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E-Moderating Practices of ESL Teachers in an Online Forum

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ABSTRACT

As teachers of English in Malaysia are increasingly warming up to the use of ICT applications such as the online discussion board or forum in their teaching, the importance of studying what they do when implementing ICT-enhanced teaching has become apparent. The use of the online forum in teaching involves a change in the role of the teacher from instructor to moderator. While much research has been carried out to describe the benefits of using the online forum in enhancing English language teaching, there is a serious lack of research on the role played by the teacher in such a forum. There is a need to examine what teachers actually do on the ground, that is, how they carry out their role as moderators to facilitate student discussion in an English language learning forum. This study was based on a university-wide online forum project carried out at Universiti Putra Malaysia, involving 30 teachers and 1400 students in one semester and 1700 students in the following semester. Teachers of English who taught a university writing course moderated the forum discussion by students in their respective classes. At the end of the second semester, two types of data were collected and analysed. First, data from a questionnaire answered by the teachers were analysed to obtain information on their background and their general perception about their role as e-moderators in the forum. Second, the archived messages posted by the teachers in the forum were extracted from the online platform and categorised according to their functions to obtain a picture of the overall pattern of the teachers' e-moderating practices. The analysis identified 16 types of messages posted by the teachers and revealed varied perceptions of the e-moderator role among the teachers. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of how teachers of English in Malaysia and possibly Asia who are fairly new to this form of interaction as a tool for teaching practice their e-moderating role in the online forum environment.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the online forum in teaching has been an established educational practice anchored upon the social constructivist model of learning whereby knowledge is said to be jointly constructed in social interactions. Online discussions in forums are said to enable student-centred learning and scaffolding interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Long, 1983; Jacob & Hong, 2010), and build cohesive and supportive communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) among students from diverse locations, all of which serve to enhance learning. Similarly, in the teaching of English as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL), the use of the online discussion premises upon the view of language learning as a social process, whereby the discussion serves as a site for the social co-construction of meaning, language input, and language production. It provides the space for students to use the target language in a non-threatening and supportive environment, all within a cohesive community of practice.

In Malaysia, ESL teachers have generally been receptive of the practice of using online tools for learning. Most educational institutions have their official learning management portals that include student forum facilities to encourage their teachers to incorporate online interaction in their teaching. Anecdotal evidence has provided a somewhat widespread acceptance and adoption of ICT among ESL teachers, especially in higher education, and this is reflected in the amount of research in Malaysia on the use of both synchronous and asynchronous online communication tools for teaching and learning English. Examples of research on ICT use in English language teaching in Malaysia are studies by Chan and Yap (2008, 2010) that described an initiative at Universiti Putra Malaysia where an online forum to teach writing to ESL students was implemented university-wide. They described the framework developed for the forum and its pedagogical underpinnings, and obtained students' reaction and assessment of their writing development after participation. Krish and Wong (2004) and Krish (2006) described an online language teaching activity, and examined the impact of teacher feedback on students' learning from the students' perspective, both in a private educational institution of higher learning in Malaysia. A study conducted by Zuwati Hasim (2006), also on online learning implemented in a private distance learning institution looked at how effective the online forum is in promoting communication

skills in English among students. In a virtual university in Malaysia, Zaini Amir (2006) investigated the learning strategies used by students in an online learning environment. A study in the secondary school context was conducted by Melor Mohd. Yunus et al. (2009) where students in an urban school in Malaysia provided feedback on their use of ICT for learning English. Apart from studies related to students' perceptions and practices, there have been those that examine ICT use from the teachers' perspectives, for instance the studies conducted by Melor Mohd. Yunus (2007), and Saadiyah Darus and Ho (2008) that compared ESL teachers' expectations with their actual use of ICT in their teaching, and described teachers' use of computers to teach English, respectively. Also providing insight into the issue of ICT use from the teachers' point of view, Norazila Abdul Aziz (2009) investigated teachers' concerns regarding institutional technology adoption process.

These studies provide invaluable insight into the use of ICT in ESL teaching and learning in Malaysia, mainly from the point of view of teachers and students about what they did, how they did it, and what they thought of it. However, there is yet another dimension that has stood unexplored, that is the role of the teacher as it is performed in the online interaction. As more teachers of English especially in this part of the world are venturing into using online tools, especially the ubiquitous online forum, it is important to know what role they actually play in facilitating discussion with and among students.

The use of the online forum in teaching involves a change in the role of the teacher from instructor to moderator. Teacher training has not kept up with the demands of this role of the "e-moderator" (Salmon, 2004, p. vii) that the modern-day teacher is expected to take on. As researchers in teacher education have observed, teachers must be prepared to take on a more facilitative role in online teaching (Palloff & Pratt, 2000; Salmon, 2004; Wilson & Stacey, 2004) which requires a different set of skills from those necessary for face-to-face classroom teaching (Goodyear, et al., 2001). Clearly, teachers need to be taught how to teach online (Daw & Riding, 2002; Riding & Daw, 2002; Wilson & Stacey, 2004; Salmon, 2004) if they were to be expected to carry out their online work effectively. As observed by Watts (2010), "discussion boards and virtual classrooms do not necessarily lead to collaboration. Most academics have little

experience of online teaching and learning and are unsure how to make best use of these online tools” (p. 19.2).

However, before any prescription of pedagogies and of e-moderator roles for the ESL teacher can be proposed, it is highly pertinent that what is happening on the ground, that is, the current actual practices of the teachers, be examined first. The present exploratory study aimed to provide this insight through an analysis of the teachers’ messages posted on the online forum, and a self-report questionnaire answered by teachers to find out how the e-moderator role is interpreted and performed by the teachers.

E-MODERATING: COMMUNITY MAINTENANCE VS TEACHING

An “e-moderator” (Salmon, 2004, p. vii) is someone who “presides over an electronic online meeting or conference” (p. 4) just as a moderator is someone who presides over a meeting. However, the skills that are required of an e-moderator are different from a moderator of meetings in a non-CMC (computer-mediated communication) environment.

