 2011). Sharing scores, describing aspirations, and the use of names, tone, and affective, interactive and cohesive responses (Lapadat, 2007; Rourke et al., 1999) helped form a group identity (Garrison et al., 2010), a factor identified in many studies as contributing to satisfaction and learning (Ertmer & Stepich, 2004; Rovai, 2002; Shea, 2006; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). Members read each other's profiles and stories (Fahy, 2007) and engaged with each other through giving or receiving feedback. Socialization also allowed members to observe the community climate and dynamics, or to become acculturated (Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010), or enculturated (Brown et al., 1989), learning to function in a community, demonstrated by members waiting before and after joining, before posting, before starting to give feedback, and when choosing who to engage with.

5.6.2 Externalization

Requests for feedback were articulated or externalized by posting essays, with or without requests for specific feedback. The act of posting an essay or asking a question – even the act of visiting the forum – indicated an awareness or perception of a gap and a degree of belief in socially-constructed knowledge creation, or an act of externalization. Posting an essay also presupposed trust in the ability of others to help bridge this gap.

Differences in member language and proficiency satisfied Nonaka's (2000) requirement of a juxtaposition of people with different skills. Forum members may thus have had preferences for particular modes (Huang & Wang, 2002), and such heterogeneity is noted by Surowiecki (2004) and by Constant, Sprout and Kiesler (1996) as being beneficial for new perspectives in problem solving or for mutual scaffolding (Dobao, 2012).

In externalization, with its interacting *ba*, tacit and shared knowledge about writing began to be articulated into explicit form (Ellis, 1993) with ideas emerging and crystallizing. Metaphors and analogies for essay layouts, thesis sentences, topic sentences, and paragraph structures, along with model essays, allowed learners to discuss epistemic rules (Abbuhl, 2011; Charney & Carlson, 1995; Collins & Ferguson, 1993; MacBeth, 2010) and explicit strategies for dealing with the task (Matsumoto, 1995). Over time, this led to a shared vocabulary for discussing feedback. Members posted essays without comment or with simple requests, and provided simple or short feedback as a step before the more sophisticated synthesis of the combination mode.

5.6.3 Combination

The putting together of "pieces" of explicit knowledge suggest a location for complex feedback (given, requested, or applied) in the combination mode, building on the simpler articulation of a gap or simpler requests and responses found in externalization. Explicit knowledge from feedback, other threads and posts, previous learning, websites, textbooks and other resources was connected and combined into new forms, either in rewrites or later writing.

Over time, givers of feedback undertook the challenge of examining other members' essays using complex scales such as the official IELTS descriptors. In doing so, givers of feedback adopted new strategies of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis which benefitted their own writing. Members interacted by asking questions, revising writing, and testing, double-checking, or rejecting advice from peers.

Feedback given had to be made comprehensible to recipients. Practice in new genres (e.g., politeness, clarification, justification, informality, humor) in the L2 was needed in addition to the formal language of the essays. Recipients combined existing understandings with their interpretation of input from their peers.

In the externalization and combination modes, roles reversed and were relinquished, with members occasionally rewriting others' essays or writing essays on the same topic. Feedback, therefore, was far more than a unidirectional marking from an 'expert,' but a process in which new information and understanding moved back and forth in eddies and countercurrents for both participants.

5.6.4 Internalization

For Nonaka (1994), internalization or embodiment occurred in application and practice, as a full-body experience rather than an intellectual knowing. The artificial setting of the IELTS exam limits time for reflection, combination or socialization, and instead provides a concentrated, physical experience, or performance, with candidates expected to remember a web of grammar, vocabulary, and organizational strategies as well as cultural and rhetorical patterns to support their ideas.

Exercising *ba* supports doing in real life or simulations – or even the artificial experience of the exam – and transforms explicit knowledge into embodied or tacit knowledge. In practice, in tests and resits, or in subsequent academic writing, recently-acquired awareness becomes automatic or tacit from practice and application. Knowledge conversion does not stop at the internalization phase, but spirals upward in the members' use of writing at higher levels.

Based on the previous sections, Figure 18 suggests forum interactions for particular modes in Nonaka's original SECI framework.

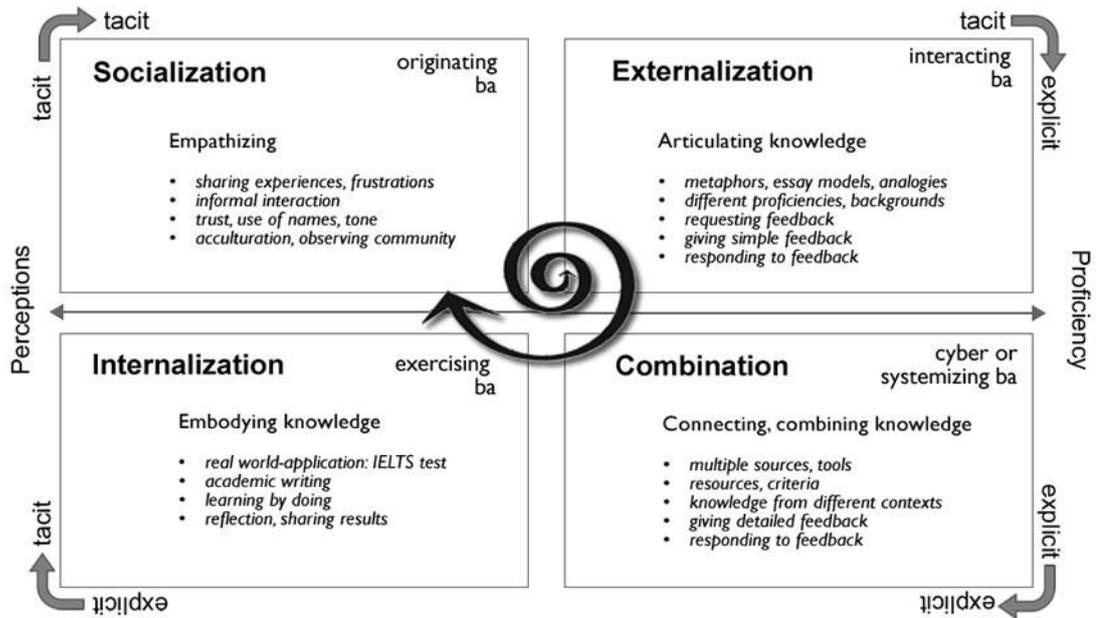


Figure 18: SECI Framework and Feedback in a Discussion Forum on Writing

(Adapted from Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka et al., 2000)

While the interactions in Figure 18 maintain the characteristics of each of Nonaka’s modes, this study proposes a further slight modification in layout only to emphasize the core role of socialization in the online setting (see Figure 19) and to address the difficulties suggested by Hosseini (2011), Haag and Duan (2012), and Bryceson (2007), among others.

Socialization is key because it provides the *ba* for all other interactions to occur. It cannot be dispensed with simply because the setting is online (Haag & Duan, 2012), or a by-product of discussion (Bryceson, 2007). In contrast, in Figure 19’s proposed layout, socialization is presented as underpinning the other forms of knowledge conversion. This does not remove its primarily tacit form: it is in the socialization mode that feelings, experiences, trust, goals, and empathy are shared.

Socialization is used in the forum in its everyday meaning of meeting, greeting, friendliness, and acknowledgment of others, and also with the meaning of being socialized or acculturated into learning or preparation for the test (Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010; Mickan & Motteram, 2008) and for new academic and professional communities (Brown et al., 1989; Rea-Dickins et al., 2007), with communication in the L2 strengthening members’ identities as new language users.

Through active participation and through observing the community, forum members were thus both learning about the domain, i.e., writing for the exam, and learning

about the forum, including how to get help, post successfully, and manage interpersonal relations and group functioning – all in the L2 (Brown et al., 1989; Collins, Newman, & Brown, 1987; Singh & Holt, 2013; Suthers, 2006).

Despite the lack of purely social posts and the high degree of task-orientation, a sense of community was palpable through politeness, greetings, use of names (particularly by more active members), generalized reciprocity, and citizenship behavior evidenced in the painstaking feedback of many members. The disappointment at the forum closure, the requests for Skype speaking partners, and the suggestions for improvement also indicated social presence (Garrison, Anderson, et al., 2010), with participants identifying with the community, trusting each other, and (to a lesser extent) developing interpersonal relationships. Bayliss and Ingram (2007) found that self-confidence improved performance during IELTS preparation: along with lowering anxiety (MacIntyre, 1997) a perception of social presence or support may have increased member engagement and confidence, addressing the lack of agency found by Mickan and Motteram (2009) among many IELTS test-takers.

While these forms of socialization may lack Nonaka's indwelling or close physical proximity (1994), the trust, care, and commitment associated with originating *ba* (Nonaka et al., 2000, p. 15) allowed members to contribute and to move from individual tacit understandings of writing and the test to a shared externalization mode, combining and ultimately internalizing their new perspectives in a knowledge-creating spiral.

Visitors to the forum encountered a huge amount of information, opinions, and essays, and a group of learners sharing similar goals. This is contrast to Bryceson's ESCIE model (2007), in which visitors first met course content or 'explicitization'. In the forum, visitors and members had to make sense of interactions among writers centered around essays as vehicles of discourse (Waldron, 2012), therefore entering into a milieu at once both task-oriented and social rather than separately social or task-oriented, and to some degree paralleling Bryceson's simultaneous socialization and combination.

