

Discourse Analysis of EFL Students' Attitudes and Social Interactions Towards a Virtual Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the discourse of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' attitudes and social interactions towards a virtual classroom of Hoa Sen University Mlearning System. The system is built on Moodle platform, where educators and learners are empowered to create personalized virtual classrooms in a secure and integrated environment. Through social network-like features, teachers and learners can exchange more ideas about lessons after school to promote independence in learning and strengthen social relationships. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to interactivity between or among people through mediated communication channels. A myriad of studies on the use of CMC of foreign language learners have been conducted; however, there is little research using discourse analysis to explore students' attitudes and social interactions in language learning contexts. This paper uses an interpretive methodology by working from quantitative and qualitative data. The participants were 100 non-English major students of an English Writing class for one semester. Besides, statistics from students' interactions and post-interviews were analyzed based on discourse analysis. The results showed that learners had positive responses and attitudes towards the virtual classroom. Finally, some implications for EFL learning and teaching using virtual classrooms were discussed.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, CMC, virtual classrooms, EFL learners, attitudes and social interactions.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Vygotsky (1962) [1], the learning process occurs through interactions and communication among teachers, students, and others. Thus, teachers can set up a learning environment that promotes students' interactions through discussion, collaboration, information exchange, and feedback. In recent years, especially during the covid-19 pandemic, online communication has been taking place rapidly to support learning and teaching activities for teachers and students in many universities in Vietnam. The transition from "real" classrooms to "virtual" ones has increased the demand for academic research on the topic.

Mills (1996) [2] defines CMC discourse as teachers' and learners' ability to communicate in virtual space through a network system. In other words, a virtual classroom is a place in which CMC discourse occurs. The author also states writing is a "social act" that might be influenced by spatial constraints. Therefore, the use of technology to teach writing, for instance, can enhance social exchange by generating new social structures. Besides, with CMC environments, learners can access

more equitable discussion platforms, leading to more interactions between learners. Thereby, they are fostered to use a more complex and formal language (Warschauer, 1996) [3].

Juvova, Chudy, Neumeister, Plischke, and Kvintova (2015) [4] argue that interaction between learners themselves and learners and instructors is the critical factor in any educational context. Benwell and Stokoe (2006) [5] indicate various fields of CMC such as emails, websites, synchronous chatrooms (real-time interaction with instant messenger) or asynchronous ones (discussion forums), and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life).

Gunawardena (1995) [6] states most of the studies regarding online learning made use of democratic and social aspects of computers during the period 1990s. Among a tremendous amount of research related to social interactions and technology, Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) [7] conceptualize a community of inquiry for reflective thinking, which is considered as an educational method. The theoretical framework emphasizes the deep meanings more than the

learning and teaching process's surface ones. Its purpose is to generate environments to boost cognition of higher order.

In order to prove the value of the framework, research by Richards (2006) [8] points out specific focus and objectives of language vary in different contexts. The only thing which may be constant is the interaction among learners and learners or learners and instructors.

Swain (1995) [9] applies the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of Halliday (1970) to analyze classroom discourse. She concludes there are three main features of language as a learning tool. First, learners are able to recognize which factor is missing when their communication cannot be effective. Second, they always search for better ways to exchange speech when there exists a realization of ineffective methods. Finally, there are opportunities for them to reflect and review the language they use. In short, the development of students' awareness can be used to enhance group work collaboration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Presence and Online Environments

Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) [7] propose a comprehensive transactional learning model and teaching that leverages the comfort and richness of interactions to capture educational dynamics and research instruction regarding efficient online learning. This model focuses on tertiary education in which meaningful and profound learning is the main goal. Accordingly, the learning process is carried out in a community consisting of instructors and learners who are crucial and divided into three core constituents: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence (Figure 1).

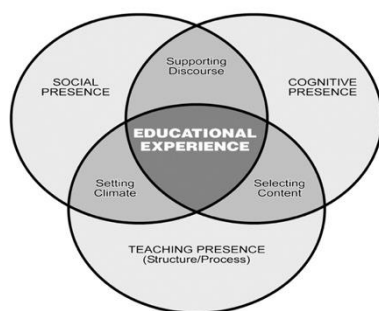


Figure 1 The community of inquiry theoretical framework (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer, 2001)

Among the three elements mentioned, social presence was particularly prioritized in this study. This theory thoroughly addresses interactions, cooperation, and social interactions in the learning process. Specifically, presence is correlated with an integral part of the intermediate medium, understood as the ability of

learners to speculate themselves in social and emotional ways (e.g., personal traits) to perform themselves as “real” people (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001) [7]. In other words, it helps to create an environment that supports and encourages discovery, skepticism, expression, and comments. As Rogers and Lea (2005) [11] point out in their study, when individuals are identified with a group and purpose, the group operates more effectively (rather than merely making connections among individuals).