Two important features of the online forum used in teaching-learning situations impact on what is expected of the online teacher-moderator, or e-moderator. First, the concept of “community” is primary to all online forums. Every online forum must necessarily entail maintenance of an active community, that is, a community of members who actively interact with each other online and whose content/messages posted can be viewed by other members. This is because an online community effectively ceases to exist once there is no visible interaction, despite the existence of a list of registered members in the forum. Second, if the online forum is created as part of an ESL instructional activity, there has to be a pedagogical dimension, a language teaching dimension specifically, that works to ensure language learning occurs within the interaction. In principle, the e-moderator is expected to perform these twin functions of maintaining community as well as ensuring that language learning takes place.

Community Maintenance

An online community entails a group of people who may be physically dispersed and who interact with each other by posting messages and/or content on internet forums in which they congregate. These messages/content must be relevant to the topic or discussion thread of the particular forum, and should generate interest among the members. The notion of “user-generated content” represents the underlying principle of all successful online forums, wherein members contribute material or ideas that sustain interaction and attract new members, thereby maintaining and enlarging the community. As observed by Kearns et al. in Wright (2008, p. 234) about municipal authority forums, “[t]he use of moderators is important in keeping citizen engagement focused and in consequently ensuring that such engagement adds value to services, to policy, and to citizens”. In most forums, the lively and engaging discussion/interaction itself is the user-generated content we speak of, the attraction that pulls in members. In communities whose members are inactive, the e-moderator’s responsibility to maintain the community is made much more difficult. To understand the community maintenance role of the e-moderator better, we refer to examples in non-educational contexts. This is because for non-pedagogically based forums, community maintenance is the life or death of the forum. Thus, any e-moderator practice in such forums is explicit for community maintenance. Furthermore, the community maintenance function predates the pedagogical function, as the online forum (similarly many other online platforms such as blogs and wikis) existed for social networking and communication purposes before it was adapted for teaching purposes.

Wright (2009) identified a list of eleven possible e-moderator roles: “greeter”, “conversation stimulator”, “conflict resolver”, “summariser of debates”, “problem solver”, “supporter”, “welcome”, “cybrarian”, “open censor”, “covert censor”, and “cleaner” (p. 236). The roles as explained by Wright are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Potential e-moderator roles (Wright, 2009, p. 236)

Role	Description
Greeter	making people feel welcome
Conversation Stimulator	posing new questions and topics, playing devil's advocate in existing conversations
Conflict Resolver	mediating conflicts towards collective agreements (or agreeing to disagree)
Summariser of Debates	-
Problem Solver	directing questions to relevant people for response
Supporter	bringing in external information to enrich debates, support arguments
Welcomer	bringing in new participants, either citizens or politicians/ civil servants
'Cybrarian'	providing expert knowledge on particular topics
Open Censor	deleting messages deemed inappropriate, normally against predefined rules and criteria. Feedback is given to explain why, and an opportunity to rewrite is provided
Covert Censor	deleting messages deemed inappropriate, but without explaining why
Cleaner	removing or closing dead threads, hiving off subdiscussions into separate threads

Wojcik (2008) after surveying specific roles of the e-moderator found by several researchers (including Wright (2006)), categorised the roles into three broad functions which she named “the manager”, “the referee”, and “the intermediary” (p. 3), and which were then used as a framework to analyse the functions of the moderators in French municipal website forums. She found that the moderators in the forums performed the function of the manager by greeting the users (greeter), selecting and structuring topics in the forum which has an effect on users’ participation, intervenes in debates to stimulate discussion (conversation stimulator), providing answers to queries by users (cybrarian), and archiving and moving discussions into their appropriate threads at his or her discretion (cleaner). For the referee function, Wojcik found that the moderators in the French municipal forums performed the role of censor by approving or rejecting users’ posts, or modifying or editing posts, depending on the rules set up for the particular forums they were moderating. A lot of discretion was exercised by the moderators in determining whether a particular post should be rejected or allowed, especially when the posts being moderated contained sensitive material such as criticisms towards political representatives in the municipality. Lastly, the moderator functioned as intermediary by forwarding suggestions and requests from users to political representatives in the municipality, and by relaying answers from the representatives to the users. This was because the representatives did not participate in the forums but depended on the moderator to be the intermediary between themselves and the users.

From the examples of moderator roles discussed, it is clear that the e-moderator maintains community through the execution of various acts that combine to provide recognisable general typologies. These acts serve to welcome members, facilitate and motivate discussion, and provide administration, technical and intermediary support, all within the framework of community maintenance.

Pedagogical function

As with the general community forums that are the antecedents of the pedagogically-based ones, community maintenance is an essential responsibility of the e-moderator in forums set up for the purpose of learning. In addition to community maintenance, e-moderators in

education forums are expected to facilitate learning. Wilson and Stacey (2004) have observed that adopting an online role is something new and unfamiliar to teachers. This suggests that teachers who utilise the online discussion for instructional purposes must possess certain skills and a clear understanding of the role they should play as e-moderators to ensure effective learning. To better understand what exactly the pedagogical function of the e-moderator is, we examine two models of e-moderating proposed for teachers by Salmon (2004) and Feenberg and Xin (2002).

Based on her research done in the UK Open University, Salmon (2004) proposed a model for teaching and learning online in which the role of the e-moderator is to provide support to students in their learning and helping the students to develop from novice to independent learners in online courses. The model defines e-moderating duties in five stages (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Five-stage model of e-moderating (Salmon, 2004, p. 29)

Stage	E-moderating functions
Stage 1	Access and motivation – welcoming and encouraging
Stage 2	Online socialisation - familiarising and providing bridges between cultural, social and learning environments
Stage 3	Information exchange – facilitating tasks and supporting use of learning materials
Stage 4	Knowledge construction – facilitating process
Stage 5	Development – supporting-responding

Stage 1 has to do with the functions of ensuring students have proper access to the online learning facility, as well as welcoming and encouraging students to participate in their online programme. The e-moderator then moves to Stage 2 where he or she tries to help students adapt to the online learning environment, for example, how to go about learning through the online mode and how to interact with other students, both of which may be unfamiliar to students embarking on an online course for the first time. Next, in Stage 3 the e-moderator facilitates and encourages information exchange among students and sharing of learning materials to complete assigned learning tasks. This leads to Stage 4, where the e-moderator

encourages students to construct their own understanding of what they have learnt through active discussion and interaction with their online peers. This stage is important as it signals the knowledge construction activity that is in contrast to the mere sharing of information. Finally, in Stage 5, the e-moderator facilitates reflection on learning, and encourages students to develop their online learning capacities such as by forming and moderating discussion groups of their own or developing plans for more active participation in their own learning. In this stage, the e-moderator responds to and supports the students' initiatives to become independent learners.