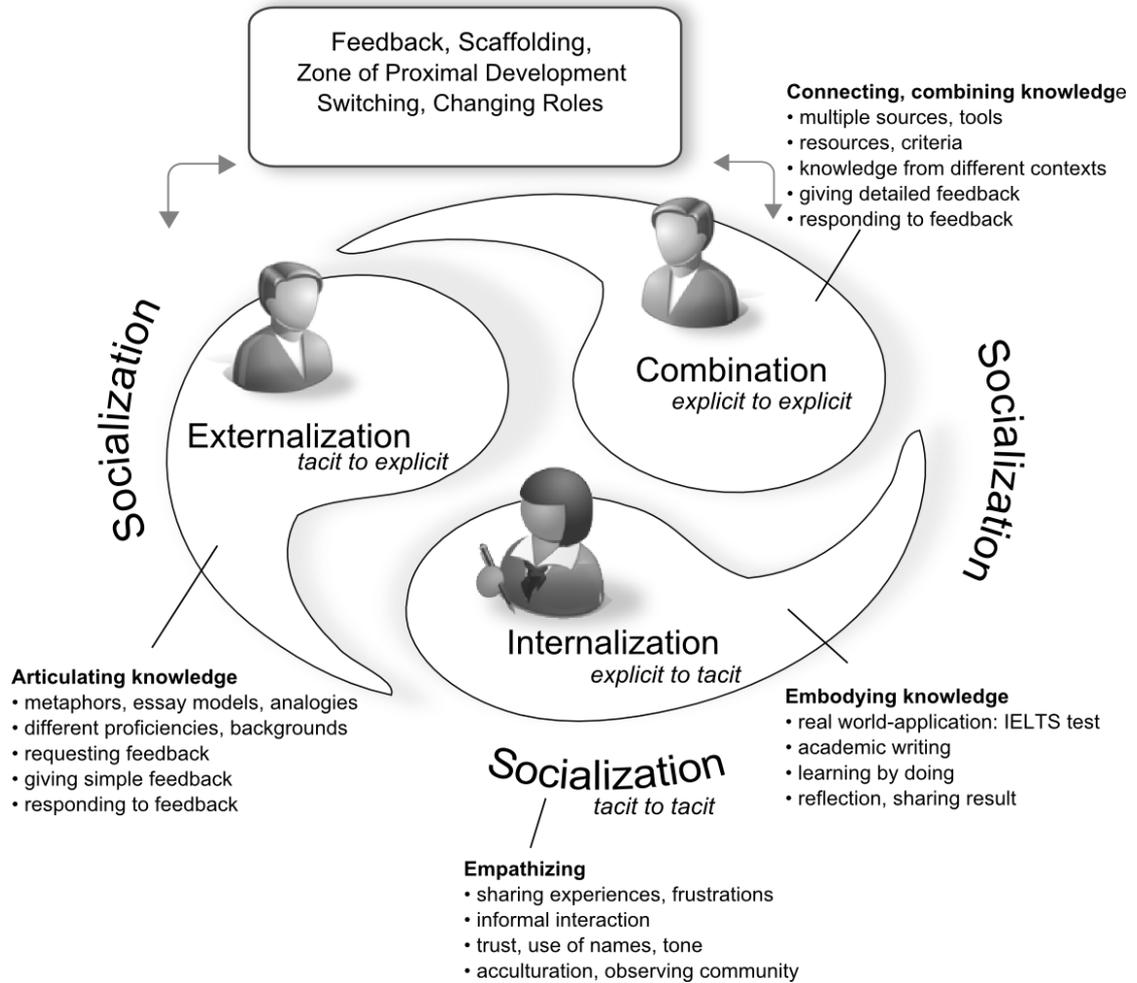


Figure 19: Modified SECI model for online discussion

In the modification in Figure 19 above, apart from the central role given to online socialization, the essential characteristics of Nonaka's knowledge conversion modes remain unchanged, with knowledge about academic essay writing being converted from tacit to explicit, combined in new explicit forms, and internalized again as tacit knowledge. As well as establishing care, trust, and commitment and an environment of sharing and empathy, socialization allows for gradual acculturation (Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010) and for lurking and less visible forms of participation as an active learning strategy of members and visitors.

Having socialization underpin and permeate the other forms of knowledge creation and conversion allows for more fluid interplay of the different modes. Encounters with the forum can begin at almost any point, but always with some element of socialization. Instead of a rigid sequencing, knowledge conversions can occur almost simultaneously: rather than being fixed in one mode or proceeding rigidly through modes, a criticism leveled by Gourlay (2006) and Engeström (1999), interactions in

the forum were more fluid, with participants moving quickly through multiple modes of knowledge conversion.

Socialization and Lurking

Lurking and socialization have a paradoxical relationship. Nonaka's model emphasized physicality and a sense of being, action and involvement, and Takeuchi stressed that participants need to engage in the flow of ideas and "cannot be onlookers or bystanders" (Takeuchi, 2006, p. 89). The reference to engagement is key: lurkers, although not contributing written artifacts, were nevertheless engaged in the flow of ideas and interactions, empathizing, reading, reflecting, or rejecting, and perhaps writing and editing offline.

As described earlier, lurking occurred as members waited before their first posts, suggesting a gradual engagement with the ideas of the forum and a socialization process with the forum dynamics, member identities, and content. Members then lurked selectively during their membership, particularly before giving feedback, and changed participation again after final posts. The large number of repeat visitors shown in server logs suggested an audience much larger than the active membership, suggesting that socialization must have occurred to some degree at least (Baumer et al., 2008; Blanchard & Markus, 2004), although probably to a lesser extent than for active members (Black, 2005a; Smith et al., 2009).

5.6.5 The Relationship between OCB and SECI

The work of Dennis Organ and Thomas Bateman (1983), based on earlier work by Katz (1964), suggest that organizations thrive as a result of spontaneous innovative behavior by individuals. In contrast, Nonaka attributed the success of Japanese companies to cycles of activities involving workers and stakeholders that allowed interaction and knowledge conversion to occur (Nonaka et al., 2000; Nonaka, 1994).

These differing perspectives on organizational functioning may reflect different positions along collective-individual dimensions. In Nonaka's Japanese contexts, management, workers, and stakeholders worked collectively using formal collective processes and activities to create organizational knowledge and change: in the US-centered organizational citizenship and commitment studies, spontaneous discretionary behavior by individuals benefitted the organization.

The SECI model, stemming from collective approaches (although guided by managers) suggests a socially-constructed process of interaction with the

environment, whereas the more role-based organizational citizenship may suggest a more static model aligned with Western views of the contribution of the individual in solving problems.

For knowledge-based communities, both models require rethinking: the lines between in-role and supra-role activities of online citizenship behavior may be more blurred than in conventional settings, while new forms of socialization and engagement may be needed for SECI knowledge-creation models.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1 Contributions of the Research

This study has hoped to show that peer feedback around essay writing in an online discussion contributed to improved writing, greater use of feedback and self-regulation, and greater self-efficacy and confidence in L2 writing. Participating as members of a target language learning community empowered learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to share and create new knowledge in a loop of increased commitment and changing roles. Rather than being dependent learners, members acted as autonomous users of the target language, learning various ways how to function in the community and how to use the language in a variety of authentic and increasingly complex ways.

The study contributes to greater understanding of the value of different types of voluntary feedback as a process of creating knowledge for recipients, givers, and lurkers. It adds to the body of literature on asynchronous discussion and on feedback by focusing on second-language learners of English, particularly non-traditional students, who are learning to write essays for exams such as IELTS. Good grades in IELTS can lead to higher education opportunities or better-paid employment in countries such as Australia, the UK, Canada, or the US. The interaction around these essays therefore can contribute to changes in proficiency, perception, membership, identity, and social change.

Learning occurred through various forms of participation, including lurking, and from changes in perception and proficiency. Many members perceived improvements in their own writing such as a reduced time needed to write essays and greater ease in developing and organizing ideas. Many also described changes in their perceptions of giving feedback, viewing it both as being within their ability and being a useful activity for the giver.

Active members articulated knowledge and began to use a common vocabulary to discuss essay organization, grammar, and usage issues. With practice and time, many members began to combine multiple resources, tools and strategies when giving or replying to feedback. Members took on roles often associated with teachers or moderators in discussion forums in more conventional educational settings, including welcoming and orienting new members, providing encouragement, and

responding to neglected threads. Finally, members practiced writing at higher levels, engaging with the process in an upward spiral.

Two key findings for theory are in the application of a knowledge creation framework to forum interactions and the difficulty of distinguishing between core and discretionary behavior in online settings. The thesis suggests that a modified SECI framework can provide a useful metaphor in a spirit of ‘dynamic entangling’ (Nonaka, 1994, p. 20) for analysis of knowledge sharing and creation in online discussion. It also proposes that roles and participation are dynamic rather than fixed, evolving over time with engagement and as the proficiency and perceptions of the member and the community change.

Content and Structure

Over 20 years ago, (Henri, 1992, p. 119) noted the challenge of using the “riches” provided by content analysis, and ten years later, Rourke et al.’s entertaining description of a Professor Jones demonstrated this challenge (Rourke et al., 2001). Despite these riches, transcript analysis only indicates possible learning (Hew & Cheung, 2003b), and therefore observing what people actually do can provide complementary information (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). By analyzing both structure and content, therefore, this study has tried to reduce the dependence on content alone by examining participant interactions.

The thesis proposes that the impetus for engagement with the forum was a perception of a gap between the level of the learners and a reference level – in this case a desired state in an exam – and a desire to obtain information to close this gap (Ramaprasad, 1983). Feedback was not simply a written product given by an expert or more able other, but required a response, negotiation, and internalization of the new information. The value of feedback, therefore, went far beyond the comments made by forum members, but extended to the skills of analyzing the writing of others, framing feedback, responding to feedback, the resulting dialogues, and the countercurrents and eddies of reflection leading to greater self-regulation and an increased awareness of audience in writing.

Lurking and feedback are both commonly misrepresented: one as malingering or social loafing or a failure to take responsibility, and the other as a product given by an expert, usually a person in power. Both views may arise from views in which learning is transmitted and learners have little power over learning activities.

The forum interactions reflected a view of writing as an interdependent social process. Rather than being static forms, the hundreds of essays, rewrites, and comments generated were outcomes of writing as a process with an audience, as well as being forms for structuring academic inquiry.

Contribution 1: Feedback

The contributions of members indicated that intermediate and higher level learners of English were able to provide detailed accurate feedback, particularly at the macro level, often using complex descriptors such as IELTS criteria rather than general narratives, and sometimes combining multiple external references and tools.

In addition, a large number of members moved from requesting feedback to providing useful feedback to others or to responding in detail to feedback. This trajectory was generally associated with an increased number of posts and a longer membership duration. While members still appeared to prefer input from a more 'expert' peer, perceptions of giving and receiving feedback became more positive over time for many members.

Contribution 2: Online Knowledge Creation and Socialization

Some applications of Nonaka's SECI knowledge framework (1991, 1994) to online communities have had difficulty with the socialization mode. Because the indwelling and physical proximity described by Nonaka are, for some authors, more problematic in the online environment, researchers have either downplayed its importance in online settings (Bryceson, 2007) or omitted it altogether from their analysis (Haag & Duan, 2012).

In this study's modification, socialization underpins and permeates the other modes of the framework as a foundation for socially-constructed learning, allows acculturation into the practices of essay writing and exam preparation, and provides an originating point for empathy, shared experiences, and goals. The modified framework suggests a more fluid and less structured movement between the modes of knowledge creation.

Learning about writing is a social activity, with writing-as-thinking (Applebee, 1984; Scardamalia et al., 1984) encouraging reflection, self-regulation and critical thinking: it is itself a form of knowledge creation, a conversion from the writer's own tacit awareness of an issue into a more explicit one. Writing, even in the narrow genre of academic essays for IELTS with its structures, slots, and constraints (Collins & Ferguson, 1993), is a conversation, not just with oneself, but an intertextual, socially-

mediated act in which the audience informs the writer's hand and ideas are bounced between what is clearly known and easily articulated to that which is less well-understood and requires effort to express. In writing as a second language and in feedback discussion, there are additional challenges posed by usage, accuracy, awareness, proficiency and exposure, as well as cultural understandings and rhetorical patterns of different members of the audience.

Nonaka's knowledge spiral, in microcosm, resembles writing as a process: the underlying awareness of the social setting or audience; the initial externalization or draft of ideas; the deliberate combination of feedback from others, literary devices, vocabulary, grammar and organization; and the individual reflection, refinement, application, and practice.

While Nonaka's model may be applicable to online settings, it may not provide a detailed set of triggers or guidelines for developers of online community, and in this it differs in intent and applicability from instruments such as the community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000).

Contribution 3: Mediation of the Discussion Forum Technology

Scardamalia and Bereiter (2008, p. 7), Thomas (2002), and others have criticized discussion forums as being suitable more for tips on "laying floor tile" than for complex problem-solving or consensus because of the difficulty of synthesizing information from many threads and contributors. However, these concerns did not appear to affect the sharing and creation of knowledge by members. Although there was no almost discussion of ideas in the essays, the work of members in analyzing the writing of others, identifying problems in organization, evaluating essays against complex scales such as the IELTS banding descriptors, suggesting rewrites, and critically combining information from a variety of sources (readability tools, other websites, textbooks, and previous experiences) would seem to provide clear evidence of critical thinking.

Critical thinking may have occurred in a slightly different sequence to that desired in many forums in which consensus and synthesis may be expected in a thread. Here, while critical thinking skills were required to analyze peer writing, comparing it or feedback to other examples, and evaluating it against complex criteria, there was little synthesis or agreement – or disagreement – within threads. Instead, synthesis was generally evidenced in subsequent essays.

