

## Investigation of the perceived usefulness of a StudyNet group discussion facility by international students

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### Summary

Postgraduate international students at UK institutions of higher education often find difficulty dealing with seminar-type discussions. An attempt was made to help students with this by utilising the group discussion facility of StudyNet. However, as most of the students were from East Asia, where education is often considered as essentially a passive process rather than something they have to do for themselves, it was felt necessary to investigate this to see how seriously they took such an activity. A questionnaire was therefore given to the students and the results analysed. Despite some criticisms, the students were generally found to understand the purpose of the activity and think it beneficial. Thus, overall, when activities are clearly seen to be related to the learning outcomes and integrated into the course, they can be used with confidence with East Asian students.

### Introduction

The University's International Bridging Programme prepares international students for postgraduate study at the University. To follow the programme students usually have a first degree and the appropriate academic qualifications to enrol on a Masters degree. However, their English competence is inadequate for a postgraduate course so it is necessary for them to improve it. Hence they need to follow the University's course or a similar one elsewhere. It is a one-year course and the students take several different modules. The largest module is English for Academic Purposes. It consists of sixteen hours per week of class contact in Semester A and six hours per week in Semester B.

The main aims of the Semester B course are to:

- improve the students' command of academic English: language structure, use and vocabulary
- consolidate their language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in academic contexts
- put to practical use appropriate academic conventions observed in British higher education
- acquire a range of transferable academic skills essential for effective study at postgraduate level
- develop learner independence.

By the end of the course they should have a knowledge and understanding of:

- relevant conventions followed in academic English (both written and oral)
- the difference between the informal and formal registers of the English language
- what is expected linguistically of an overseas postgraduate student in British higher education.

They should also be able to:

- listen to, understand and take notes in lectures
- apply a range of reading strategies and use the library appropriately
- produce a substantial piece of researched writing
- take part in discussions, seminars and tutorials
- prepare and deliver presentations
- employ a range of general and academic vocabulary.

Objectives are defined by the needs of students' academic courses in the following year. The main job, therefore, in preparing these courses is to investigate what the students will have to do in their academic course, work out what aspects of language – grammar, vocabulary, skills and so on – they will need and then find ways to teach and assess it (Gillett, 1989).

One skill needed by postgraduate students is the ability to take part in discussions. It is generally accepted that student-student interaction, both formal and informal, is beneficial in higher education (Pica and Doughty, 1985; Topping, 1996; Tan, 2003). It has also been reported that many international students, especially those from Asia, find this difficult and do not participate well enough in these discussions (Jones, 1999; Leki, 2001; Basturkmen, 2002). Participation in discussions is therefore included as one of the objectives of the course. For several years a face-to-face discussion of an academic article has been included, whereby one student introduces an academic article to the class and then leads a discussion.

With the recent introduction, though, of StudyNet and a strong belief that any effective use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) must begin with clear integration of the VLE into the course, it was decided to extend this aspect of the course to include an online discussion using the StudyNet group discussion facility. One reason is that much research has shown that online discussions produce more interaction (Dysthe, 2002). They also allow quieter students to participate and show that international students will participate more if they have time to think about their contributions and plan the language they want to use. It has also been reported that international students have increased motivation to use the target language and therefore produce more language (Bump, 1990; Beauvois, 1992; Kern, 1995; Oliva and Pollastrini, 1995). Moreover, there is a more balanced participation (Kern, 1995; Sullivan and Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996). Students also use a wider variety of language (Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996), which is syntactically and lexically more complex (Warschauer, 1996). This structured use of the VLE benefits students with a variety of learning styles from a

wider range of sociocultural backgrounds (Pennington, 1996). It was hoped students would find this to their advantage.

Thus there is evidence that group discussion is beneficial in education and that online discussions can also be valuable. However, how predominantly East Asian students would deal with an online discussion was an important question. Often, their view of education is that it is essentially a passive process, something that happens to them, not something they have to do for themselves, something that is mainly the job of the teacher (Jin and Cortazzi, 1993; Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Catterick, 2004). So the purpose of the research was to investigate whether such students would undertake the task in the manner set, whether they regarded the activity as being advantageous to them and whether they would see the underlying reasons for such a task. Finally, it was useful to determine whether the students perceived that learning was in fact occurring.

### **Methodology**

The programme had about 120 students in 2003/04, divided into nine groups for teaching purposes. The online discussion took place in the first four weeks of the second semester. The educational purpose of the online discussion, which is not evaluated in this study, was to help students improve their ability to read an academic article, to take part in discussions on such an article and to experience this via StudyNet. As with most of the teaching on this programme, the purpose of this was twofold: to improve students' language and study skills, and also to experience using StudyNet in preparation for their future academic lives. They were given very clear instructions about exactly what was required of them and their contribution was assessed, in order to encourage full participation.