Salmon's five-stage model is a comprehensive framework encompassing all the duties of an e-moderator entrusted with the task of facilitating an online learning programme of a somewhat extended duration. In such longer term programmes, students are helped through their learning journey in an online course by the e-moderator who facilitates their socialisation and development from beginner to independent learner.

At a more micro-level, for instance within an online forum set up for the learning of a specific skill or content, what should e-moderators do as they preside over an online learning meeting? Feenberg and Xin (2002), based on their experience dealing with online discussions proposed a model of e-moderating for teachers. They advocate 10 e-moderator functions, grouped into the three broad categories of contextualising functions, monitoring functions, and metafunctions. They maintain that the performance of these functions which are crucial to the success of online discussions need not be the sole responsibility of an assigned moderator but can be performed by any member of the online forum community. Briefly, the functions in the e-moderating framework are identified as follows (Feenberg & Xin, 2002, Section II) (in italics is the summarised explanation of each function):

Contextualising functions:

Opening discussions (e.g. *opening comments and raising topics*)

Setting the norms (e.g. *setting procedures for the discussion*)

Setting the agenda (e.g. *selecting themes, topics*)

Referring (e.g. *referring to materials and hyperlinking*)

Monitoring functions:

Recognition (e.g. *explicitly welcoming and valuing participants' comments*)

Prompting (e.g. *addressing requests for comments, providing tasks*)

Assessing (e.g. *evaluating participants' accomplishments/performance*)

Meta functions:

Meta-commenting (e.g. *making remarks about context, clarity, relevance etc.*)

Weaving (e.g. *summarising and pulling together comments to encourage further discussion*)

Delegating (e.g. *assigning certain moderating functions to individual participants*)

At the level of moderating discussions in a forum, the role of the e-moderator as proposed by Feenberg and Xin (2002), although specified for teachers in particular, do not seem to be much different from that of the e-moderator in generic forums. Only two functions can be identified as potentially different from those in generic forums. They are:

- a) Prompting – while e-moderators of generic forums do prompt members by introducing topics and playing devil's advocate to stimulate discussion (Wright, 2009), they are unlikely to provide “tasks” to be completed by community members. On the other hand, the teacher-moderator provides prompts which are sometimes also tasks in themselves (as in writing prompts/tasks in a writing course) which the members (students) are more or less compelled to complete, especially if there is assessment involved.
- b) Assessing – in the educational context, students' participation may be mandatory, and achievements in a forum may be subject to some form of evaluation. This feature is obviously absent in generic non pedagogically-based forums.

Up to this point, it appears that e-moderating a pedagogically-based forum is essentially very similar to e-moderating a generic community forum in terms of the skills required of the moderator and the duties he or she is required to fulfill. The difference in teacher-moderated forums is that the themes or content selected for discussion as well as student

participation and task requirements are determined by the teacher, in line with the learning objectives set out for the forum as a tool for teaching and learning. In both Salmon's (2004) and Feenberg and Xin's (2002) models, the e-moderator does not "teach" in the traditional sense of the word, as in provide instruction on the content to be learnt. This is understandable, for the aim of a forum is to have students interact with each other (and the teacher) to construct knowledge (constructivist underpinnings) collaboratively. It would become untenable if the forum were to develop into an electronically mediated one-on-one teaching session where the teacher is the central figure in the interaction (we represent this concept in Figure 6.1). In such a model (Model B, Figure 6.1) where interaction between members does not exist, one cannot call the assembly of members a "community".

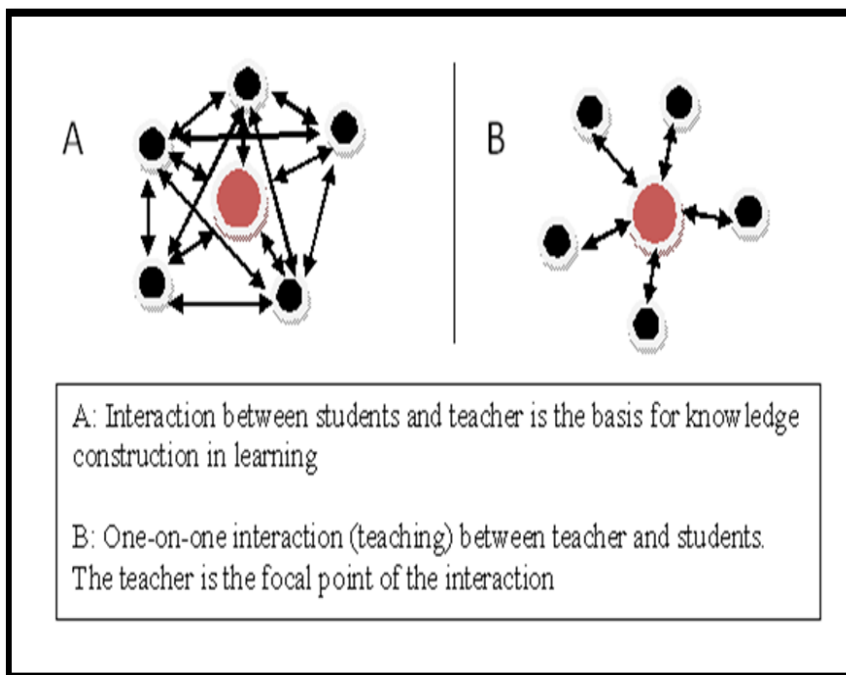


Figure 6.1 Interaction models in computer-mediated learning

Are there, then, specific e-moderator roles the teacher-moderator is expected to play that can be identified as the pedagogical function of the e-moderator as posited in the earlier part of this paper? In addressing this question, Feenberg and Xin (2002) point out that by performing functions such as contextualising, monitoring and meta-commenting, the e-moderator *is* in effect performing the pedagogical function:

... setting an agenda for the discussion is also an opportunity to introduce basic concepts in the field; granting students explicit recognition for their contributions can often be combined with substantive comments on those contributions; raising topics and summarising discussions both keep the conversation flowing (a social function) and communicate ideas (a pedagogical function) (Feenberg & Xin, 2002, Section II).