While early writing on asynchronous discussion hoped for greater empowerment of less-vocal members as control was transferred from moderators, members in the current forum did not appear to seek more egalitarian or looser structures. Instead, they proposed more controls on membership, smaller restricted groups with greater responsibility, and increased accountability and structure.

In the forum, the content of the essays themselves was secondary to the ability to use the target forms in the L2, and learners focused on analysis and evaluation of other members' ability to use this form rather than on explicit critical discussion of problems or ideas.

Contribution 4: Previous Learning and Online Experiences

Although the forum was not a conventional classroom, many previous formal learning experiences appeared to shape some members' expectations and interactions. In conventional classrooms, students are often expected to reciprocate in peer editing activities which may be required and graded. In the forum's more open setting, the form and extent of participation was decided by members, reflecting their perceptions and proficiency, and reciprocation was not required.

In many classroom settings, it may be uncommon or inappropriate for students to direct the teacher or to preface their homework or assignments with notes or requests, and any response to teacher feedback may be at the learner's discretion. In the absence of explicit roles for teachers and learners, interactions in the first few months were similar to many such classroom settings. A presumption of teacher presence may have resulted in some members seeking feedback, rather than giving it, and may have stifled debate. However, over time and with increased engagement and membership, new roles arose for members and moderators alike.

Structures in the forum should perhaps have been made more explicit, with clearly described roles for individuals and expectations for the activities associated with each role. Managers and designers of online communities may have two choices: to openly state the terms of participation and reward specific contributions, or to leave it open to the community to determine its own forms of participation, with literature suggesting that a clear intent and expectations can provide a framework for contribution (Singh & Holt, 2013). While community managers may wish to see forum members participating in discussion and producing shared or negotiated artifacts, they may also have to provide structures that allow other forms of participation. A balance may be needed between restrictive roles shaped by the

application software or scripted by forum managers, and the uncertainty generated by a lack of participation guidelines.

Perhaps the ‘dependable behavior’ (Katz, 1964) required of employees in bricks-and-mortar companies has, for online settings in which the core requirement is contribution and knowledge sharing, evolved into Boud’s interdependence (1988) or structural dependence (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999).

Contribution 5: Lurking

Lurking or less-visible participation was a key feature of the forum. Although lurking is usually viewed as negatively impacting community, it appeared to have advantages for the organization and for members, allowing scalability for the community and allowing alternative forms of participation to emerge such as increased reflection and a choice of interaction with particular peers and content. It helped strike a balance between maximizing the input from members and overwhelming members with too many essays. Lurking may have helped to establish trust or commitment, with members spared the need to participate in ways for which they were not ready or able and given space to become comfortable with more visible forms of participation.

Online communities supporting informal learning may need to set aside traditional classroom assumptions regarding reciprocity and participation, and either allow members more autonomy in deciding the extent and form of participation or specify clear expectations for participation. If members act in communities out of community interest and to share expertise (Wasko & Faraj, 2000), then newer forms of peer “teaching presence” (Anderson et al., 2001), not teacher presence, may be needed to facilitate participation.

Visitors and members who practice lurking, or less-visible participation, may need to be encouraged to try more visible forms, particularly if the community is dependent on such artifacts. These may not be limited to essays, which may be time-consuming or demanding, but could take the form of social identity, social support, or shorter writing exercises, activities, polls, questions or quizzes. Moderators may need to provide opportunities for different levels of participation, avoid forcing members into restricted roles, and consider ways of supporting the emergence of community-determined roles.

Contribution 6: Roles and Community Intent

Questions arise when applying models from conventional organizations such as organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988) or organizational commitment

(Bateman et al., 2011; Fugelstad et al., 2012) to online learning settings. Although, as Organ suggested, OCB may seem intuitive, applying it to online settings may be problematic because of the close relationship between the intent or core task of knowledge communities and the behaviors that support those tasks. Not all online behaviors promote “the effective functioning of the organization” (Organ, 1997, p. 86) or support task performance, and more analysis may be needed to help unblur the borderlines between core and discretionary online participation.

Roles in the forum were evolving and overlapping, rather than fixed, and more difficult to separate from the core intention of the community. Without clear expectations and guidelines, it was not surprising that members would display uncertainty or limit their participation, as in the early months of the forum. Over time, however, members took on roles associated with teachers or moderators in forums in more conventional educational settings: welcoming and orienting new members, providing encouragement, and responding to neglected threads. Members also motivated and empathized by sharing frustrations, anecdotes, successes, or aspirations.

While members tended to display particular micro or meso patterns of behavior, such as lurker, requester of feedback, starter of new threads, responder, or giver of feedback, many of these changed with time, engagement and with increased confidence or changes in perception. The view of Strijbos and De Laat (2010) of roles as being positioned on a continuum from individual behaviors through repeated patterns to longer stances or approaches allows such movement or emergence, and its description of a macro-level role as a stance or disposition echoes Glaser’s critical thinking stance (1941).

By specifying expectations, the core intent of the community becomes clearer. The question that Smith, Organ and Near (1983) asked bank management about their employees in early OCB research also holds true for online communities:

What kinds of things do you like to have people in your group do, but you know that you can’t actually force them to do it, can’t promise any tangible rewards for doing it, and can’t punish them for not doing it? (Organ, 1997, p. 93)

Posing the question to designers and moderators of online communities may help to distinguish core community functions from behaviors and interactions which support

the social environment of task performance (Organ, 1997), particularly when that task comprises knowledge creation or sharing.

6.2 Future Research and Directions

Future Research

An extensive body of essays, feedback, and commentary was generated in the forum, and this could provide a rich resource for a narrower focus in language learning research (van der Pol et al., 2008; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). One valuable area might be in linguistic analysis of the comments as related to particular levels of proficiency. Another possible avenue might be a detailed examination of changes in proficiency in members' essays over time in the forum. Research into the members' understanding of the requirements of the genre and task could also cast light on the link between the use of model essays or examples and their application.

Directions for the Forum

This research began with an interest in what motivated people to contribute online. Now that the willingness and ability of learners to participate in feedback on essay writing has been demonstrated, I would like to continue a resource of value to many. As a by-product of this research, I hope that a redesigned writefix.com forum would benefit learners, particularly non-traditional learners, who need to improve their writing. Whether they participate actively by posting or giving feedback, or whether they choose simply to read, learners of English worldwide could benefit as a result of having a simple interface allowing exposure to peers' essays, comments, and interactions.

Among the improvements suggested by active members was an easier interface in the text editor for adding comments, many of which were standard and repetitive, and which could provide links to examples or detailed explanations. Reducing the amount of time needed and having templates of comments might make more people willing to give feedback (Constant et al., 1996), not just leveraging the kindness of strangers, but allowing members to see the value of giving feedback for their own writing.

Example of possible additions to the site could include features similar to those in the University of Pittsburgh's SWoRD program (Cho & Schunn, 2007) or the WebPA system (Loddington, Pond, Wilkinson, & Willmot, 2009) with provision for anonymous or known review, ratings of reviews, algorithms to indicate reviewer consistency, and profiles of reviewers. To examine Surowiecki's concept of the

wisdom of crowds (2004), or Matsumoto's concept of something "fundamentally common" in writing (1995, p. 26), I would like to investigate whether a diverse population of learners, teachers and others could quickly grade essays on simplified versions of scales such as the IELTS descriptors.

Such technology-driven approaches might allow more members to contribute more content more quickly. However, in contrast to such an emphasis on quantity, members requested more organized and targeted activities within the forum such as micro-courses or timetabled workshops with generally smaller groups and selected membership, all of which might require support from moderators or knowledge managers. Resolving the tension between increased scale and greater engagement for smaller groups would require a clear assessment of the forum's goal or purpose.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

The voluntary, self-selecting nature of the forum meant that members may already have had positive attitudes to peer editing, since it was promoted as a core focus of the site. Most members, however, claimed little or no previous experience with peer feedback in writing, and many cited little experience of any discussion in learning English.

The lack of investigation of the effect of my input as moderator (or designer, peer, researcher, or teacher) undoubtedly changed the complexion of the research. While my focus was always on peer-to-peer interaction, much of that may have been influenced or modelled on my forms of participation, witnessed and perhaps internalized by members (Collison et al., 2000; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992).

Written responses from members to questions might have provided better insights about peer editing than information from member interviews. Given that much of the literature on online asynchronous discussion with L2 learners notes the importance of allowing time for members to reflect, asking for input through oral interviews may have put members at a disadvantage.

While some members who agreed to be interviewed may have perceived themselves as having adequate skills in speaking, interviews may have increased anxiety among those who lacked such confidence.

The selection of interviewees could have been much broader. Gall et al. (2007) suggest the need to be sensitive to what is excluded as well as what is included: I

would have liked more interviews with infrequent posters and members who had never posted. If my intent was to see the world through the eyes of the culture being examined (Barnes, 1996), then not having representatives of one of the chief activities, lurking or low-level participation, could be regarded as a serious omission. However, the input of some of the most active posters – the core group, or “critical mass” (Oliver et al., 1985; Peddibhotla & Subramani, 2007; Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007) – provided valuable information regarding a significant activity affecting many members of the group, and, in any case, it later became clear that all members engaged in forms of lurking at various times.

Invitations were issued after the forum closed, which may have made participants less willing to take part and their reports colored by the time lapsed between membership and their interview.

6.4 Reflection

The initial impetus for the research was to wonder why people helped each other online, particularly in a second language. Research suggested myriad reasons for contributing to online forums, public document repositories, or other user-content sites. Words like helpfulness, helping, social presence, altruism, fulfillment of needs, need for praise, need for reward, obligation, reciprocity, paying forward, paying backward, desire for publication, desire to improve by contributing, practice, new skills, concentration, public recognition, volunteerism, restitution, creation of a public good, and professional development were just some of the motivators and terms associated with online contribution. My initial feeling was that contributing to the forum represented for most members a form of helping, a discretionary, altruistic activity, with perhaps some of the motivators above featuring to a lesser extent.

As moderator, I may have hoped for and privileged visible feedback by members on their peers’ writing, rather than other forms of engagement such as lurking or seeking feedback. However, this slightly narrow view of feedback as a product – whether from a peer or a teacher – did not take into account the extent of discussion, negotiation, self-assessment, and learning involved when people interact.

The analysis of member interactions encouraged me to shift this view of feedback from being a comment (whether from a peer or a teacher), or product, to a more socially-centered process. I had perhaps forgotten that the giving feedback in the form of commenting on an essay cannot occur in isolation. In retrospect, my emphasis may have been on the essays as a growing collection or resource of artifacts,

rather than on the the business of people interpreting and reshaping each other's essays.

Another motivator was a feeling that visitors would recognize good writing if they saw it and that they would instinctively know a Band 5 or a Band 6, whether benchmarked against their own writing and previous scores or against external criteria, such as the IELTS descriptors.

One problem I faced was knowing when to stop gathering data. Constable (2003), echoing Gold's cautionary warning about the participant-as-observer (1958), noted that virtual ethnographic approaches can blur the boundary between home and office and draw the researcher in, to the neglect of the ultimate task of writing (Constable, 2003, p. 4). This was certainly the case in this study: the bulk of my work was during the data gathering phase was spent on replying to comments, responding to essays and administering the forum rather than in analyzing or theorizing it. Not until the forum closed did work begin on data analysis and on seeking patterns.

The most significant of the forum was perhaps in the development of the members' writing and the members' increased confidence in their ability to assess their own writing and that of others. It is hoped that this confidence will stay with them after the exam and perhaps even extend to skills other than writing. A significant group of members have made a transition from consumers or outsiders to insiders (Sadler, 1989, p. 135), or a form of cognitive apprenticeship (Collins et al., 1987; Gunawardena et al., 1997), joining the "guild" of people able to use multiple criteria to determine quality.