Jahng, Nielsen, and Chan (2010) [12] argue over the mediating function of social presence for critical discourse and cooperation. Their new perception asserts that social presence should be spontaneously developed through a purposeful and collaborative inquiry process.

The new form of online education (CMC) has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars, and some have contributed to the studies of classroom discourse in online environments.

In a study by Barbour et al. (2009) [13], the author illustrates the benefits of virtual schools as well as the expanded access to education. Accordingly, high-quality learning opportunities are provided, and students' results and skills are improved, providing educational options and effective management.

BoUiger (2009) [14] describes shortcomings in virtual classrooms' communication, such as lack of physical presence and verbal communication. This may lead to challenges that students have to encounter when expressing most of their thoughts and feelings through text. Hence, visual communication components such as pictographic and typographic marks can play a vital role in conveying intentions and meanings. To investigate this issue, a quantitative method was used to analyze some of CMC's characters and images during a course for graduates, occurring entirely online in late 2004 and 2005. The results show learners use various visual cues to express themselves.

Another study conducted by Stansberry (2006) [15] finds that asynchronous discussion in CMC discourse exhibits various characteristics. As such, students demonstrate more complex decision-making processes, increase participation and collaboration, learn to perform in a more structured way, and focus on higher-order thinking.

Following a different approach, Park (2007) [16] examines a synchronous class's discourse to point out communication constraints on students' interpersonal performance. It is suggested that learners use various linguistic strategies creatively to manifest their opinions and emotions such as prosodic features, contractions, and typographical rules. In addition to describing gestures and facial expressions, emoticons are also used. One important conclusion from this study is that interpersonal

interactions' effectiveness is a key element in the success of team participation and collaboration in the CMC context.

Le (2011) [17] admits that in Vietnam, English is recognized as a foreign language, so there are limitations of practice and interactions outside the traditional classrooms; thus, learners often have to take advantage of classroom hours to improve their English skills. A change in teaching methodology, such as communicative language instruction, has allowed students to communicate with friends and teachers in the target language (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013) [18]. Nevertheless, due to a large number of students in each classroom and lack of up-to-the-minute facilities, teachers cannot always generate realistic communication scenarios for the whole class (Nguyen, 2004) [19]. The online environments, especially virtual courses, provide students with communication and interaction opportunities, but the quality of online learning in Vietnam remains a concern (Hong, 2009) [20].

2.2 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Approach to Discourse Analysis

SFL theory has been widely applied in a number of areas, including language teaching (Christie 1999) [21]. According to this theory, comments, attitudes, and even relationships between readers and writers are expressed through linguistic forms (Halliday, 1985, 1989) [22][23]. The basic principle is that all linguistic systems can be analyzed to serve one of three types of meta-functions: conceptual, interpersonal, and textual. To investigate social interactions, only interpersonal function was discussed in this study.

The view of interpersonal meta-function of language is presented by Halliday (1970) [10]. He states it is the function by which the speaker penetrates discourse to perform a speech exchange role. In addition to mood and modality presentation, his concept also includes various phenomena, vocative, and attitudinal items, or uses of conjunctive items that evoke the speakers' roles of communication (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 240) [24]. The universal concept of interpersonal meaning has a significant impact, surpassing Hallidayan and systematic linguistics. Specifically, it applies not only to propositional grammar study but also to language change and discourse.

Eggins & Slade (1997) [25] use the SFL model in conventional conversation analysis. They argue that normal conversation is "driven by interpersonal meaning". Language use (textual meaning) and defined topics (ideal meaning) are less critical than interpersonal meaning in casual conversations.

Usually, in English textbooks and EFL classes, common conversations are taught in a pattern where

students learn to greet people on the street or conduct daily discussions about the weather or just about life. These experiences help students participate in English-speaking cultures' social environments (Eggins & Slade, 1997) [25]. They also suggest that all analysis in this area has the potential to promote "full participation in the cultural life of English-speaking countries".