Indeed, acts of the e-moderator such as facilitating active and high quality discussion on selected content enable students to learn the content, reflect on it and construct their own unique understanding of the content. Thus, it may be more accurate to say that community maintenance goals combine with pedagogical goals in e-moderating. The difference in teacher-moderated forums is in the type of content selected for discussion and the assessment of students' understanding of the content as determined by the learning objectives set out for the forum activity as an educational tool. While some may deduce that the presence of assessment makes participation in many educational forums compulsory such that the community maintenance effort on the part of the teacher-moderator is expected to be greatly reduced, we maintain that this may not be so for several reasons. First, in forums where students have to write in a non-native language (e.g. English for Malaysian students) the difficulty in expressing themselves in writing hinders their participation. Second, where they could write freely in netspeak English or bilingually (mother tongue and English) in their own blogs or Facebook sites, ESL students find it daunting to have to write extended discussions fully in standard English which is a usual requirement in ESL learning forums. And third, as the content in such forums must revolve around course requirements rather than personal interest, motivation to engage in active discussion and debate over it may be greatly reduced. Informal observation by the authors found many teacher-initiated forums fizzle out without much

evidence of active discussion that indicate understanding and construction of knowledge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While ESL teachers in Malaysia and many parts of Asia have started to use the online forum technology in their teaching, there has been no study conducted thus far to find out what their e-moderating practices are. The present study aimed to examine the e-moderating practices of teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in a language learning online forum populated by ESL undergraduates at Universiti Putra Malaysia. By obtaining the teachers' feedback on their participation as e-moderators after the course, and analysing the teachers' archived forum posts extracted from the online platform, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the teachers' general perceptions of their role as e-moderators in the forum?
2. What is the teachers' self-reported level of involvement in the forum as e-moderators?
3. What are the functions of the messages posted by the teachers in the forums as e-moderators of their students' discussions?
4. What is the overall pattern of e-moderator functions carried out by the teachers as a group?
5. What e-moderator profiles can be identified from the practices of the teacher-moderators in the study?

This study takes an exploratory stance in investigating a topic about which little is known. The goal of the study is descriptive, with the aim to shed light on how the ESL teacher-moderators interpret and perform the e-moderator role.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The present study drew its data from an online forum that was part of a university writing course conducted at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

The online forum was set up to complement classroom-based writing instruction that focused on academic writing skills. The forum served as a platform for students to practice writing opinions in meaningful discussions with other students. As the writing course was a compulsory course for most students in the university, 1400 students participated in the forum in the first semester it was implemented and 1700 participated in the following semester.

A total of 30 teachers who taught the writing course were invited to attend a special training on using the online forum platform to moderate the discussions in the classes they taught. Among the items covered at the training were the basic technical features of the online platform (technical training), and the general responsibilities of a moderator (moderator training) as many of the teachers were first time users of such online medium in teaching. The first author was the initiator and coordinator of the forum project when it was implemented. The coordinator determined the rules of participation, assessment criteria, and the tasks and topics for discussion. Therefore the role of the teachers did not include carrying out these duties that were undertaken by the coordinator. Their role was to facilitate the students' participation in the forum in their respective groups. They also had to ensure that students fulfilled the required tasks for assessment purposes. Among the requirements set out were that students had to write opinion type paragraphs based on prompts provided by the coordinator each week (for fourteen weeks), and they were required to respond to the writings of their peers in the forum. The objective of the forum was to have students overcome the fear of writing in English, develop a habit of writing in English, develop skills in giving opinions and responding to others' opinions in writing, and gain general improvement in English writing proficiency.

METHOD

The study collected two types of data. First were data collected through a questionnaire designed to obtain background information about the teachers, their general perceptions about their role as e-moderators as well as their level of involvement in the forum. Second were the teachers' archived posts extracted from the online forum platform. Of the 30 teachers who taught the writing course and moderated the online forum in

the current study, 23 returned the survey questionnaire that were e-mailed to them at the end of the second semester. For the analysis of messages posted by the teachers, only messages posted in the second semester were collected, comprising 214 posts in total from 19 teachers. The messages were read through and their functions categorised by two raters (and consensus reached between them) and labeled accordingly.

Profile of the Teachers

The teachers were either full-time language instructors at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), or experienced part-time university or school teachers. The profile of the teachers as regards their age, prior training in e-learning, prior experience in using ICT for teaching, and the number of semesters they taught and moderated the writing course in UPM is presented in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Profile of the teachers

	Frequency (f) (n=23)	Percent (%) (n=23)	Cumulative Percent (%) (n=23)
Age:			
21 – 30 years	7	30.4	30.4
31 – 40 years	7	30.4	60.9
41 – 50 years	7	30.4	91.3
51 years and above	2	8.7	100.0
Attended online forum training in UPM:			
0 times	4	17.4	17.4
Once	15	65.2	82.6
Twice	4	17.4	100.0
Attended prior training in e-learning:			
0 times	11	47.8	47.8
1 – 2 times	4	17.4	65.2
3 – 5 times	8	34.8	100.0

Table 6.3 (cont'd)

Prior experience in using ICT in teaching:			
Yes	13	56.5	56.5
No	10	43.5	100.0
Number of semesters moderated the online forum in UPM:			
One semester	10	43.5	43.5
Two semesters	13	56.5	100.0

The teachers were fairly equally represented in terms of age, with seven teachers each in the 21 to 30 and 31 to 40 age groups, and nine in the more mature category of 41 years and above. Next, the university offered training on the use and moderation of the online forum twice (once at the beginning of each semester) for the teachers of the course. All the teachers were invited to attend the training; however, from the survey it was found that four of the teachers did not attend any of the training offered, while four others attended it twice. The remaining 15 attended the training once.

Some of the teachers had also attended training on the use of e-learning of some kind between one to five times offered by other institutions prior to the start of the UPM course. However, 11 of them had never attended such training before. Further, 10 of them had never had any experience using ICT in teaching before. Of those who had, the most frequently mentioned type of tool used appears to be online activities related to the use of internet resources such as online exercises, and less frequently, blogs and forums. Finally, 10 of the teachers taught the writing course and moderated the forum in the current study for one semester whereas 13 of them did so for two semesters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first part of this section presents findings from the survey answered by the teachers and the second part presents findings from the analysis of the teachers' posts in the forum.