Disappointment: Numbers of Members Reached

While tens of thousands of visitors viewed essays and comments, only a relatively small number of participants became active, fewer than might have been encountered in a normal teaching load over the period. This could be viewed as disappointing given the potential for reaching thousands of participants.

However, the relatively small number of members attracted to the forum should not necessarily be viewed as a failure, nor should apparently low levels of interactivity (Henri, 1992). Instead, they can be viewed as a highly effective form of filtering and as an outcome of the autonomous choices of members regarding their form of participation. As Gunawardena et al. (1997) pointed out, negotiation can be largely unspoken, with members taking away their own meanings. Thousands lurked and

may have benefited, while those who chose to participate more actively also did so largely out of choice.

Sustainability

The forum stopped in August 2012, just a few months after it started to become more active in March, and to the dismay of some of the more active members. There were two main reasons for closing the forum: the need to start working on analyzing the data, and the fact that saturation had been reached in terms of the types of problems arising. Due to the member turnover, many questions posed by participants had been answered earlier, and some longer-term active members were beginning to notice particular behaviors of newcomers. In addition, the discussion forum format, in particular the choice of thread structure with essays at the center of discourse rather than issues such as layout or grammar meant that it was hard for newcomers to access information in any other way than to post essays and ask questions that may have already been answered.

If the forum had continued, the question of sustainability and the size of the critical mass required to create a self-managed and self-sustaining community would have arisen. Members might have taken on new roles as knowledge managers or knowledge enablers (von Krogh & Ichijo, 2000), with authority for housekeeping, moderating, and sustaining the forum. The result for the website might be a dilution of the relationship between members and the original moderator, but at the benefit of much increased scale, and greater attention to particular levels of writing (e.g. dedicated areas for lower or higher bands or for particular types of error, such as organization, coherence, grammar, or idea development).

It remains to be seen if, given enough members, time and commitment, and a supportive atmosphere, a forum can naturally develop a balance of members who give feedback, apply a range of criteria, post new essays at a variety of levels, and share experiences and social information. Suggestions for subgroups and for tighter control were beginning to emerge. Although it is not clear whether the members who proposed these would have had the time or energy to take care of such structures, more administrative roles and autonomy could have allowed the forum to grow much larger and allowed some members to develop valuable skills. What incentives members would need to take on these roles would depend on their motivations and time.

Referring to online communities of practice, Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) note that they

...often start tentatively, with only an initial sense of why they should come together and with modest technology resources. Then they continuously reinvent themselves. Their understanding of their domain expands. New members join, others leave. Their practices evolve. (Wenger et al., 2009, p. 11)

Despite its tentative start, the forum showed that learners from across the world were willing and able to give valuable feedback to each other. Hopefully a reinvented and evolved learning community can provide a setting for many other learners to come together and develop their writing.

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Appendix 1: Sample Thread

A sample thread (one of the 545 threads) is shown below.

[Topic 568]

August 14 - August 23, 2011 - 11 days

Posts (Thread depth): **14** posts in thread

(DanZhu, RoshanIELTS, DanZhu, RoshanIELTS, DanZhu,
RoshanIELTS, TOEFLgenie, RoshanIELTS, DanZhu, Mohan,
RoshanIELTS, writefix, writefix, RoshanIELTS)

Unique participants: **5** unique contributors

(DanZhu, RoshanIELTS, TOEFLgenie, Mohan, Writefix)

Word Count: **2,836**

Should governments make more effort to promote alternative sources of energy? Related Topics Topic RSS
 Topic ID 568

Tags: fossil fuels oil coal gas CO2 carbon dioxide global warming enironment oil imports pollution renewable green sustainable wind
 solar geothermal hydro electricity

August 14, 2012 3:24 am 1 Post ID 2151 5 ★★★★★

RoshanIELTS
 Member
 Forum Posts: 32
 Member Since: July 13, 2012
 Offline

Governments should make more effort to promote alternative sources of energy. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Energy is the most important topic in the twenty first century. Many nations regardless of being from the first world countries or the second world, have an ever increasing reliance on sources of energy. The threat of energy shortage, environmental considerations and the imperils of being dependent to certain countries, which are the major suppliers of energy, encourages us to search for new sources of energy more than ever.

Obviously, taking steps towards new sources of energy is not always an easy task. Most importantly because there are several opposition views against this movement. Evidently, the cost of enhancing the production and consumption of new energies is remarkably high. Additionally, the necessary technology for this purpose is immature and the whole topic still needs high volume of research and study. As a result, the overall cost related to new energies is high comparing to legacy energies. Adapting societies who are used to legacy energies, to the modern energy sources is also another hindrance.

But non of these reasons shall stop the governments from promoting alternative energy sources. Firstly because sooner or later we run out of legacy sources such as oil or coal and the consequences are catastrophic. It will be a huge global turmoil if the flow of energy stops even for a single day. Secondly, many nations have a strong dependency on countries with legacy sources of energy which makes their political or economical situation quite unsustainable and fragile. As a matter of fact, these nations shall search for new energies in a restless fashion. Lastly, not all legacy sources are environmentally friendly in contrast with new sources such as wind energy. For this reason, also it is favorable to acquire alternative sources of energy.

To sum up, although there exists many forces against promotion of new energies, we should overcome the problems towards this point, and embrace the idea. If we do not act soon, we sure end up with energy shortage disaster, more damages to the environment and an annoying dependency on aliens.

August 14, 2012 12:58 pm 2 Post ID 2153 5 ★★★★★

TOEFLgenie
 Member
 Forum Posts: 17
 Member Since: August 14, 2012
 Offline

hi,

After going through your essay i can say i liked your reasoning but it lacks bit clarity which u can do by giving appropriate examples where ever possible which will make your essay better and also increase the length. For e.g

Why should Govt make more effort to promote alternative sources of energy?

Govt is responsible for the development and welfare of its people therefore should make efforts and also for the following reasons:

- 1) Because sources of energy we have are not eco-friendly -cause pollution example – acid rain, global warming
- 2) they are not renewable and limited so in near future we need alternative that's why research is going on to make vehicle run by Hydrogen which is abundant and can be produced through other sources.
- 3) reduce the dependency on other Nations for such sources and at the same time reduce the probability of having war for such sources – e.g. USA dependent on Saudi Arabia, etc.
- 4) Why government should make efforts and not any private body – because finding alternative source of energy requires huge investment which cannot be done by any private company etc.

finally conclusion.

Please let me know if you find this useful.

August 14, 2012
8:20 pm



DanZhu

Member

Forum Posts: 67

Member Since:

July 16, 2012

Offline



Post ID 2163



Energy is the most important topic in the twenty first century. Many nations regardless of being from the first world-countries or the second world, have an ever increasing reliance on sources of energy. The threat of energy shortage, environmental considerations and the imperils of being dependent to **certain countries**, which are the major suppliers of energy, (actually, I think this sentence could be shorten) encourages us to search for new sources of energy more than ever.

Obviously, taking steps towards new sources of energy is not always and easy task. Most importantly because there are several opposition views against this movement. **Evidently**, the cost of enhancing the production and consumption of new energies is **remarkably** high. **Additionally**, the necessary technology for this purpose is immature and the whole topic still needs high volume of research and study. **As a result**, the overall cost related to new energies is high comparing to legacy energies. Adapting societies who are used to consume legacy energies, to the modern energy sources is also another hindrance. some form of words are overuse. (adv.)

But non of thisese reasons shall stop the governments from promoting alternative energy sources. **Firstly**, because sooner or later we run out of legacy sources such as oil or coal and the consequences are catastrophic. It will be a huge global turmoil if the flow of energy stops even (though just) for a single day. **Secondly**, many nations have a strong dependency on countries with legacy sources of energy which makes their political or economical situation quite unsustainable and fragile. As a matter of fact, these nations shall search for new energies in a restless fashion. **Lastly**, not all legacy sources are environmentally friendly in contrast with new sources such as wind energy. For this reason, also it is favorable to acquire alternative sources of energy.

To sum up, although there exists many forces against promotion of new energies, we should overcome the problems towards this point ,and embrace the idea. If we do not act soon, we sure end up with energy shortage disaster, more damages to the environment and an annoying dependency on aliens.

hey, dude, apparently, ur skills are way overpass me. Idea and grammar is good, just one thing.

u repeat the same structure of word constantly, i use the yellow pen to make it clear.

Best regards,

DanZhu

August 14, 2012
10:21 pm



RoshanIELTS

Member

Forum Posts: 32

Member Since:

July 13, 2012

Offline



Post ID 2165



Hi guys,

Having more supportive examples and using a variety of sentence structures are what I learned from your comments. Thank you.

I've a problem with the Three Ideas rule. In fact, if I want to include three ideas in each paragraph, I will likely run out of time.

I wonder how I can have three ideas plus supporting examples in each paragraph and pack the essay at a maximum of 300 words.

Another point is about using a variety of grammar structures. I feel I can't utilize several tenses because most of essays need a dialogue in present tense. What else can I do to enrich my essay in terms of grammar?

Thank vou guvs,

Van

August 15, 2012
2:08 pm



DanZhu

Member

Forum Posts: 67

Member Since:
July 16, 2012

● Offline

5



Post ID 2170



Hey **Van**

I have the same problems lke u. These two parts is weak.

I guess just cut down that overdue phrases.

More than 300 words is not a big deal, but u should promise that the content is useful.

Each paragraph has three points, and it will easy to over 300 words.

I think ur work will be fine. Dont worry.

Dan

August 18, 2012
3:42 pm



RoshanIELTS

Member

Forum Posts: 32

Member Since:
July 13, 2012

● Offline

6



Post ID 2190



Dear: **Dan and TOEFLgenie**

Could you please give me a mark from 9 according to the IELTS writing assessment criteria?

http://www.ieltsessentials.com/PDF/BandcoreDescriptors_WritingT2.pdf

Thanks a lot,

Van

August 18, 2012
7:38 pm



Post ID 2191



DanZhu

Member

Forum Posts: 67

Member Since:
July 16, 2012

Offline

Hey, **Van**

I m not quite sure about ur meaning. u wanna an assessment criteria?

U already get the pdf. Do u want me to paste it here?

Task response: 1. fully addresses all parts of the task

2. presents a fully developed position in answer to the question with relevant, fully extended and well supported ideas

Coherence and conhesion: 1. uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention

2. skilfully manages paragraphing

Lexical resources: 1. uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'

Grammar range and accuracy: 1. uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'

Best regards,

Dan

August 18, 2012
10:37 pm



RoshanIELTS
Member

Forum Posts: 32
Member Since:
July 13, 2012

● Offline

8    Post ID 2193 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I got a 5.5 mark for this essay from an examiner. I wonder if this is really worth 5.5?!

Thanks

August 19, 2012
4:35 pm



DanZhu
Member

Forum Posts: 67
Member Since:
July 16, 2012

● Offline

9    Post ID 2195 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Really? This essay is way better than mine, and my work is 5.5, so I guess u can achieve a high score.

In my opinion, its better than 5.5, maybe the examiner is strict. I m afraid so.

I hope Enda could come here to evaluate ur essay

August 19, 2012
9:51 pm



Mohan
Member

Forum Posts: 3
Member Since:
August 17, 2012

● Offline

10    Post ID 2196 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Hi **RoshanIELTS**

Great thanks to send this essay. I should say that it would be better you notice some points. Firstly, I am not examiner, nor am I a native speaker. To partly answer why your examiner gave you or an estimated score of your writing is 5.5 (or may be 6) I think the problem mostly in **Task response**. If you look at the question you find that the questions asks you **whether you are in side of promoting alternative resources or not**. I think you should already clear your position. But I think you jump in conclusion without any rational reasons already made. **At the first paragraph** you mentioned how difficult the developing energy would be!! without any explanation that how we overcome this problem. Actually, you've dealt a a lot with difficulties (took one paragraph) while you are in favor of promoting alternative resources!! look at this Band description **addresses the task only partially; the format may be inappropriate in places**

- expresses a position but the development is not always clear and there may be no conclusions drawn

I guess that and plus many mistakes made in almost every sentences reduced your mark.

