Online Dialog Among EFL College Faculty:
A Comparison of Two Saudi and Korean Newsgroups

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ABSTRACT

I created a newsgroup with Yahoo Groups and invited all male and female colleagues at the College of Languages and Translation to register. The aims of the newsgroup were to share college news, discuss academic issues and student and faculty problems, learn about each other's publications and academic activities. Although messages were sent to the college's 160 faculty members, only 28 (17.5%) registered. They posted a total of 73 messages, with 50% posted by the dean and 34% posted by the author. Messages posted were mainly about conference calls and university memos. 71% of the members did not participate at all. By contrast, I am a member of a Korean Teachers' Education and Development Newsgroup. The Korean Newsgroup has 133 members. They posted a total of 685 messages. They discuss all kinds of academic issues related to the teaching and learning of English in Korea such as: Students' response on projects, a list of MATESL-like programs, creating collaborative teacher communities, action research to collate and write a class activities book, writing for TEC, advice for teaching freshmen English classes, putting faces to names and names to faces, good teacher characteristics, expressing feelings, mandatory English, ESL/EFL teacher standards, professional development summer options, call for National Executive Council candidates, in addition to conference and course announcements, job vacancies, surveys, digests and others. The study reports the causes of inadequate participation among the Saudi Newsgroup members based on findings of a survey.

Keywords: *online dialogue, online interaction, online communication, CMC, college faculty, Korean faculty, Saudi faculty, Yahoo Groups, Saudi Newsgroup, Korean Newsgroup.*

INTRODUCTION

Latest developments in computer-mediated communication (CMC) made it easy for teachers to communicate and interact with each other. Teachers no longer need to meet face to face to discuss educational issues and problems and exchange ideas and experiences. They can do so through mailing lists, e-mail, live chat, text-messaging, videoconferencing, online discussion forums, and newsgroups. Synchronous and asynchronous online learning communities are widely used in almost every profession including education.

A review of the literature has shown numerous studies that utilized different types of CMC tools used for group communication, interaction, and professional development. For example, Hawk (2000) explored online professional development opportunities for adult ESL teachers and tutors via chat groups, discussion lists, online journals, newsletters, instructional activities, available lessons and curricula, Websites of ESL organizations and institutions, staff development materials, and Web portals to find out the benefits and challenges facing online professional development. In another study, two educators used multiple information sources viz, asynchronous Web-based chat space, e-

mail, and written assignments to develop new understandings about their roles as teachers of information technology research to a multinational class to improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of a new postgraduate subject delivered by a mixture of face-to-face and Web-supported instruction (Ferry & Corrent-Agostinho, 2000).

Some other studies focused on large-group e-mail and listserv communication (Overbaugh, 1998); electronic mailing lists (listservs) supporting a community of practice of literacy teachers (Hew & Hara, 2007); the RTEACHER electronic mailing list for professional discussions of literacy education which has an electronic dimension with global connections and instantaneous exchanges (Brabham & Villaume, 2003); how four largest physics education-related electronic mail lists operate, and provide information about their objectives and membership (MacIsaac, 2000); the effect of teachers for teacher mailing lists on particular academic subjects (Drot-Delange, 2001); the use of asynchronous mailing lists and synchronous Internet-based chat communication sessions and their impact on teachers' attitudes toward collaboration, activity completion rate, and test performance (Ohlund, Yu, Jannasch-Pennell & DiGangi, 2000).

A study by Lapp, Flood & Martin (1998) investigated the use of a teacher chatroom to discuss how students can be helped to learn to read and appreciate informational text.

In addition, teachers and educational researchers participated in video clubs to discuss videotaped classroom instruction (Sherin, 2003). WebBoards and electronic conferencing were used in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher education courses (Vazquez-Montilla & Zhu, 2000). Video teleconferencing (VTEL); e-mail and chat rooms were used as a distance learning tool by a group of preservice teachers and university researchers actively working together to help improve their practice (Saurino & Saurino (2003). Box's (1999) study showed the strengths and limitations of three types of CMC: (i) one-way CMC (World Wide Web, audio, video, graphics,); (ii) two-way asynchronous CMC (message boards, mailing lists, e-mail); and (iii) two-way synchronous CMC (chat, video conferencing, audio conferencing).