General Perceptions and Level of Involvement of Teachers

From the questionnaire answered by 23 teachers, the general perceptions of the teachers regarding their role as e-moderators were obtained. Table 6.4 shows the teachers' responses about their confidence in being e-moderators.

Table 6.4 Teachers' confidence in being e-moderators

Questions/answers	Frequency (n=23)	Percent %
Did you face any difficulty learning how to use the forum platform?		
Yes, a lot	1	4.3
Not much	17	73.9
Not at all	5	21.7
Prior to the start of the course, were you apprehensive about having to moderate the forum?		
Yes, a lot	9	39.1
Not much	11	47.8
Not at all	3	13
Did you understand the role of the moderator in the forum?	(missing value=1)	
Yes, very well	20	87
Not much	2	8.7
No	0	0
Did you have any difficulty carrying out your role as the moderator for your groups?		
Seldom	12	52.2
Sometimes	11	47.8
Frequently	0	0
Do you need further training on how to use the forum platform? (technical training)		
Yes	6	26.1
No	8	34.8
Maybe	9	39.1

Table 6.4 (cont'd)

Do you need further training on how to be a more effective moderator? (moderator training)			
Yes	13	56.5	
No	5	21.7	
Maybe	5	21.7	
(After the course) Are you confident about starting your own forum project at your own institution?			
Yes	7	30.4	
No	16	69.6	

The survey showed that the teachers generally did not have much difficulty with learning the technical aspect of using the online forum platform, with only 4.3% ($f=1$) (Table 6.4) reported having a lot of difficulty. This was despite the fact that almost half of the teachers (47.8%) (Table 6.3) had not attended any training in ICT use for teaching. The ease with which even first time users found in using the forum platform indicated the simplicity and intuitiveness of the technology that made it accessible to all users. However, knowing the technical aspects of the forum bore no implications for the confidence in moderating a forum, as indicated by a mere 13% ($f=3$) who said they were not at all apprehensive (which means a huge 86.9% *were* apprehensive to some degree) (Table 6.4). This apprehension was not caused by their uncertainty about what they had to do as moderators, as 87% of them said they understood the role of the moderator. Furthermore, at the end of the course, 52.2% reported that they did not encounter any difficulty carrying out their role as moderators, while 47.8% said they encountered some problems. This result is interpreted as that there was still some degree of ambivalence among the teachers about carrying out their duties as e-moderators.

The teachers were then asked whether they felt they needed further technical and moderator training after the course. For technical training, a substantial 65.2% ($f=15$) said they needed it, whereas for moderator training an even bigger proportion of the teachers (78.2%, $f= 18$) said they needed it. This finding is unsurprising, because for most of the teachers, it was the first time they had moderated a forum, and it was expected that they would have questions arising as they performed the role for the first time. As the final gauge on the teachers' confidence in e-moderating, they

were asked to rate their confidence in starting their own forum projects in the future, only 30.4% (f=7) said yes. This result indicates that the skills needed for e-moderating cannot be taken for granted among traditionally trained teachers. They do, indeed, represent a different set of skills that teachers need to be taught (Riding & Daw, 2002; Wilson & Stacey, 2004; Salmon, 2004) if they were to be able to manage their online teaching effectively.

The next three questions in the survey asked the teachers to provide information about the frequency with which they performed certain basic functions, as a gauge of the extent of their involvement. Their responses are shown in Table 6.5.

Table 6.5 Teachers' performance of basic e-moderating functions

Questions/answers	Frequency (n=23)	Percent %
On the average, how often did you read posts, responses and private messages in the forum?		
None	0	0
Daily	5	21.7
Weekly	11	47.8
Monthly	1	4.3
Others/when necessary	6	26.1
On the average, how often did you post messages in the forum?		
None	3	13
Daily	1	4.3
Weekly	8	34.8
Monthly	3	13
Others/when necessary	8	34.8
On the average, how often did you perform administrative functions in the forum (e.g. delete names, delete posts, lock/unlock topics, warn students, etc)	(missing value=1)	
None	0	0
Daily	0	0
Weekly	14	60.9
Monthly	1	4.3
Others/when necessary	7	30.4

On the average, most of the teachers read students' posts and private messages to them on a weekly basis (47.8%, $f=11$) (Table 6.5). About one-fifth (21.7%) did this on a daily basis, indicating that the teachers were generally interested and committed in their participation. To the question of how often they posted messages, however, only one teacher (4.3%) did so on a daily basis, while the majority of them posted messages on a weekly basis (34.8%). Unfortunately, not a negligible number took much longer intervals to post messages (monthly=13%, when necessary=34.8%) or even did not post any messages at all throughout the duration of the forum activity (none= 13%). On administrative functions such as maintaining a members' register (admit/block members), lock/unlock topics, cleaning threads, and so forth, 60.9% ($f=14$) did so on a weekly basis. This frequent involvement may be in part due to the requirement of the course in which topics for discussion were expected to be locked after a certain period being active (usually two weeks). However, the teachers were given the discretion to decide for their respective groups when the topics/threads should be locked.

The survey conducted at the end of the writing course showed the teachers' feelings and how they dealt with the basic functions of the e-moderator. In the next part, the teachers' e-moderating practices are further examined by looking at what types of messages were posted by the teachers' throughout the second semester of the forum activity.

Functions of Teacher Messages

Data comprising 214 teacher posts were collected from the second semester the forum was implemented. Nineteen teachers participated in the forum for this period, thus the posts were those of these 19 teachers only. The posts were extracted directly from the online forum platform which also recorded the total number of posts by each teacher. The teacher posts were analysed for speech functions which were then tabulated to obtain a picture of the types of functions performed by the teacher-moderators. As a full post by a teacher may contain more than one message (with its function), the number of counts for messages identified (322) was more than the total number of posts (214). For example, a post by a teacher may begin with a goodwill message (GD), followed by an announcement about class postponement (AN).

Sixteen categories of functions/types were identified from the data. The following section describes these 16 functions, illustrated with extracts from the actual data. The names of the teachers and students wherever mentioned have been changed on account of confidentiality.

1. WL – Welcoming

The label for this speech function is self-explanatory. The welcoming function refers to messages that welcome students to the forum. Such messages were mainly found posted at the beginning of the semester, or at the commencement of the forum.