August 20, 2012
2:22 am



RoshanIELTS
Member

Forum Posts: 32
Member Since:
July 13, 2012

● Offline

11    Post ID 2199 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Hi **Mohan**

Thanks for your time.

I think I need to complete my writing puzzle as I see there is still some weaknesses.

My marks fluctuates between 6 to 7 normally but for the next Ielts exam I need to get a mark 7 or above.

Hope I can get it.

Van

August 22, 2012
3:49 pm

12    Post ID 2222

5      



writefix
Admin

Forum Posts: 763

Member Since:
July 27, 2011

 Offline

Hi **RoshanIELTS**

Thanks for this essay!

Punctuation: Commas

Don't separate the subject ('many nations') from its verb ('have') with a comma. You wrote:

Many nations regardless of being from the first world countries or the second world, have an ever increasing reliance on sources of energy

You would never write "Many countries, have beautiful national parks." Be careful with commas – **if in doubt, leave them out.**

Here's another sentence with incorrect commas:

- Adapting societies who are used to legacy energies, to the modern energy sources is also another hindrance.

As I suggest - leave commas out! Keep sentences simple. Here's one possible rewrite:

Changing patterns of use based on legacy energies to more modern energy sources is another hindrance. OR

Another problem is changing attitudes. The way we used energy at present cannot be the same in the future.

Punctuation: Fragment

This is not a complete sentence:

- Most importantly because there are several opposition views against this movement.

You need to join it to the previous or following sentence.

This is another fragment:

- Firstly because sooner or later we run out of legacy sources such as oil or coal and the consequences are catastrophic

The word 'because' introduces a dependent clause. It can't be a complete sentence by itself in formal writing. Read more about [Fragments](#) or [Comma Splices](#).

Shorten and Simplify

This sentence is nice but it's too long.

The threat of energy shortage, environmental considerations and the perils of being dependent on certain countries, which are the major suppliers of energy, encourages us to search for new sources of energy more than ever. (35 words)



Let's tighten it up a little:

Energy shortages, environmental concerns, and the perils of being dependent on certain countries are pushing the search for alternative energy. (20 words)

The search for alternative energy has become more urgent due to worries over energy shortages, environmental concerns, and fears of over-reliance on unstable countries for oil. (26 words)

Worries over energy shortages, the environment and over-dependence on imported fuels is making the search for alternative energy more critical. (20 words)

Verb Tense

You wrote:

- But non of **this** reasons **shall** stop **the** governments from promoting alternative energy sources.

Here's one possible rewrite:

But none of these reasons should stop governments from promoting alternative energy sources.

Clarify/Verb Tense

You wrote:

*As a matter of fact, these nations **shall** search for new energies in a **restless** fashion.*

I'm not sure what you mean, but here's one possible rewrite:

*These countries are aggressively looking for new sources of energy **OR**
These countries are at the forefront of the search for new energy.*

Shorten/Simplify

The next suggestions aren't really about making shorter sentences, but removing the empty "it." You wrote:

It will be a huge global turmoil if the flow of energy stops even for a single day.

The 'it' (anticipatory it) We can remove the empty reference at the start. (We could use 'There will/would be' but it's just the same problem):

*If the flow of energy stopped even for a single day, huge global turmoil would result **OR**
Huge global turmoil would result if energy flows were stopped even for a single day.*

Have a look at [a good explanation here](#).

Shorten/Simplify: 2

This sentence, however, really does need to be simplified:

To sum up, although there exists many forces against promotion of new energies, we should overcome the problems towards this point and embrace the idea.

Help! Vagueness alert! **Padding!** Woolly! Touchy-feely, and meaningless! What does this say? What does it mean? It sounds lovely, but it meaningless. Say something! What does 'this point' refer to? What does 'the idea' refer to? What are the problems?

It's the conclusion - summarize, give the key points, repeat!

The structure "although there exist (it should be singular, not plural) is just too stuffy and too formal. Dump it.

Here's one possible rewrite with some examples from your essay

To sum up, developing new energy will be expensive and require us to change many current attitudes and practices.

Word Choice/Word Form/Usage

- an annoying dependency on **aliens**. → an annoying dependency on imported oil. [Aliens are people from other planets – Mars, Jupiter, or Zog.

August 22, 2012 3:58 pm 13 Post ID 2223 0 ★★★★★



writefix
Admin
Forum Posts: 763
Member Since: July 27, 2011
● Offline

Hi RoshanIELTS

I do think that 5.5 is a little harsh. Perhaps the teacher/examiner was trying to focus on one particular skill or area – I don't know the situation.

But I wish **Danzhu** was the examiner! So kind and generous with marks!

Maybe somewhere in between is about right. I think overall you should be able to reach your goal if (1) you make sure to have enough ideas, and (2), don't pad.

When you get the question, underline like crazy, highlight, draw arrows, draw circles, write related words, synonyms, opposites; change nouns into verbs and verbs into adjectives. Play for at least five minutes until you are sure of the question, and keep going back to it until you have a plan for each paragraph. Have examples for each idea.

Here's [an example of a topic with related words](#) and brainstorm.

The problem of padding and repetitive sentences which look nice but don't really say a lot will go away if you have enough ideas. So concentrate on getting as many ideas as you can, and aim for a maximum of 300 words. Less can sometimes be more!

August 23, 2012 12:29 pm 14 Post ID 2236 0 ★★★★★



RoshanIELTS
Member
Forum Posts: 32
Member Since: July 13, 2012
● Offline

When you get the question, underline like crazy, highlight, draw arrows, draw circles, write related words, synonyms, opposites; change nouns into verbs and verbs into adjectives. Play for at least five minutes until you are sure of the question, and keep going back to it until you have a plan for each paragraph. Have examples for each idea.

That was inspiring. I'll put this strategy into action for my next essay...

Appendix 2: Coding Scheme

As described in Chapter 3, while a range of pre-existing coding schemes were available in the literature, a decision was made to first allow categories and subcategories to emerge from the data and then to map those categories to related concepts in the relevant literature.

The main themes and indicators which emerged from the findings and which were subsequently linked to similar categorizations from the literature are grouped here according to the three research questions.

Research Question 1: Types of Interaction

- What types of interactions occur in an online discussion forum on essay writing for language learners?

| Initial category and indicator | Subsequent links to literature | Example or notes |
|---|---|---|
| Post type (essay only, appeal for comments, question only, essay and question, appeal to admin, feedback to other, response to feedback, suggestion, statement, question re feedback, community related, request for partner, general question, question for admin) | Interactivity (Henri, 1992) | |
| Post Length: short (1-3 sentences of original content), medium (4-9 sentences of original content), long | Elementary or In-depth clarification (Hara et al., 2000); | |
| One line or token feedback | Unfocused feedback (Ellis, 2009) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks so much Dan Zhu for ur useful comments. Bye • Hi Katy I think we should think simple as much as possible and avoid long sentence.but your wriing is good as far as I'm concerned bye • Thank you Lina, for your comment I find it logic once again thanks Alina |
| Type of Help sought: (general help, request for comments, specific help, speaking partner, usability, appeal, clarification, admin advice) | Cognitive: Triggers (Garrison et al., 2001) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope I can improve my english via writefix. I will appreciate if someone here can help. • Feel free to correct my essay, I'm thankful if someone will correct it because wrting is my weakest link. Thank you in advance. • Dear Abdulqadir, Thank you for your reply, we can practise spoken English through Skype whenever possible. If you want, you can define certain free time according to your work and availability and I will follow it. Once again thank you |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Post addressed to (one, two, moderator, group, all, none) Involving many/one | Cohesive (Rourke et al., 1999) - vocatives, addresses individuals/groups: social presence, Sense of community, inclusive pronouns (Rourke et al., 1999) | |
|---|--|--|

Research Question 2: Social and Affective Factors in Feedback

- What types of feedback on essay writing indicate learning and knowledge-sharing among forum members?

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Aspiration | Verbal support (Henri, 1992); Disclosure (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope you will get a high score. • I hope I can be ur examiner and I must can give u a high score. • I think I can launch my visa process with this score but maybe in future I need 7 in each band. |
| Encouragement of one or many | Verbal support (Henri, 1992); Building community (Lapadat, 2007); Reacting emotionally to others (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002) Interactive: Complimenting, expressing appreciation (Rourke et al., 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your remarks have motivated me to write more essays. • The rest is fine and I am sure next time you will score 7 :) • hi Hilda08: Your "rant" really resonates with me!!!! • I have the same problem as you several weeks ago, my sentence is long and meaningless. I made tons of grammar mistakes in my essays. I felt awful at that time, but never lose heart. Come on. • Hey, DanZhu, Good Luck~~! I believe you can make it! • I hope we all achieve the ielts test soon • don't worry dear.. just practice.. practice...and practice... believe me..it works!!! • Hi All, HI Lily, I have the same situation. I hope finally we can get score what we need. |
| Formality/informality | Cohesive devices (Lapadat, 2007); Affective: Conventional or unconventional expressions of emotion, humor (Rourke et al., 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your sentence is toooooooooooooo long :) • Nice to see you! Did you enjoy a favorable and memorable holiday? I hope so :x • Long time no "see". haha~ • COUNT ME IN! • Hey dude, I read ur essay, its fine.1. Write a thesis sentence2, Pay attention to the punctuation 3... • I am sure you gonna rock in ur language test. • Hoping that everything is fine oh!:) |
| Tone, Gratitude, Politeness | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you very much. I'm very happy because of your comment. • Sincere thanks, AliceXi That is very useful for me... |
| Newcomer, introduction | Social presence, introductions (Henri, 1992); | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is my first essay on writefix. Please, don't hesitate to leave your comment on my writing. • Hello guys. I am a new member in here. And this forum is very useful for my |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| | | <p>writing, because I can see others essays also be fixed by many users.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm a new comer here with one of my IELTS essays. Wish to get your comments on my writing, Thanks a lot. • Hi folks, I am a newbie and stumble upon this fantastic website today then write one essay to share with all of you straight after registration (SOooo excited .lol) |
| Response to feedback | General "Will" response rather than specific action; Cohesive (Rourke et al., 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks, Mr. Writefix & AliceXi....Really appreciate it. I'm really weak on grammar and my vocab not so good. Will work on it. • After finishing my IELTS test, I'll try to add some comments on other essays. |
| We/Us; community orientation | Blanchard and Markus (2004); Social presence (Rourke et al., 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I should have wrote for your website earlier! • As Ive already said it's kind of habit to me to come here and take a look at this site now and then. |
| Thanks, response to feedback | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you all for the precious comments on my first post. • thanxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx so much for your advise • thank you for your brilliant, fabulous, and comprehensive analysis and advice |

Research Question 2: Cognitive Factors in Feedback

- What types of feedback on essay writing indicate learning and knowledge-sharing among forum members?

While writers such as Ware and O'Dowd (2008) and van der Pol, van den Berg, Admiraal, and Simons (2008) suggested coding schemes for language-related episodes or the linguistic aspects of peer feedback in detail, feedback was only one part of the focus of the current study, and accordingly less detailed analysis was made of such features such as length of response, the target structures (whether macro or micro-level), or the use of internal or external information and resources to support feedback.