The utilization of pronouns is one of the main features of interpersonal meta-function. It represents the interactions and social distance between the senders and receivers of messages. Personal pronouns refer to different entities in discourse for brevity and less confusion. The pronouns are used to refer to the participants and reflect the relationship between the people involved (Thompson, 1996/2000, p. 26) [26]. The choice of personal pronouns expresses the writer's intention: showing respect to readers to establish good relationships with them or serving other purposes such as conveying content in the text.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

From the literature and profound of the use of CMC in teaching a foreign language as well as the SFL approach to discourse analysis, this research aimed to find EFL learners' attitudes and social interactions towards the virtual English writing class of Hoa Sen University (HSU) Mlearning system. Therefore, the research question is:

What are the EFL learners' social interactions and attitudes towards the virtual English writing classroom?

4. METHODS

4.1 Pedagogical Setting & Participants

A total of 100 students from HSU, Ho Chi Minh City, took part in the study. The participants were second-year students ranging from different majors (non-English major). They were recruited due to the following reasons:

As second-year students, all had more than one year equipped with an intensive English program with a specific goal (Figure 2), in which writing is seen as an essential skill. Participating students were at EIC6 level, the highest English level for non-major students at HSU. Moreover, the researcher joined this course with the role of the instructor. There were 57 males and 43 females among 100 participants. All of them were required to put up their writings online and give other members feedback during the semester 19.2B of 2019. Students' interactions and reflections regarding the virtual classroom were accumulated to be analyzed.

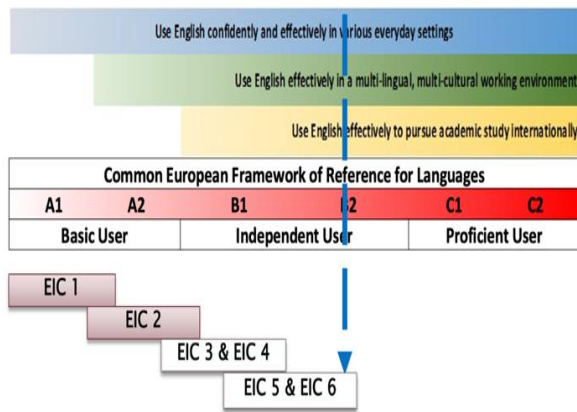


Figure 2 Goal of Intensive English program for non-major students

4.2 Procedures

The research design was generally a case study model. It was conducted for one semester in an EIC6 class at HSU. In this class, the students were learning English writing as a required section of the subject; they studied about three periods (50 minutes each) per session per day for 35 sessions.

In addition to taking traditional classes, learners were also required to take a virtual course to improve their writing skills. Each student was provided with a personal account on the administrator's Mlearning system. After that, the teacher added all students to the course. A special mode was adjusted to their posts and responses so that only members of the class can see them.

When participating in the class, the instructor required the students to write down their feelings and opinions about the class and interact with the rest of the members by responding to their writings. All collected data was the main factor serving the analysis. First, content analysis was used to examine learners' responses to the course. This was extremely important because it helped to know whether learners would accept the purpose of practicing writing skills in the virtual class or not. Second, Halliday's interpersonal meta-function (1985, 1989) [22][23] and the social presence model proposed by Rourke et al. (2000) [7] were used to analyze the content of online interactions.

4.3 Research Tools

Five open-ended questions were used to ask students how they felt about virtual classrooms at the end of the semester. All responses must be presented in written form and posted directly to the class forum. The English version of the questions was attached to the Vietnamese translation to avoid possible misunderstandings and ensure validity.

Below were the reflection questions:

1. Have you participated in a virtual classroom before this semester?
2. Have you participated in a virtual writing classroom before this semester?
3. Are you interested in studying in a virtual classroom? Please write down its advantages and disadvantages?
(about 120 words)
4. Would you like to study English writing in a virtual classroom?
5. How would you describe this virtual class? (Various adjectives should be used to describe it.)

Classroom reflections were collected and systematically analyzed into a variety of categories. Each category represented students' perceptions of the virtual classroom. Furthermore, the learners' online interactions were also studied, which serves as the primary interaction analysis source.

5. FINDINGS

Regarding the five open-ended questions, the majority of the responses were positive. The results of the first two questions indicated that almost all students had participated in the virtual classroom before. This was understandable because when the covid-19 epidemic broke out in Vietnam, learning on the Mlearning system was applied synchronously to all HSU subjects. However, only 20% of students previously took a virtual English writing class. When the participants were asked if they wanted to continue with the virtual writing class, only 5 of them (5%) said they did not want to take any more virtual classes next semester, 10% remained neutral. In contrast, most students (80%) felt interested in the next participation.