Extract 1: Hello everybody, I'd like to welcome everyone in Group 10 to our ONLINE FORUM.

Extract 2:

Hi to everyone in group 2. Welcome to our online forum.

2. WN: Warning

This has to do with the administrative function of the moderator to ensure students abide by the rules of the forum, specifically the rule on using English as the language of the forum, prohibition of using inappropriate language, personal attacks, copying others' messages and posting them as one's own, etc. The rules had been posted as an announcement in the forum by the forum coordinator and all students were reminded to read the rules at the start of the forum. Only three warnings were found issued, not by the teachers but by the coordinator. As the author was the coordinator, this data were not included in the study. No warnings were found issued by any of the teachers.

3. ADV: Advising

The speech function of advising comprises messages that give advice to students about what they should do about their participation (or lack of it) in the forum.

Extract 1: Sarah, you seem to be very inactive in the forum 😞
What's going on? I advise you to see me ASAP.

Extract 2: Only 7 students have registered. Please register as soon as possible. You only have one week left.

4. TSK: Posting tasks

This type of message posted is not a speech function, but rather a label to indicate the teacher's action in posting the task in his or her group's forum. There is no message written by the teacher at all; instead, he or she has just copied the writing prompts (prepared by the coordinator of the forum) from the main page of the forum and pasted them into the group's forum. This task was actually delegated to the student group leader to carry out, but a few of the teachers performed it themselves.

5. AN: Making announcements

This is when teachers post announcements about class postponements, reminders about assignment submission dates, examination dates, appointments, and other administrative matters.

Extract 1: Dear students, 😊 Please include your details in the following form. Your cooperation is very much appreciated. Tq. 😊

Extract 2: The first 10 students on the attendance list can come between 10 – 10.45. Students from no 11 – 20 can come between 10.45 – 11.30.

6. TSKR: Reminding students about the writing tasks

For this message type, teachers post messages to remind students about their writing task requirements. Students were sometimes found to have written too briefly and superficially that their contribution to the discussion was insignificant. Hence, some of the teachers had to remind them of the minimum requirements.

Extract 1: Please make sure you have two or three supporting details to support your topic sentence.

Extract 2: Your response must be around 50 words. Tell your friend whether you agree or disagree with her points.

7. MOT: Motivating/ praising

This function is characterised by messages that specifically aim to give rise to positive feelings in the students about themselves and their writing.

Extract 1: You are doing very well! Keep it up.

Extract 2: I have enjoyed reading your posts. With practice you can improve your writing skills. So, keep writing ...

Extract 3: I read your responses every week as I find most of the students' responses interesting and full of good ideas.

8. GR: Giving feedback related to grammar

This refers to feedback from teachers that points out grammatical errors in students' writing and/or provides suggestions on correct grammatical and structural forms.

Extract 1: I just want to point out some of the mistakes that you may want to amend before printing out your work. I have underlined them.

Extract 2: I have highlighted some errors here, so you can edit your work.

Extract 3: Tivia, it is not "a girl **which** pretends", "...**who**...".

Extract 4: You need to pay more attention to your choice of words and grammar. E-mail me if you are not sure of anything.

9. CNT: Giving feedback related to content

Messages that constitute comments on the content of students' writing come under this category. Teachers either commented on or responded to the argument/ideas presented in the students' writing.

Extract 1: You seem to repeat the same point over and over again. Focus on *why we shouldn't expect anything in return*.

Extract 2: I think it is a good idea to make students pay for their wrongdoing. This will make them realise that they should not break the rules.

10. EXP: Giving feedback related to expressions used by students

Feedback given to correct students' inappropriate use of expressions in English is categorised as EXP.

Extract 1: Rita, your 4th sentence could read "Nobody wants to make friends with someone who has an attitude problem".

Extract 2: ... please note the errors in sentence 2. "...regardless how much the money, the ransom asked by them." You could improve it by "...how much money or ransom is demanded by the captors".

Extract 3: “It all was god’s fated”. You could say “It was all fated” or “It was God’s Will”.

11. STRUCT: Giving feedback related to structure in students’ writing

Students were taught the basic paragraph organisation for expository writing. Some teachers commented on this aspect of the students’ writing in the forum. This type of feedback is labeled STRUCT. Some of the messages could also come under the MOT (motivating/praising). However, whereas the MOT messages are comments that are more general about students’ participation and writing, the STRUCT messages are specific touching on the structure of the students’ writing.

Extract 1: Please use the format taught in class.

Extract 2: You have a good topic sentence and conclusion.

Extract 2: This is a well-organised paragraph.

12. GD: Expressing goodwill

All messages expressing goodwill come under this category. Season’s greetings and well-wishes nearing examination time were common.

Extract 1 : Have fun in learning and good luck for your studies.

Extract 2: All the best to you, Fidah.

Extract 3: Selamat Hari Raya to all our Muslim friends.

13. JK: Joking

This category of message is comprised of comments that can be construed as a joke, or that contain humour. As expected, use of humour suited only certain personalities and thus it was found to be minimal in the data analysed, and were used by only two of the teachers.

Extract 1: Are you writing a novel?

Extract 2: I am speechless

Extract 3: I would suggest you sing this song so that everyone is able to understand you better... you can sing with Gerard...

The next three functions have to do with responses to specific questions asked by students. They are identified as answers to questions related to administrative matters, to the writing tasks, and grammar. It is clarified that

the number of responses posted by teachers does not in any way reflect the number of questions actually asked by students in the forum, as there were questions posed that were not answered by the teachers, but responded to by other students, or not responded to at all.

14. ANS-ADMIN: Answering queries related to administration

This message type consists of answers to students' questions related to the administration of the forum or the course in general. For example, students asked questions about their assignments, about when they could get their test results or where the examination venue was.

Extract 1 : Hi Chua, which assignment are you doing now?
 Assignment 2 or 3? About your test, you need to wait for
 your lecturer to ...

Extract 2: Second topic only, but if you feel that the issue you want
 to discuss is related, why not?

15. ANS-TSK: Answering queries related to writing tasks

These are responses posted in response to questions by students asking for clarification related to the writing tasks. The Extract below is a teacher's response to a student's question on whether he could use the same 'phrase' as that used by another student.