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Feedback type (macro, micro, major rewrite, vague praise, specific praise, vague criticism, specific criticism, ideas criticised, thanks, thanks and appeal, question, practical issue) | (Ellis, 2009; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Shute, 2008; van der Pol et al., 2008; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) | |
| Offers or requests for help | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope I can improve my english via writefix. I will appreciate if someone here can help. • Feel free to correct my essay, I'm thankful if someone will correct it because wrting is my weakest link. Thank you in advance. • Dear Akm, Thank you for your reply, we |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | <p>can practise spoken English through Skype whenever possible. If you want, you can define certain free time according to your work and availability and I will follow it. Once again thank you</p> |
| <p>Specific question on format, organization, content, grammar</p> | <p>Specific content questions – either vertical or horizontal (Fahy, 2001); Content directed questions (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • i am kind of confused about the linkers, the overused, tired old phrases. • I still wonder a bit why simple is regarded great? Isn't there too simple? • Hi everyone, I am confused in the words "affect, effect, impact, influence". Can you tell me what are the different and make some sentences? Thanks a lot! Best regards • Some teachers really insist on using passive forms instead of active forms. Now I was wondering which one I should use to get higher score in IELTS. |
| <p>Analysis tools used - developing expertise</p> | <p>Using external information and experiences (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002) Integrating information from various sources (Garrison et al., 2001)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are going to take an IELTS exam you have to write at least 250 words. • As http://www.read-able.com/check.php shows Number of words per sentence is 18.5 • For format you can read the IELTS writing format on this site. Best of luck! • I tried the Readability Indices, but not sure which index improved means better • I see many IELTS teachers make a mistake when advise student to do not be a subjective in their essays, as they compare IELTS exam with an article they make at universities. But IELTS is quite different • Actually, the book Writing Academic English in The Longman Academic Writing Series tells us that in order to achieve coherence in a paragraph, using transition signals to link ideas is one of four ways. • As probably you know writing has 4 criteria to scoring . Task response - coherence and cohesion- Lexical resource- grammatical range and accuracy • Hi, HectorMc Could you tell me how you counted the words of this essay? Using some softwares or..... ? Thank a million |
| <p>Response to feedback</p> | <p>Response to (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Tseng & Tsai, 2010) Critical assessment of others' contributions (Newman, Webb, & Cochrane, 1995;)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here, I would like to stick to the way i write. let's wait for other comments |
| <p>Experience and Anecdotes; Storytelling</p> | <p>Stories (Fahy, 2007)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finally, I finished my dissertation and a lot of stuff, and graduated from my university. What is more, my IELTS score was admitted by my new university. So, I got some time to take a good relax and back to this forum. • Unfortunately i am naturally prompt to write as i wrote in my native language |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | | <p>(Italian), hence i elaborate complicated sentences because of that but i know it is wrong cause often people cannot get what i want to say!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my school, teachers and my senior do not encourage me to use "I" when writing an essay • Hi These days cause of watching Olympic Games really couldn't write and comment. Hope to back to normal life to contribute more to this site!! • One thing that Id like to share from my experience, I felt that the shorcut that probably elevates/improves your writing is Clarity. |
| Clarify, defend, justify, accept | Clear up ambiguities (Newman et al., 1995) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see your point but discussing why art doesnt make a lot of money would take the entire thing in a new direction. |
| Evidence of reflection, action in response to feedback | <p>Response to feedback</p> <p>Commentary (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008)</p> <p>Exploration (Garrison et al., 2001)</p> <p>Synthesis and connecting ideas (Garrison et al., 2001)</p> <p>Connecting ideas, synthesis (Garrison et al., 2001)</p> <p>Offering an approach for the task (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks all of you: to Katy, i have reduced the length of the essay, please read my up-dated one. DanZhu: i feel i have much discussions with you..... • Hey Victor, I have the same problems lke u. These two parts is weak. I guess just cut down that overdue phrases. More than 300 words is not a big deal, but u should promise that the content is useful. • So basically, I just have to cut down the size of the intro and I'll be okay, yeah? • Well because you don't understand my idea, I will rewrite it again • I've read some articles given by IELTS's examiners, and find they may prefer one paragraph containing one argument • Thank you for the feed back. I have made some changes and cut the essay short. I hope it is up to the mark now.... • Firstly, i would say that katiss and i are what you referred to as "risk-takers" who adventure to adopt some complex words but both of us are not 100% sure of their correct usage/choice. • I think that layout is generally fine because you include more ideas on supporting arguments. Perhaps it might be better to place your opposing paragraph at the beginning and follow by the last two paragraphs. • In this paragraph you have to some extent weakened your stand by contraindicating your own points indirectly • Hello TuanND, Wow what much time did you spend on this essay? Can you handle it well within 40 mins? I've noticed the essay has more than 300 words. Please see below pink inserts for reference. |
| Modelling, Internalization of moderator role | Modelling and training for feedback (Gerbic, 2006; Mangelsdorf, 1992); Cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, 2005; Collison et al., 2000; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think as Mr. Enda says avoid from generalizations • The idea is to make your essay concise, so you should try to remove redundant words. If you can write a sentence in 15 words rather than 22 words and the meaning is similar, you should try to write 15 words. |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | Gunawardena et al., 1997; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First of all, as Mr ENda always wants to show us you used some long sentences. As http://www.read-able.com/check.php shows Number of words per sentence is 18.5 • I'll start by addressing the grammar and spelling problems so we'll have a grammatically sound piece to work on. Mistakes are highlighted in yellow and crossed out, and corrections are put between brackets |
| Request for help | General request for feedback - affective (Veldhuis-Diermanse, 2002) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hello, Can everyone help me out with the essay? • I am a newbie in the forum and I am studying for IELTS exam next month. I hope that you can help to fix my essay |
| Peer to peer feedback | <p>Switching and relinquishing roles, ownership (Villamil and de Guerrero (2000; Liu and Carless, 2006)</p> <p>Scaffolding (Fahy, 2001)</p> <p>Bracketing of feedback with compliments (Lapadat, 2007)</p> <p>Switching and relinquishing roles, ownership (Villamil and de Guerrero (2000; Liu and Carless, 2006)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because Mr. Enda and other members in the forum have helped me so much, I want help others in my turn although I'm not good at English ^_^ . Would you mind if I tend to give you some comments? ;)... • Hi, I find your writing generally good and coherent, However, I will try to give you some comments, hopefully will improve it more... • in my personal view, if you can discuss both positive and negative aspects, it will improve the discussion more better. second, i think you... • Switching and relinquishing roles, ownership (Villamil and de Guerrero (2000; Liu and Carless, 2006) |
| Links to resources, tools, combination | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your essay is only 246 words in length and it doesn't meet the demand for an IELTS essay which should be at least 250 words. • As http://www.read-able.com/check.php shows Number of words per sentence is 18.5 • Maybe you should review more details of the requirement from the official website first. • Actually, this phrase I learned from the book "Successful Writing Proficiency" by Virginia Evans. Do you know that book • I liked some of the writing advice in Barrons IELTS |

Research Question 3: Identity and Perception

- What perceptions do users have of the feedback and interactions on the forum?

A: Identity and Self-Perception

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Identity: Name and Personal Information</p> | <p>Social: Self-introduction (Henri, 1992);</p> <p>Power of exam (Mickan and Motteram, 2008)</p> <p>Perception of L2 identity</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm a pharmacist, studying English for IELTS exam • You know I'm not a digital native I know only work knowldege in computer i.e pharmacy programs only and my sons teach me to a some extent I'm not a computer literate. so please do not be bored • I'm studying in Hanoi, are we in the same city? :D • Hi guys, I am the newest member of this forum and this is the first time I wrote an essay like this. • Hi, Alison. You can call me Joe. • I used to study in ACET Hanoi, now I'm living in Australia. • I tried IELTS GT 4 times now to get a score of 8 in each area. The first time i got 7 in writing with no practise some 7 month ago, then 6.5 twice in another test center • English writing and speaking is my weakness, so I hope I can improve my english via writefix. I will appreciate if someone here can help. |
| <p>Deference to more expert other/admin; Awareness of range of expertise</p> | <p>Learner attitudes to peer vs teacher feedback (Ge, 2011) (Lee, 1997, 2011; Saito, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1995) Zhang, 1995); Politeness (Amores, 1997; Johnson & Roen, 1992)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can't find any mistake in your essay... Hope other nice people can give you some advice... Best regards, Jacquil • hope Mr. Enda helps us in places where I made mistakes and also for putting complementary comments. • Here, I would like to stick to the way i write. let's wait for other comments :P |
| <p>Language (of giver), L1, language ability</p> | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • your speaking ability is definitely higher than me. • BTW,I have a feeling that your English is very well, at least better than me.haha • Some of my suggestions may be inaccurate..... • Apparently, my English skills much weaker than u guys • our teachers always told us to use some complex vocabulary, because some simple words have been used too many times • I think my english is very poor, I cant find any mistake in your essay • I do myself never care about ARTICLE because in my own langauge omitting articles does not alter the meaning a lot. |
| <p>Time, Urgency, Pressure: Power of the exam</p> | <p>Power of exam, Challenge and difficulty (Moore et al., 2011; Pennycook, 2007; Tollefson, 2000) Apprenticeship (Mickan & Motteram, 2008)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am going to take the test on the 12nd this month(it scares me to death!), so your suggestions are extremelly useful for me • Hi Ranjit79, Im afraid Im busy now • The reason why I did not reply is that I'm too eventful to type a word! • I'll be having my exam next week and I'm getting anxious already.. • I've just finished taking my IELTS exam yesterday. I want to say, I really feel the practice and comment are crucial to the exam |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there is 2 weeks left for me to practice ielts essays. So nervous. • Sorry, DanZhu and Katy, i don't have time to response your comments, but i rewrite: especially PARA 2 and 3. thank your comments • I have posted an essay 2 days back. Dint receive comments from any one yet:(Why is it so? Should i wait for few days • I cannot leave more comments because now is the middle of the night. • i am studying for my final test, so i will stop comment on other writing in a short time |
|--|--|--|

B: Perceptions of Peer Editing

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Self-criticism | Metacognitive: Comparing oneself to another as a cognitive agent (Henri, 1992) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever I want to improve one skills, I get low score in others. I'll have to take another test around 2 or 3 weeks later • I feel that I probably never could achieve band 6. • Once again a disappointing result for me... • The Speaking result is terrible. • I am going to take the ielts exam in the next three months but my writing has too much problem. • Don't dare to tell my first score. It is a shame! • The writing is tragic. • It seems that Chinese students are always using too many template-sentences, i.e. sentences like "This is considerably due" or "It is apparent that", to offset the insufficiency of words due to the lack of ideas. Actually, my essay also has this kind of defect. |
| Perceptions of Peer Editing | Positive (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2005; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998; Zhang, 1995) or negative attitudes to peer feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proof reading is also a kind of learning, right? • Hopefully, with your help, my writing skill can improve ^^ Again, thank you so much!!! • I would like to contribute to it but do not know how. I think my writing is not good enough to also fix others' essays, though I would like to. • I have to admit that at first I don't want to comment others' essays, out of many reasons. Like I am busy, lazy, it takes time and I am afraid that I would have errors when editing. But now I think to help people is fun • I believe that correcting mistakes from each other is one way of learning so no worries about that • Hello, i think peer comment is really important to improve a writing • with negative feedback, i often think carefully about it. if it is true, i change my writing. if i still feel confused, i ask my friends for further explanation. i think feedbacks are others' opinion to improve |

| | | |
|---|----------------------|---|
| <p>Difficulty, efficacy, challenge, frustration</p> | <p>Power of exam</p> | <p>your writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actually, English is my second language. It's so difficult to write an essay in 40 minutes :) • Wish I could progress. I will keep marching on! Fighting for the IELTS. • I find myself quite confused because my English teacher said that, putting more complex structures will improve my score • I realize that I have a huge disparity to achieve my goal. I need keep training. • Hi, everyone! The result came out! overall: 6.5 listening: 7 reading: 6.5 writing: 5.5 speaking: 6 It is a pity. The writing is tragic. It seems that I have to take this test again! • Writing just kills me, I don't really know what to do about it. Overall 8.0 but only 6.5 in writing. Practising seems to not help at all... |
|---|----------------------|---|

Appendix 3: Moderator Participation: Teaching Presence model

Appendices 3 and 4 are examples of my input as moderator using two models – that of Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) in Appendix 3 and that of Hattie and Timperley in Appendix 4. The purpose of having two such sets of examples is to highlight the difference between the two, with the Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, Archer model presenting a similar structure to that of Salmon (2003) in Chapter 2, in which there is a sequential process involved in moderation, with particular roles at different times. In contrast, the Hattie and Timperley model used in Appendix 4 focuses specifically on types of feedback provided by the moderator or instructor.