Furthermore, schoolteachers and college faculty online discussion forums have been the focus of numerous studies due to their wide use. For example, Dukes & Jones (2007) implemented an online collaborative consultation community to provide mentor support to university students enrolled in an alternative certification program. Studies by Scherff & Paulus (2006); Hough, Smithey & Evertson (2004); Selwyn, 2000; Stephens & Hartmann (2004); Fletcher (1999), and Carboni (1999) utilized CMC to support preservice English teachers, create connected virtual communities of practice for intern teachers, build professional community through online discussions of mathematics teaching with technology, support practicing elementary school teachers' professional development in mathematics, and create a forum for dialog among teachers.

At Indiana University, Bloomington, Northwest campuses, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, the AltaVista Forum (now SiteScape Forum), and a WWW-based discussion forum were used by three university instructors to facilitate CMC in three teacher training courses. The authors described the project setting, development of a meaningful project, the importance of modelling behavior, training students on collaboration skills, benefits of using SiteScape Forum, assessment issues, flexibility, student feedback, and anticipating problem areas (Anderson, Reinhart & Slowinski, 2001).

Elementary school teachers from two Florida counties, college professors, and preservice teachers from two Florida universities shared a discussion board in which

they contributed postings and worked collaboratively to integrate technology into classrooms, lesson plans and curriculum with (Enger, Lacey & Bacallao (2002).

Goldborough (2005) and McAteer & Harris (2003) described the different options available for users when they run an online discussion group such as whether to moderate online groups or not, described the use of Yahoo discussion groups and gave reasons for introducing CMC, intended outcomes, content, tasks, group profile and support systems.

In Saudi Arabia, the author and her freshman students at King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia shared an online grammar course with a professor and his students at Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia using the Makkah eLearning platform. The experiment proved to be a total failure due to cultural issues, lack of technological skills and unfamiliarity with the platform and activities (Al-Jarf, 2005; Al-Jarf, 2007)

In another study, Al-Jarf (2006e) proposed a model for online instruction and collaborative and interactive activities that develop EFL college students' dialogue skills, cross-cultural themes that can serve as a basis for selecting dialogue topics, misconceptions about Saudi Arabia, Islamic and Arabic cultures and electronic and print resources for locating stereotypes. The author gave recommendations for successful dialogue between Saudi and English-speaking students.

A cross-cultural online writing project was created by three English-as-a foreign language (EFL) college instructors from Ukraine, Russia, and Saudi Arabia in which the three instructors and their undergraduate students participated. The aims of the collaborative online project were to develop students' writing skills in English, to develop their awareness of local and global cultural issues and events and to develop their ability to communicate and interact with students from other countries and cultures. Thirteen discussion threads, twenty external links, three assignments, nine documents, a photo gallery and Powerpoint presentations were posted in the Nicenet discussion forum. The collaborative project proved to be very effective in enhancing students' writing skills and their communication and interaction with each other (Al-Jarf, 2006a; Al-Jarf, 2006b).

Moreover, the Saudi Ministry of Education has created special online discussion forums for schoolteachers teaching any grade level and any subject area as part of its internet website. Al-Jarf (2006c) and Al-Jarf (2006d) examined those teachers' online forums and reported the number of participants, number of threads and responses, topics with the highest and lowest posts and the forums' role in schoolteachers' professional development and their effect on their attitudes.

Due to lack of online discussion forums for professional EFL college instructors in Saudi Arabia, the author created a newsgroup with Yahoo Groups (COLT@ yahoogroups.com). She invited all male and female instructors at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to register. The aims of this Saudi Newsgroup were to discuss academic issues; to discuss student and faculty problems; to share college news; to learn about each other's publications and academic activities, and other teaching, learning and assessment issues. At the same time, the author is a member of a Korean Teachers' Education and Development newsgroup which is a special interest group of TESOL Korea (KOTESOL_TED_SIG@yahoogroups.com). The present study aims to compare the Saudi EFL faculty Newsgroup COLT@yahoogroups.com and the Korean EFL faculty Newsgroup KOTESOL_TED_SIG@yahoogroups.com. It aims to compare the following: (i) the membership size; (ii) the message volume; (iii) the posting frequency; (iv) the range and types of topics posted. It also aims to explore reasons for the lack of interest among

members of the Saudi EFL faculty Newsgroup as perceived by the group members themselves.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the Saudi Newsgroup consisted of all faculty members at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (male and female; those with a Ph.D., MA and BA degrees). The COLT faculty are multi-national (from USA, UK, Canada India, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, and others). Saudi faculty constitute less than 20%. Membership in the Newsgroup was free. They teach different college levels and different language, linguistics and translation courses.