The analysis was divided into three main aspects: (1) learners' attitudes, (2) the adjectives they used to describe the class, (3) the social interactions among learners. First, their attitudes were determined through the analysis of content. Next, the learners' descriptions were systematically classified. Finally, the results of learners' social interactions were presented. Below is a breakdown of each section.

5.1 Attitudes Towards the Virtual English Writing Classroom

As shown in Table 1, 85% of the participants had positive attitudes towards the course. More specifically, these good responses fell into four main aspects: convenience, mutual learning, social connection, and real-time communication.

Table 1. EFL learners' attitudes

Attitudes	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	5	5%
Positive	85	85%
Neutral	10	10%

5.1.1 Convenience

Among students' positive comments when being asked about their sentiment towards the class, "convenience" had a high frequency of presence. They thought the classroom was convenient for both the learners and the instructor.

Student A: I found studying online convenient because I need to upload my homework from home. Looking up information from the internet is also very fast.

Student B: Yes, I like this virtual classroom due to its convenience. I can attend it anytime and anywhere.

Student C: Of course! This is a perfect choice. Mlearning system is very convenient. We don't need to go to the campus.

5.1.2 Mutual Learning

In addition to comments about this class's convenience, learners found it helpful when reading other people's writings and thought their writing skill was improved thanks to this activity. More specifically, the virtual classroom was like an open learning space in which all learners had the opportunity to learn from their peers. In contrast, the chance of learning mutually was very little in a traditional classroom.

Student D: When taking a virtual classroom, we all have to use English to answer the teachers' questions. It is great to be in such a learning environment. I think my English has also improved a bit.

Student E: When reading other people's assignments, I have more experience with my writing. Since then, my scores are also better.

5.1.3 Social Connection

The connection between the members of the virtual classroom was remarkable. Social connection was vividly shown through the students' responses.

Student G: Yes, it helps students connect more as well as with teachers.

Student H: Communication between classmates is easier than ever.

5.1.4 Real-Time Communication

In addition to the above analysis, learners indicated that the virtual classroom was the place where they can exchange ideas with one another immediately. Hence, when accessing the online learning environment, learners could present their own views without limitations of time and space.

Student C: We quickly take advantage of the Mlearning system, such as instant messaging and real-time connection. It is an excellent platform for us. The relationship between the members of the virtual classroom was remarkable. Social connection was vividly shown through the students' responses.

Student G: Yes, it helps students connect more and with teachers.

Student H: Communication between classmates is easier than ever.

5.2 Adjective Description

Table 2. Adjective description

	Adjectives	Frequency
Positive	convenient	52
	easy	22
	useful	15
	interesting	22
	fun	24
	good	10
	fast	10
	effective	5
	real	5
	satisfied	2
	enjoyable	5
	Special	1
	fun	15
		total: 82.5%
Negative	not good	10
	terrible	5
	boring	10
	nervous	5
	worried	5
	ineffective	5
		total: 17.5%

From the available data (Table 2), it can be affirmed that participants felt satisfied with the experience of participating in the virtual classroom. Most of the adjectives were positive (82.5%); the remaining 17.5% were negative. The adjectives “convenient”, “easy”, “interesting,” and “useful” had a high frequency of presence in learners’ writings. The members who expressed their opinions with negative adjectives were interviewed afterward. These learners thought learning in a virtual classroom made them feel worried, nervous, and even pressured when they had to log into the classroom regularly. They required face-to-face interactions and communication, which they were familiar with. Some students pointed out that internet access should only be for relaxation and entertainment, not for academic objectives, because there were so many things to learn in the "real" classrooms.

5.3 Social Interactions

Social interactions of learners were unveiled in the subsequent section. Active participation of learners in the virtual classroom was demonstrated through their posts in the class forum (592 times) and the feedback on friends' posts (826 times).

Table 3. The interactive category of social presence

(Adapted from Rourke et al., 2001)

Category	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Interactive	Agreement	35	26.4
	Advice/Suggestion	123	24
	Questioning	77	15
	Compliment	66	12.9
	Appreciation	15	2.9
	Content reference	96	18.8

The analysis of students’ responses in the virtual classroom indicated social interactions (Table 3). Out of the eight indicators, “agreement” (26.4%) and “advice/suggestion” (24%) were the most frequent, followed by “content reference” (18.8%) and "questioning" (15%). So, it was evident while responding to their classmates’ posts; learners would refer to what had been mentioned previously. Moreover, giving compliments and questioning happened in feedback content. Online feedback was used as a token of social interaction.