In their community of inquiry framework, Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) describe three categories of teaching presence: instructional design and organization; facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Below are examples from the Anderson et al coding scheme with examples of my input as moderator in the forum. All are extracts, generally from much longer posts.

Instructional Design and Organization (Anderson et al., 2001)

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting curriculum | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks for this Task 1 essay. Maybe I should open a separate area in the forum for Task 1, but I don't have too many examples yet. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing methods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't need to make long comments - just a few words is fine! |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing time parameters | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing medium effectively | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please be careful with the topics. Try to get your topics from reliable sources or textbooks • I don't recommend typing directly into the forum – you could lose your work. It's better to type on your computer, save, and then copy-and-paste. • Thanks for your essay. I've reformatted it a little above – I think you may have had problems with the editor so I've put back the paragraphs in the way I think you wanted them. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing netiquette | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As I suggested in the other comments, it's better to submit one essay, get feedback, consider it, and then submit another essay than to submit a big bunch of essays at the same level. • Unfortunately, I can't evaluate the essays by giving an IELTS grade - but others are welcome to! Why don't you post your essay and see what other people say about it, or estimate what other essays should get. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying areas of agreement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colin92 summed up the major weakness with this essay when he said":hmmm....a bit wordy? hmmm "He's absolutely right. |

Other householding and organizations functions not included in the Anderson et al model include more technical

Facilitating Discourse (Anderson et al., 2001)

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking to reach consensus/understanding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TriPhamE I think you are right - Brian's essay was good because it was focused and had a clear central topic |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contributions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hi Maurier and thanks for this essay. I hope you can add some comments to some of the other essays on the site! People would really appreciate your help!! • Hello Russet and welcome to Writefix!! I hope people comment on your essays soon. In the meantime, please feel free to comment on other people's essays! There are some other essays on this topic in this forum. Have a look at: Hilda84 • Hi Lily Sorry - for some reason I missed your fantastic post. It's very interesting and very insightful. I really appreciate the help you are giving others • Hi Johanna I was waiting to see if perhaps you could comment on some other people's essays. If we all help, the work is much less! • We have a lot of new people and new essays. A big welcome to them, and a big thanks to all of you wonderful people who comment |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting climate for learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hi DariushV Don't worry about how your essay compares with other essays – it's fine, and there are very few perfect essays here! • Looking forward to some more essays from you. And don't be afraid to comment on other people's essays! • Hi TriPhamE and Lester! Don't be depressed! Everytime someone finds a mistake, your writing is getting better and better!! I know it's tough when someone criticizes your beautiful creation that you spent so much time and effort on, but we are all aiming for the same goal • Don't get discouraged - just work on one small thing at a time. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing in participants, prompting discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hi Derek09! Thank you! I hope the exam goes well for you. Please come back and post your results good bad or wonderful in the Results forum! • thanks for this essay on an interesting topic. I hope other people try this topic or add their comments. • Hello Rosita2001 Thanks for your great comments on Shieiuian's essay! As I said above I'm really impressed at the rewrites, and even more so by your ability to find parts of the sentences that are not needed. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the efficacy of the process | |

Direct Instruction (Anderson et al., 2001)

| | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present content and questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, you have some good points and some excellent sentences in your essay. However, it doesn't really answer the question, and would benefit from much clearer organization. What is your essay trying to do? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus the discussion on specific issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks Colin92 and Hilda84 for these two essays. Here we have are two similar essays, but one is much easier to read than the other, and, frankly, is much more interesting. Why is Hilda84' essay easier to read? • Thanks for this essay, and thanks to Gerry and Colin92 for their comments.As usual, Hilda84 writes clearly and with few errors. As Colin92 says, her essay is nice to read, although as Gerry suggests, a slightly shorter essay might be more effective. Hilda84, what did you think about Gerry's suggestion regarding thetopic sentences? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize the discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AliceXi - thanks for a really great job. You've helped identify a lot of problems! And very constructive criticism - some really good suggestions too!!'d just change one small thing - you edited one of WatNhat's sentences: • Hi Alina, Lina Some good ideas in your essay here! I like Lina's suggestion of "...", and the comments about 'people' and 'persons' and 'human beings' are good also. I think Alina's essay is clearly written and very sympathetic to famous people • I like both your conclusion and Nico's. • A secondary theme in Rosita2001's suggestions is simplicity and shorter sentences. I agree with splitting longer sentences, and I agree with keeping sentences simple and pronoun reference clear.'m glad that both of you explained your decisions! • Hi Thora and Rosita2001 Now I've read the comments, and the response to the comments, and the response to the response!Thanks for all your suggestions and defenses |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't need to rely on stock phrases like "It is widely acknowledged that" and especially, "Scientific research has proved..." What happens if you leave them out? Your essay becomes stronger, not weaker, because you are stating your opinion. It's an opinion essay! • Hi RoshaniELTS! HectorMc is using a phrase from a report on language use in IELTS essays.'Nongeneric native-like text' means simply correct English that does not look as if it is a memorized sentence |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnose misconceptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IELTS does not recommend that you write long essays. Here is a quote from their site |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your essay is organized and meets the requirements, but you should put more of yourself into it. Drop the passives, tell a story, explain how you ended up doing engineering instead of medicine, outline the possibility of you achieving this dream or wish - make it personal and interesting Please, everyone: no research, no scientists, no surveys, no polls, no conferences, no recent papers, no recent reports, no recent newspaper articles, and no reports just published. This is YOUR opinion essay. It's not Task 1 where we analyze data. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inject knowledge from diverse sources, e.g., textbook, articles, internet, personal experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hi HectorMc Thanks for this report and well done on finding it. There are many other interesting reports on the same site. Your essay is very well written and 'most sentences are error free.' Have a look at the IELTS descriptors for this phrase. IELTS does not recommend that you write long essays. Here is a quote from their site A second suggestion is to avoid words that don't contribute much. Sometimes examiners call these words "memorized chunks" Hello guru! The first thing I would do is get some of the Cambridge IELTS Practice exam books - there are a lot of them but the newer ones are better |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responding to technical concerns | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To edit your own profile, click http://writefix.com/?page_id=2722/profile after you log in Using some of the tools at the top of the page (under "Useful Links") we can find the the essay is 227 words long. As Lily points out this would be too short for IELTS - you would lose a lot of marks here. We're having some problems with getting the formatting buttons showing in the editor. I'll check this out over the next day or so If you like how a person writes, you can click on their photograph or icon to find more Yes it was [spam], Lily, thanks. I've deleted it. |

As described earlier, this teaching presence coding excludes social input, which Anderson et al felt to be generated by both teachers and learners. Accordingly, much of my social input would fall outside the teaching presence coding above, but could also be interpreted as facilitating discourse:

- Hi Moemoe and Yokama Good luck on the 26th, and please come back and let us know how you did here!

- Well done Tommy and good luck! Take a few days off. You've been following this forum for a long time and you need a rest! Thanks for all your contributions and helpT hat's a shame about Task 1

Appendix 4: Moderator Participation: Hattie and Timperley model

In contrast to the sequential views of moderator roles adopted by Salmon (2003) and by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001), Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe four levels of feedback - feedback on the task (FT), on the underlying processes (FP), on the self-regulation necessary for feedback (FR) and on the self (FS).

Below are examples of my input as moderator according to the Hattie and Timperley model. All are extracts, generally from much longer posts: posts tended to be at least 300 words on average, but posts with significant feedback could be 500-750 words long.

Feedback on the Task (FT)

This level of feedback may include directions regarding faulty interpretations or to acquire more, different, or correct information

- Your essay is 232 words long which would lead to a penalty in IELTS. Just adding one more sentence would avoid this problem
- You still have some run-on sentences and comma splices. A comma splice is where you join what should be two sentences with a comma: Illiteracy is a pressing concern especially for poor countries, it affects all other aspects of life. This is a very easy mistake to fix. Just use full stops more often: Illiteracy is a pressing concern especially for poor countries. It affects many aspects of life.

Feedback on Process (FP)

- One thing I would say here is to check carefully for fragments. Fragments are...
- Don't forget every sentence starts with a capital letter.
- The first thing I would suggest is to have four paragraphs only.
- I'm not sure what the first sentence means. How could you rewrite it more simply?
- One small vocab point: what would be better than the word 'specifications'? It sounds a little like a machine or a car or a tool or something.
- The most noticeable feature of your essay is that there are very few articles. It is almost telegraphic. You need to add "the," "a," "an," plurals, or a subject throughout the essay.
- Watch out for plurals and articles, and try to give examples. Don't be woolly or vague. The question in IELTS asks you to give examples.

Feedback on Regulation (FR)

Learners actively engage in giving and receiving feedback from others. Greater skill in self-evaluation or confidence to engage further on a task and addresses the way students monitor, direct, and regulate actions towards the learning goal

- Hi Rosita2001! Commenting on other people's essays is hard work, but it does make you think!
- Hi VuongNT! Welcome to writefix - good to have you here. I hope some people will add one or two comments for you. I have some ready, but I'm waiting to see what other people say first. In the meantime, why don't you write a sentence or two on Maurier's essay (she's new too!) or on Lily's new IELTS topic? If you like how a person writes, you can click on their photograph or icon to find more.
- Try to make sure that the opening sentence for your essay is absolutely crystal clear and error free. First impressions count!
- Hi HectorMc and Nico. Thanks to both of you for the essay and the rewrites. Some good stuff going on here. I think Brian's rewrite of the second paragraph was very good. But first of all, why does it need to be rewritten?
- Check out the Lexical Density of the sentence on this very useful website:
<http://www.usingenglish.com/re.....istics.php>
- Hi Khwarizmi and welcome to Writefix! Thanks for your essay! I'm glad you posted it under Alia's so we can look at related ideas easily
- Thanks for the comments! Your writing is more than good enough to benefit others! Please go ahead and comment as much as you like - I'm sure others will be very grateful!
- I've added a 300-word sample essay on this topic at <http://writefix.com/?p=3317> (opens in new window). I'm not very happy with it - I think the conclusion needs work. What do you think?
- Thanks Alina and ZafB and welcome Band7! I'm going to look at your three thesis sentences...
- I will pin this essay to the top of the forum for a few days and see if other people comment on it or view it!

Feedback on the Self

- That's an intelligent response to the question, well done!
- Thanks for your essay. I like your description of the garden and your daily activity of watering and doing exercise there!
- Your essay shows that you are not afraid to pick a difficult topic!