Extract 1: It doesn't matter if you have the same phrase, but I am
 sure your reasons would be fairly different.

16. ANS-GR: Answering queries related to grammar

Answers to questions about grammar by students are categorised as ANS-GR. In the data for the current study, no such message was encountered. This is not to be confused with the GR category where the teachers posted messages commenting on the grammatical errors in the students' writing. The ANS-GR messages are responses to students' queries about grammar usage.

Overall Pattern

The data obtained from the analysis of the teachers' posts are tabulated in Table 6.4. We began by looking at the functions that were performed by at least one teacher, and counted the number of teachers that performed

the function at least once (refer to Table 6.6, last row). From this data, we were able to see how the teachers interpreted their role as e-moderators as reflected in their actual practice. The functions that were performed (at least once) by the highest number of teachers (out of a total of 19 teachers) were MOT (motivating/praising) (f=14), TSKR (reminding students about writing tasks) (f=14), and AN (making announcements) (f=13). This shows that as a group the teachers strongly considered these duties as a major part of their role as e-moderators. It is not surprising that motivating students to participate in the forum was a priority among the teachers. Encouraging and ensuring student participation is really important in an ESL learning context, where writing in English is a daunting task for many students. The other two functions, reminding students about the writing tasks they are required to complete (TSKR), and making announcements (AN) are also seen as a central part of the e-moderator's job by the teachers. In Salmon's (2004) model, these functions are categorised under Stage 1 functions, that is welcoming and encouraging, while in Feenberg and Xin's (2002) framework, they are identified as monitoring functions.

Another function which is also performed by a large number of teachers is the advising function (ADV) (f=12). Twelve out of the nineteen teachers performed this function of giving advice to the students about their participation (i.e. lack of it) in the forum at least once. Some of these were given in an admonishing tone, some in a concerned tone. Again this function can be viewed as a monitoring function of the e-moderator.

Three more functions that were seen as quite important to the role of e-moderator as demonstrated in the messages posted by the teachers are the TSK (copying and pasting tasks in the forum) (f= 9), GD (expressing goodwill) (f=7), and WL (welcoming/greeting). These monitoring functions which were performed by six to ten teachers out of 19, indicated that they were somewhat perceived as a part of the e-moderator's job by the teachers.

Next, seven functions which were performed at least once by two to five teachers out of 19, were EXP (giving feedback related to the expressions used by students in their writing) (f=5), STRUCT (giving feedback related to the structure of their writing) (f=5), GR (giving feedback related to grammar usage) (f=5), CNT (giving feedback related to the content of students' writing) (f=5), ANS-TSK (answering students' queries about the

tasks they had to do) ($f=3$), ANS-ADMIN (answering students' queries about administrative matters) ($f=2$), and JK (joking/making humorous comments) ($f=2$). Lastly, two functions, ANS-GR (answering students' queries about grammar usage) ($f=0$), and WN (giving warnings) ($f=0$) were not performed by any teacher at all.

The fact that five teachers or fewer performed these functions in the forum may be an indication of the teachers' implicit understanding that these functions are not quite a central part of a moderator's job. Of the seven seldom used functions, four (EXP, STRUCT, GR and CNT) are the meta (meta-commenting) functional roles which include commenting on the clarity and correctness/appropriateness of language, and the relevance of content (Feenberg & Xin, 2002). Two functions (ANS-TSK and ANS-ADMIN) are monitoring functions.

Joking or making humorous comments (JK) is a little more difficult to categorise. Light-hearted comments by the teacher in the forum about their students' writing appear to be used as a means to exert the teacher's online presence without making a substantive comment on the writing itself, and to let the students know that the teacher is reading what they write. The humour also functions to reduce the stress felt by the students for having to write their thoughts in English, week after week, to be read by their peers. Hence the function played by joking appears to be providing encouragement and motivation to the students, making JK a monitoring function. Figure 6.2 summarises the overall pattern of e-moderating functions as they were performed by the teacher-moderators in the online forum.

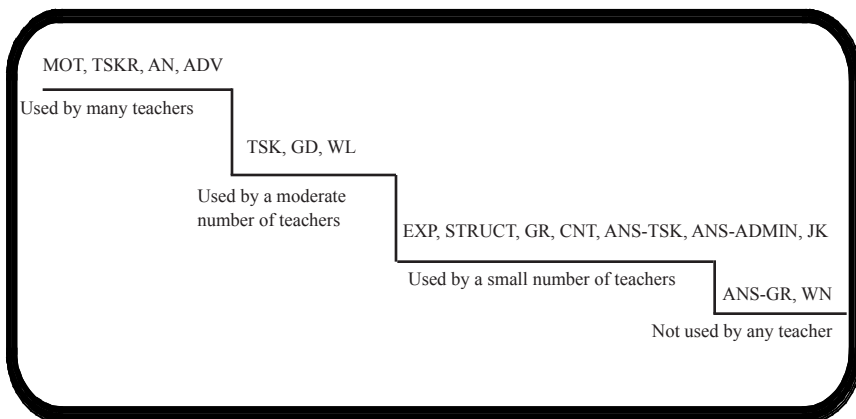


Figure 6.2: Overall pattern of e-moderating functions

Table 6.6 Frequencies of messages in each function by individual teachers

Teacher	TOTAL NO. OF POSTS	Functions														TOTAL NO. OF MESSAGES ANALYSED		
		WL	WN	ADV	TSK	AN	TSKR	MOT	GR	CNT	EXP	STRUCT	ANS-ADMIN	ANS-TSK	ANS-GR		GID	JK
L	64	1		8	13	1	3	18	19	5	1	14					1	84
E	28			3		2	1	10	20	2	6	1				2		47
N	19			2	10	1	2	5					1	1		6		28
C	9			1		5	3	4		5	1		1	1		2	4	26
M	9	1		4		1	7	7	1			1						22
S	15			2	6	3	1	1		3				1				17
O	13				13	2												15
Q	8			2		2	2	7								1		14
D	5			1		4	2	2	2							1		12
I	10				10		1	1										12
K	7	1		2		1	1	3	2									10
R	6			1			1	3		2						2		9
A	8	1		1	2	1	1	1								1		8
J	3			1		2	1	1										5
F	4				4													4
B	1	1					1	1										3
H	1	1			1													2
P	2					2												2
G	2				1													1
TOTAL	214	6	0	28	60	27	27	64	44	17	8	16	2	3	0	15	5	322
No. of teachers who performed a function at least once		6	0	12	9	13	14	14	5	5	3	3	2	3	0	7	2	

E-Moderator Profiles

Having identified the overall e-moderating pattern demonstrated by the teachers, we tried to identify individual teacher-moderator profiles in order to derive a possible typology of potential e-moderating roles of the ESL teacher. It is clarified here that the purpose of identifying these profiles is not to make generalisations into which all e-moderators should be made to fit. Rather, in line with the exploratory goal of the study, examining these profiles will shed light on how an individual ESL teacher-moderator might perceive and interpret his or her e-moderating role.