DATA COLLECTION

The author conducted a content analysis of the Saudi Newsgroup and the Korean Newsgroups' posts. She browsed both newsgroup for number of participants, posts per year and month and topics. She also interviewed 50% of the faculty members at COLT to find out their views on the benefits and shortcomings of the newsgroup. They were asked open-ended questions. Participants' responses were sorted out, classified, and are reported quantitatively and qualitatively.

RESULTS

1) The Saudi Newsgroup

Content analysis showed that only 28 out of 160 or (17.5%) of the faculty members at COLT registered. They posted a total of 73 messages (between May 10, 2004, and October 9, 2005). The distribution of the monthly Newsgroup messages is as follows:
- *The total number of messages sent in 5 months was 73, with a range between 0 – 32; and a median of 0 messages per month.*
- *50% of the messages were posted by the dean*
- *34% of the messages were posted by the author.*
- *71% of the registered members did not participate at all.*
- *Since October 9th – to the present, nobody posted anything.*

The topics Posted by the COLT Newsgroup were as follows:
- Conference calls and university memos posted by the dean.
- Translation jobs for students.
- I posted links to some papers of mine.
- Links to online articles about the teaching of English to L2 students.
- Holiday greetings and thank you notes.
- I posted several messages about academic issues (such as the new final exam system, department meetings) to trigger discussion among the group members, but no comments or responses were posted.

2) The Korean Newsgroup

The Korean newsgroup has 133 members. Between May 21, 2002, and November 23, 2005, they posted a total of 685 messages. The distribution of the monthly Newsgroup messages is as follows:

- *The total number of messages posted in 2005 was 138, with a range between 1-88; and a median of 6 messages per month.*
- *The total number of messages posted in 2004 was 100, with a range between 2 -21; and a median of 9 messages per month.*
- *The total number of messages posted in 2003 was 261, with a range of 2-52; and a median of 24 messages per month.*
- *The total number of messages posted in 2002 was 196, with a range of 1-76; and a median of 8 messages per month.*

The Korean Newsgroup discussed all kinds of academic issues related to the teaching and learning of English in general, and EFL teaching and learning in Korea, in particular. The following are sample topics:

- Students' response on the project.
- A list of MATESL-like programs.
- Creating collaborative teacher communities.
- Collating and writing a class activities book.
- Writing for TEC.
- Distance learning article writer wanted.
- Advice for teaching freshmen English classes.
- Putting faces to names and names to faces.
- Good teacher characteristics.
- Expressing feelings.
- Mandatory English.
- ESL/EFL teacher standards.
- Professional development summer options.
- Call for National Executive Council candidates.
- Conference and course announcements.
- Job vacancies.
- Surveys and digests.

3) Comparison of the Saudi and Korean Newsgroups

Although members of the COLT Newsgroup and the Korean Newsgroup are multi-national, the latter has a larger number of participants and a wider range of topics about EFL learning and teaching discussed. The Korean Newsgroup has been active for a longer period of time than the COLT Newsgroup. The number of messages posted by members of the Korean Newsgroup varies from year to year and from month to month. The fact that the Korean Newsgroup is a special interest group of TESOL Korea may be a factor in its popularity, larger number of participants and larger number of topics posted.