Appendix 5: Ethics Clearance

Ethics clearance was granted by Andrew Wilkinson, Research Support Officer, through my then supervisor Maria Zenios, on June 14, 2010, after submission of the relevant documents.

11/12/13

Gmail - Ethics Approval: Doctoral Prog E-Research and Tech. Enhanced Learning: Supporting documents



Enda Tuomey <ept1961@gmail.com>

Ethics Approval: Doctoral Prog E-Research and Tech. Enhanced Learning: Supporting documents

Wilkinson, Andrew <a.r.wilkinson@lancaster.ac.uk> Mon, Jun 14, 2010 at 6:02 PM
To: Enda Tuomey <ept1961@gmail.com>, ARWilkinson1 <ARWilkinson1@uclan.ac.uk>
Cc: "Zenios, Maria" <m.zenios@lancaster.ac.uk>

Hi Enda

Thanks for submitting this documentation. I can confirm that your project now has full ethical approval.

Regards

Andrew

Andrew Wilkinson | Research Support Officer | Research Support Office | ☒ University House, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YW | ☎ (01524) 594306 | ✉ a.r.wilkinson@lancaster.ac.uk

From: Enda Tuomey [mailto:ept1961@gmail.com]

Sent: 09 June 2010 17:36

To: ARWilkinson1; Wilkinson, Andrew

Cc: Zenios, Maria

Subject: Ethics Approval: Doctoral Prog E-Research and Tech. Enhanced Learning: Supporting documents

Hello Andrew

In response to your email below, which Maria Zenios forwarded to me, I am now attaching four documents to support my ethics approval.

Just as a reminder, I am proposing to analyze user-generated content and comments on a website I hope to set up to accompany my research, and hope to be interviewing some users and using a questionnaire/survey with

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=374df99d63&view=pt&q=user-generated+content&qs=true&search=query&msg=129361fd687f41c2>

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Enda Tuomey <ept1961@gmail.com>

Ethics Approval: Doctoral Prog E-Research and Tech. Enhanced Learning: Supporting documents

Enda Tuomey <ept1961@gmail.com>

Wed, Jun 9, 2010 at 11:35 PM

To: ARWilkinson1 <ARWilkinson1@uclan.ac.uk>, "a.r.wilkinson" <a.r.wilkinson@lancaster.ac.uk>

Cc: Maria Zenios <m.zenios@lancaster.ac.uk>

Hello Andrew

In response to your email below, which Maria Zenios forwarded to me, I am now attaching four documents to support my ethics approval.

Just as a reminder, I am proposing to analyze user-generated content and comments on a website I hope to set up to accompany my research, and hope to be interviewing some users and using a questionnaire/survey with others.

1. Terms and Conditions for the proposed website: terms_and_conditions.docx
2. Information Sheet for Participants (*both for interviews and surveys*): information_sheet.docx
3. Consent Form for Surveys: consent_form_surveys.docx
4. Consent Form for Interviews: consent_form_interviews.docx

Sorry for the delay in responding - some college mail to me is going strangely missing. If you need any further information, just let me know at ept1961@gmail.com.

Regards

Enda Tuomey

Cohort 1: Doctoral Programme in E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning

From: Wilkinson, Andrew
Sent: 20 April 2010 16:45
To: Zenios, Maria
Cc: 'j.sime@lancaster.ac.uk'
Subject: RE: Ethics procedure queries - feedback

Dear Maria

As you know a new procedure for granting ethical approval has very recently been introduced. All proposals that involve human participants now have to be reviewed by the Chair of UREC Prof Trevor McMillan. Trevor aims to review all the proposals submitted to him as soon as possible and in trying to turn this around quickly appears to have missed that interviews will be carried out as part of the research.

However in this case the information provided on the Part B form only refers in passing to invited interviews in the

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=374df99d63&view=pt&q=user-generated+content&qs=true&search=query&msg=1291d9143fd16134>

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last sentence of the answer to Q5. Q7 asks for details of information that will be shown to research participants and details of how consent will be obtained, but the answer given to Q7 makes no mention of invited interviews and just focuses on the website that will be used for data collection. If Q7 had been answered correctly and full information had originally been provided we would not have had to ask for further clarification at this stage.

If Enda can provide example participant information and consent forms, plus details of the privacy statements and terms and conditions of the website I will endeavour to get confirmation of ethical approval as soon as possible.

Regards

Andrew

Andrew Wilkinson | Research Support Officer | Research Support Office | ✉ University House, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YW | ☎ (01524) 594306 📧 a.r.wilkinson@lancaster.ac.uk

4 attachments

 **consent_form_interviews.docx**
19K

 **consent_form_surveys.docx**
21K

 **terms_and_conditions.docx**
17K

 **information_sheet.docx**
19K

Appendix 6: Screenshots

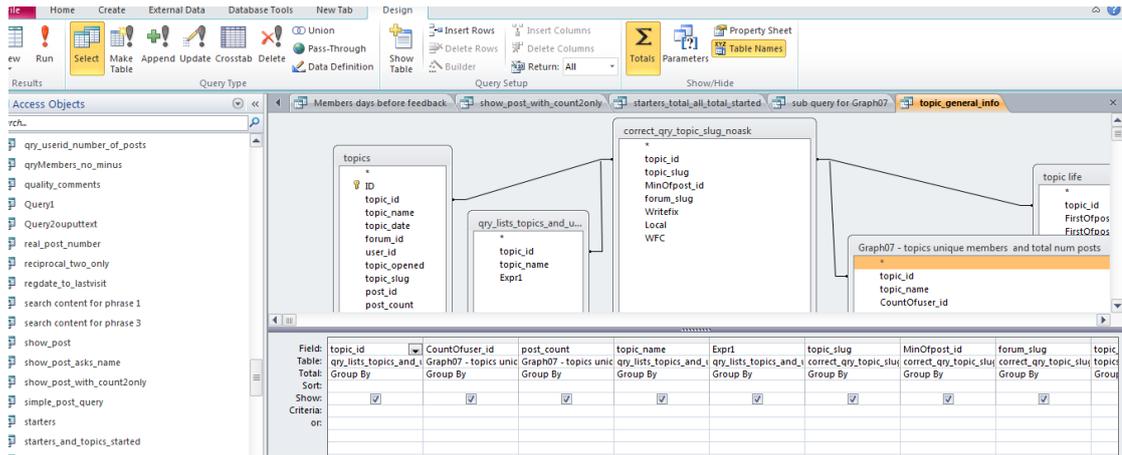
Screenshots of the Microsoft Access database used to review and analyze data from the forum.

The screenshot shows the 'Copy Of posts' form in Microsoft Access. The form includes fields for post_id (1724), Post Date (11-Jul-12), topic_id (455), user_id (959), and forum_id (1). There are several checkboxes for feedback types such as 'will', 'ID', 'new', 'P2P', 'Tkn', 'LearningEvidence', 'LinkstoResources', 'Directed at', 'Thanks', 'Usability Issue', 'Help sought', 'Response Length', 'Friendliness', 'InvolvingMany', 'ModellingAdmin', and 'Defer'. A 'FeedbackType' dropdown is set to 'Both'. A 'Greeting_all' dropdown is set to 'Admin'. A 'More about this user' button is visible. The main text area contains a detailed analysis of a forum post, starting with 'Hey, ma-frank. Thanks for writing this essay because my dream back in the day is to be a journalist or war correspondent.....LOL..anyway, share some of my comments with you: 1. The Structure looks good as you choose 3773. The second paragraph , however, seems a bit "bloated" compared with the subsequent paragraph . My personal advice is to keep your second & third paragraph more consistent in the number of words /sentences. Otherwise your essay looks a bit patchy .2. After reading your essay, i feel like i am actually reading more like an emotion-ridden speech. As you might notice, you wrote approximately 11 "we" throughout your essay. But Well, i completely agree with that you can use "we", "I" or whoever possible . But aint it too much?Your essay:We need a variety of information in daily life from life information to business news(life information? well, it is not incorrect but why dont you write others familiar to you, such as arts, health,politics,technology and so forth.) Journalists are professionals who collect, edit and publish information to the public. Credibility of information completely depends on journalists' personal integrity and professional ethic. I think most of those professionals are worthy trust.(worthy of trust or trustworthy...) We need not lose our trust with in professionals. because we have enough (a number of) honest journalists working in this sector(which sector?)and we could not find another way to get information without professionals.(topic sentence seems a bit long.. and the sentence doesnt make too much sense to me. you said "we have enough journalists And we couldnt find another way to get info without professionals?) Journalist is a career with a history more than one hundred years.(there is no point of introducing the historic background here . cuz you

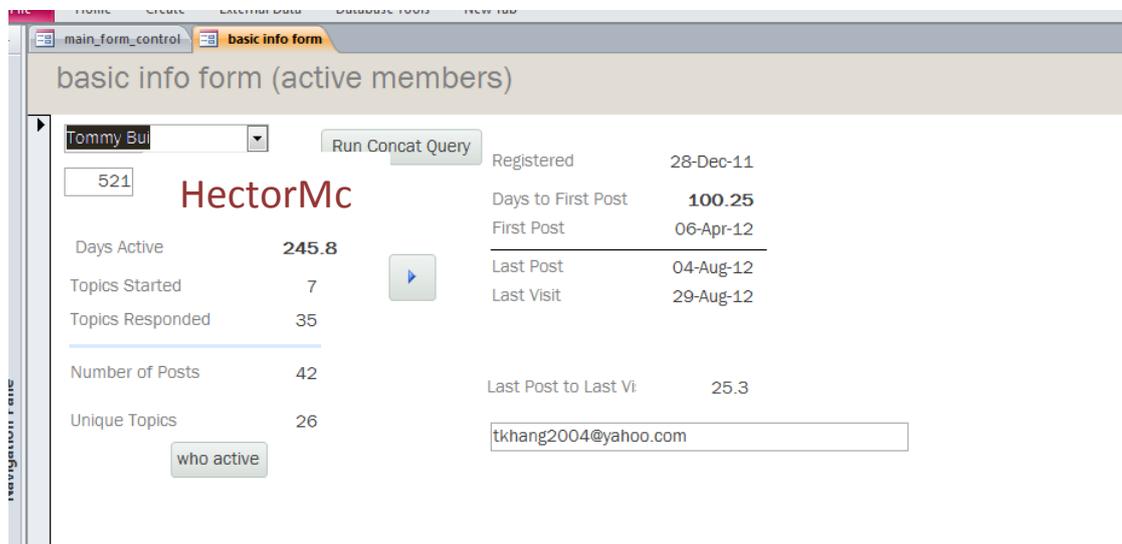
Main analysis form

The screenshot shows the 'main_form_control' form in Microsoft Access. It features a grid of buttons for various data analysis and reporting functions. The buttons are organized into several groups: 'Full Topic Info' (Asks Name, Asks ID, Asks Topic ID, Asks Post ID, (ID) who else was active), 'Reports' (Forums and Posts, Topics and Posts, Users and Topics Started, Report26 - posts by date, Main Form, Basic Info Active Members, Data Entry, Filter Form), 'Starters and Percents' (Days and Activity, Topics Posts Starters, Show Posts), 'All posts by Member' (Patterns in comments, Interesting comments, Search for a Phrase, search three times - type something each time (don't just press enter), search one phrase, search content phrase form, Single Post People), 'Reciprocal' (Reciprocal, (ID) wrote to:, (Name) wrote to:, Who wrote to (Name), No replies, Days before Feedback), 'Peer Editors' (Peer Editors, Name Gave Feedback To, Name Got Feedback From, Feedback types), and 'Filter Form' (use for sorting and filtering).

Forms for various purposes



Queries for analysis



Form for report on individual member