On the whole, four contrasting profile types can be discerned from the analysis of the 19 teachers' posts. We descriptively label them the Grammarian, the Joker, the Task-Reminder, and the Absent-Moderator profiles. The Grammarian is typified by Teachers L and E (Table 6.6). The Grammarian believes that the most important function of the ESL forum e-moderator is to point out or correct grammatical errors (GR) in students' writing, as he or she focuses on accuracy in students' written product. It is seen that Teacher L has also posted many messages concerned with the structure of students' writing (STRUCT) while Teacher E emphasised the appropriateness of expressions (EXP). These practices are in line with the Grammarian's emphasis on language form. The Grammarian is also actively involved in interacting with students. Thus, they also post a high number of encouraging messages to motivate (MOT) students to write better. (Incidentally, Teachers L and E have the highest total number of posts – see Column 2, Table 6.6).

The next type of e-moderator is the Joker, characterised by Teacher C. This profile is interesting as only certain personality types are able to utilise such resources as humour (JK) to encourage students to participate, and to maintain an online teacher presence. The Joker-moderator sees light-hearted encouragement as an effective way to build closer relationships and thus maintain an active online community. Noticeable, too, about the Joker-moderator, is the absence of messages commenting on students' grammatical errors (GR) and structure (STRUCT) of their writing. Conversely, there is a reasonable number of comments on the content (CNT) of what is written. (Note: the function of TSK is not considered here as this duty had been delegated to a student). Thus, it is surmised that the Joker places more emphasis on communication and participation,

ostensibly not letting students' poor command of grammar and structure hinder or discourage them from participating.

The third e-moderator type is the Task-Reminder as characterised by Teacher M. Other than giving strong encouragement (MOT) to students to participate, the Task-Reminder is unique in that she posts a high proportion of messages reminding students of what they have to do to complete the assigned tasks. The Task-Reminder places much importance on students fulfilling the requirements of the tasks, possibly because there may be students who need reminding before they would do what is required, students who do not understand the tasks given, and students who go off on a tangent as some are prone to do as they get carried away in their discussion.

The fourth e-moderator profile apparent from the data is the Absent-Moderator. As indicated by the label, this moderator type does not interact with the students, save for posting announcements (AN) and writing tasks (TSK) (which entails merely copying the tasks prepared by the forum coordinator and pasting them in the group's forum). The absent moderator is exemplified by Teachers O, F, H, P, and G. The absent moderator is likely to believe that the forum can run on auto-pilot in terms of students completing their writing tasks and interacting with and learning from each other without the teacher's involvement.

These e-moderator profiles derived from the analysis of individual teachers' forum posts clearly show there are varied interpretations of the role of the e-moderator among the teachers. As the forum in the study was an ESL writing forum, a forum basically set up to "teach" language skills, some teachers are bound to feel that pointing out errors and correcting grammar usage, structure of writing, and appropriateness of expression must be emphasised, as providing feedback on these features in students' writing is considered an important role of a writing teacher in a traditional (and not so traditional) writing class. By doing this, the teacher is essentially taking the role of the "cybrarian" (Wright, 2009) whereby he or she is the focal point of expert knowledge. Some teachers on the other hand, may interpret the e-moderator's central role as someone who encourages participation, and hence pay minimal attention to grammar and structure in order not to discourage students who may have a poor command of the language. It is likely that the teachers understand the fear of public

humiliation (whether real or imagined) among students if their mistakes were to be publicly pointed out by the teacher, considering that face-saving is highly valued in Malaysian (and Asian) society (Katz, 2008). These teachers, too, are likely to believe that the gains in confidence to write and express their thoughts in English that students derive from participating will eventually spill over to facilitate gains in language competence. Next, there may be teachers who take their role as e-moderator as someone who keeps students close to the task assigned. To these teachers, the success of the forum is actually in students completing their tasks, probably in view of impending assessment scheduled at the end of the course. These teachers may not realise that tasks or prompts given in an environment such as an online forum sometimes are meant to function as a catalyst to spur active discussion and learning beyond what is explicitly stated in the task itself. Discussions may take different directions as the community journeys towards constructing knowledge and developing skills. Finally, there are teachers who believe that the e-moderator's role is purely administrative, and that keeping an online presence (through posting messages) is unnecessary. These teachers do their duties in the back stage, such as keeping members' register, and locking or unlocking topics, and play a minimal role in facilitating discussion.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have presented an overview of the e-moderating practices of ESL teachers who moderated a writing forum in a public university in Malaysia. In this exploratory study, we have described the teachers' perceptions of their role as e-moderators and their self-reported level of involvement in performing basic e-moderator duties, described the functions of the messages posted by the teachers in the forum, and the collective overall pattern of the teachers' e-moderating role. Finally, we drew out and described four interesting but contrasting e-moderator profiles from among the teachers in order to shed light on how the e-moderating role may be interpreted and performed by the ESL teacher. It is not an aim of this study to pronounce judgement on whether the practices of the teachers described are appropriate, effective, or otherwise. We believe that such an evaluation must take into account all the contextual variables that bear upon the teaching-learning situation and hence, is beyond the

scope of this paper. The findings of the study have important implications for teacher training. As the pedagogical use of ICT tools, especially the ubiquitous online forum, for language learning is here to stay, the training of teachers cannot afford to neglect providing the necessary knowledge and skills to use such tools effectively to teacher trainees. More research on e-moderating and e-moderator roles, particularly in relation to their effectiveness in the teaching and learning of a second/foreign language context is needed to provide the direction for and to inform teacher education.

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