Table 4. Personal pronouns used in the English writing virtual classroom

Personal Pronouns		Frequency	Percentage (%)
First Person	I (me)	1076	42
	We (us)	356	14
Second Person	You (you)	623	15.8
Third Person	He (him)	118	4.6
	She (her)	89	3.4
	It (it)	109	4.3
	They (Them)	172	6.8

The recurrence of personal pronoun use was listed in table 4. First and second-person pronouns were more commonly used than the others. This means the writers tried to create their own social community, making the readers feel close to each other. The sense of intimacy was significantly represented by first-person pronouns (56 %), helping learners create interactions like face-to-face communication. However, the prevalence rate for second-person pronouns (15.8%) was lower than that for third-person pronouns (19.1%). The dominant rationale for the high third-person pronoun rate was that students had to tell or describe their favorite movies or TV shows. Students listed and described in detail one or several characters they admired; therefore, the third-person

Table 5. Percentage of the frequency of speech function pairs (Adapted from Halliday,1985)

Initiating Speech Function	Responding Speech Function	
	Supporting	Confronting
Offer 7%	Acceptance 5%	Rejection 0
Command 2%	Compliance 0	Refusal 0
Statement 81 %	Acknowledgment 84 %	Contradiction 0
Question 10 %	Answer 11%	Disclaimer 0

pronouns (he/she) was often used (8%).

In addition to the analysis of pronouns, Halliday's interpersonal function was still applied to investigate learners' initiations, and responses (Table 5), resulting in more social interactions were explored. As data indicated, there are 550 times of initiating and responding pairs, dominantly (84%) were statement - acknowledgment, followed by question-answer (11%) and offer-acceptance (5%). With the above analysis, social interactions were significantly presented in this study.

There were obviously social interactions among EFL learners. When one presented their opinion, the others responded, especially in a positive way. In general, learners in this CMC context did not only have more opportunities to the target language, but they were also able to share and encourage their classmates. It could be concluded CMC enhanced the connection between learners.

6. DISCUSSION

Overall, most of the course participants (85%) responded positively to the virtual classroom. They thought that the HSU Mlearning system was a useful and practical online learning platform. There were four categories they covered: convenience, mutual learning, social connection, and real - time communication.

In addition to the good feelings of learners for the course, the high social interactions among them, which was demonstrated through their active submission as well as feedback to other members, were also very noticeable. Additionally, they advised and encouraged one another. All of this was proved through data analysis based on Halliday's interpersonal meta-function (1985, 1989) [22][23] and the social presence model proposed by Rourke et al. (2000) [7].

Next, pronouns were also one of the main features of social interaction. First-person pronouns appeared quite often (56.9%), indicating that direct communication accounted for the majority of classroom interactions.

Most importantly, almost all learners are expected to continue taking virtual classes in the future. The fact that 90.2% of the positive adjectives used by learners to describe the classroom indicated their interest in virtual learning.

According to Brooks (2013) [27], learning is not only a linguistic process, but it is also understood as a social procedure. A virtual classroom can be affirmed as a crucial factor that helps explore learning and teaching through human interactions. As a result, it is possible to discover discourse patterns of speech through classroom contexts. Students' classroom discourse can be valuable since it might generate comprehensive course content, improving students' learning ability.

As describe by Ziegler et al. (2014) [28], discourse analysis of virtual classrooms can help instructors

understand what students think. Teachers can consider discourse as a useful way to examine whether learners accept a learning concept or not. Therefore, instructors should maintain discipline and observation in order to ensure secure and safe environments for learners to interact naturally. By contrast, students would feel reluctant when expressing opinions. Another major issue pointed out in this research paper was mostly directed towards students' attitudes, which helped instructors design suitable activities to encourage them to give feedback and suggestions to their peers. , the number of assignments should be taken into consideration and adjusted so as not to put students under pressure.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows the importance of learners' attitudes and social interactions towards virtual classes, especially the EFL ones. This leads to the fact that classroom discourse should be more focused during online courses. Furthermore, the study's findings would add value to a myriad of studies available and help teachers and educators have better views about the teaching and learning occurring in the virtual classroom. For example, assignments should be considered to be adjusted not to pressure the learners.

Hopefully, the findings and conclusions shed some light on the application of virtual classrooms in an integrated course. It will help language teachers who want to stimulate learners' engagement and foster more positive interaction among learners.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Hai Tran Quang is currently a English lecturer at Hoa Sen University, Vietnam. His accumulated experience from working at various educational institutions has equipped him with ample confidence and skills in language teaching. His interests are Linguistics, Virtual Communities, and Teaching Learning Practices.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Part of this paper was supported by the ELT Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Hoa Sen University.

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