4) Factors Affecting Inadequate Participation in the Saudi Newsgroup:

Results of interviews with a sample of faculty in the COLT Newsgroup showed a number of factors that affected their participation and interaction such as:
- Inadequate computer skills.
- Lack of interest.
- They are not used to this kind of communication, i.e., online communication through Yahoo Groups.
- Some indicated that do not have time. They are too busy and have a high teaching load.
- Some prefer to waste time on academic work rather than this kind of activity, i.e., participating in a Newsgroup.
- Some cannot cope with the flow of messages.
- Slow internet connection plays a role in accessing and browsing the Newsgroup messages.
- Some reported that they did not post any suggestions because nobody takes their suggestions seriously. Their suggestions are not appreciated by the administration. They feel that they cannot change anything, and that change is initiated by the administration.

DISCUSSION

Findings of the present study showed that 17.5% of the faculty at COLT joined the Yahoo Newsgroup that the author created. Participating faculty posted a total of 73 messages, with 50% posted by the dean, 34% posted by the author and only 16% posted by the rest of members. Messages posted were mainly conference calls and university memos. 71% of the members did not participate at all. By contrast, the Korean Newsgroup members was more active and posted a total of 685 messages and discussed all kinds of academic issues related to the teaching and learning of English in Korea.

Findings of the presents study regarding the inadequate activity in the Saudi Newgroup are inconsistent with findings of other studies in the literature. For example, preservice teachers completing English education internships at professional development schools used an asynchronous discussion forum for informal learning and for psychological support on complex issues that were not easy to discuss face to face. The interns regularly responded to each other's requests, thoughts, and concerns (Scherff & Paulus, 2006). In Enger, Lacey & Bacallao's (2002) study, elementary school teachers from two Florida counties, college professors, and preservice teachers from two Florida universities who participated in an online discussion board worked collaboratively and wrote posts about the integration of technology into classrooms, curriculum design, and lesson plans. In Carboni's (1999) study, the online discussion forums helped participating teachers understand the teaching of math, helped them support and share with each other as a learning community. In Fletcher's (1999) study, the pilot Teacher Dialogue Forums provided Georgia teachers with an opportunity to learn about current research on teaching and the teaching profession, share views, learn from colleagues, let their voices be heard, shape practice and policy in teaching. The teachers appreciated the forums and the opportunity given to them to discuss teaching in the light of current research.

The communication, interaction, and amount of participation in the current COLT faculty Newsgroup are contrary to the Ministry of Education's online discussion forums for teachers of all grade levels and all subject areas which were found to be effective in promoting participating teachers' professional development and have high interaction among the teachers (Al-Jarf, 2006c; Al-Jarf, 2006d). They are also contrary to the high interaction and online writing collaboration among Saudi, Ukrainian, and Russian students using the Nicenet online discussion forums (Al-Jarf, 2006a; Al-Jarf, 2006b).

As in the current study, online discussions forums for secondary mathematics teachers, in Stephens & Hartmann's (2004) study, were found to be ineffective in building a professional community through online discussions of math teaching with technology. Although the project staff made structural changes to increase online participation, the discussion forum received little significant use on the part of the teachers. Face-to-face workshops were well-attended and judged highly effective by the participants. Selwyn's (2000) added that although the online forum was widely used as an information and empathetic exchange resource, it was limited by various caveats associated with CMC groups in general.

It seems that faculty inflexibility, lack of familiarity with the new CMC (Yahoo Groups), and cultural issues were obstacles to online communication, interaction, and professional development (McMahon, 1997; Al-Jarf, 2007).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To encourage the COLT faculty to participate in the Yahoo Newsgroup, this study recommends the following:

- Discussing newsgroup participation in the department meetings.
- Giving a presentation about the significance and advantages of a professional newsgroup in the college seminars.
- Having faculty members browse samples of professional newsgroups as an example of showing them which EFL and translation teaching and learning issues are discussed.
- Sending a formal invitation to all faculty members by the college dean and department heads.
- Having a newsgroup with several areas of interest with several faculty members participating in each.
- A monthly announcement of the faculty member with the highest number of messages posted.
- Clearly articulating a purpose for the discussions, framing the kind of participation expected, including both experienced and novice instructors in the discussions, and establishing trust among participating instructors, shaping the kinds of issues discussed and depth of thinking revealed.
- Surveying faculty members to find out what topics are of interest to them.

Finally, this study recommends that future research investigates EFL teachers and faculty group pages on social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

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