The online discussion element was worth 6.25% of the coursework element of the course for the semester. All the students discussed the same article and were told they could read the article online, print it out or copy it to their own computers. At the end of this discussion period, the lecturers evaluated the students' contributions. The assessment consisted of a combination of the quantity of contributions to the discussion and the quality – ideas, interaction and language. In other words, students were rewarded for contributing more than the minimum, as well as using the activity as a learning tool, not simply as a bare assessment. The students were then asked what they felt about doing this activity and what they learned from it. This was done via a questionnaire in which students were asked how they took part in the discussion, what they felt about taking part in the discussion and what they thought they had learned from it. The questionnaire was given to all the students who had taken part and they were asked to complete it in class time. This was done in weeks seven and eight, three to four weeks after having completed the activity. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions, divided into multiple choice and short-answer questions. The rationale behind the questionnaire was to assess how the students perceived the worthiness of the task.

#### **Guidance given to students**

The students were told that a grade would be given for their contribution to this discussion, and that a good contribution consisted of demonstrating knowledge of the article and making a relevant contribution to the discussion in appropriate English. They were instructed to make their first contribution by the end of week two of the semester and their second by the end of week three. Two contributions was the bare minimum if they wanted to pass and more was

expected for a good mark. Each contribution had to be four or five sentences.

The students were advised on, and given practice in class, as to what a contribution consisted of.

This could include, among other things:

- a question to a member of the group
- an opinion about the article
- giving further information on the subject
- agreement or disagreement with a member of their group
- reasons for their opinions
- invitations to other members of their group to contribute
- asking other people about their opinions
- supporting and encouraging other members of their group.

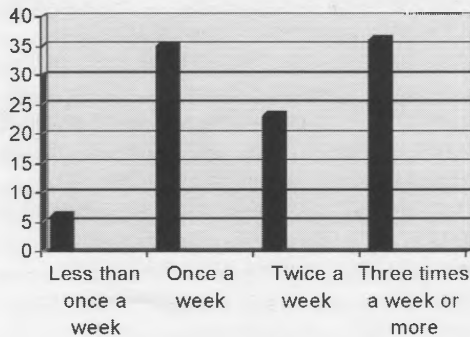
They were told to read all the contributions from their group members, not just those from the lecturer and furthermore to respond not only to the lecturer's points, but to carry on a discussion with the other members of their group as well. Appropriate language needed to be used as this was a formal academic discussion, not an email to a friend. Their contributions had to be written in accurate academic English and it might therefore be useful to compose their contributions on a word-processor, check it for accuracy and then paste it into the discussion. Their mark would depend on how well they achieved this task.

### Results and discussion

The purpose was to see whether or not students undertook the task, what advantages they saw in undertaking it, whether they understood the reasons for doing it and what they thought they learned from it. Exactly 112 completed questionnaires were received. The questions most relevant to the research aims will be discussed, with the hope that it will be useful for lecturers in similar circumstances.

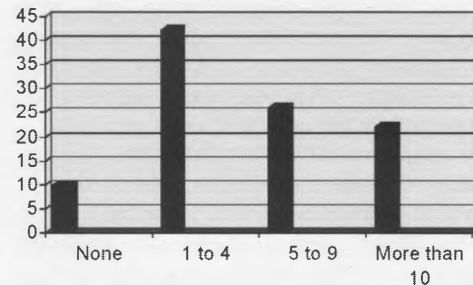
First is the question of the extent to which students undertook the task. This was measured by looking at the number, frequency, style and length of students' contributions. Although the minimum number of contributions was two in order to achieve a pass, students were encouraged to contribute as much as possible, in order to be successful and to practise their skills. The assessment period being over four weeks, 35% of students made one contribution a week, 23% twice a week, while 36% of students contributed three times a week or more (Figure 1). It was certainly clear, therefore, that most students were contributing more than the minimum. It may be the case, though, that a very small number decided that doing any extra work for an assessment that counted for such a small amount of the overall course mark was not worth the effort.

Figure 1: Frequency of contribution



Considering the style of discussion, with threads connected to single opinions or ideas, one would have expected students to have read all or most of the contributions on the list prior to adding their own point of view. Figure 2 shows that 48% of students claimed to have read more than five previous contributions, while 22% of those students had read more than ten. Surprisingly, though, 10% of students claimed not to have read any contributions before adding their own. It can thus be speculated that these students do not quite understand the concept of a discussion.

Figure 2: Number of contributions read prior to contributing

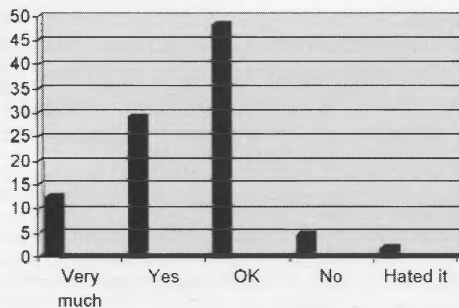


As regards the length of their own contributions, 42% stated they had written a paragraph, while the rest either equally wrote a few sentences or more than a paragraph. This was confirmed by the class lecturer, who monitored the contributions on a weekly basis. The students were expected to write at least a few sentences, so in this respect the exercise can be deemed successful.

It was felt that the level of participation would depend to some extent on whether they had enjoyed the exercise. As can be seen from Figure 3, less than 2% said they hated it. Almost 50% chose OK and 29% said they had enjoyed

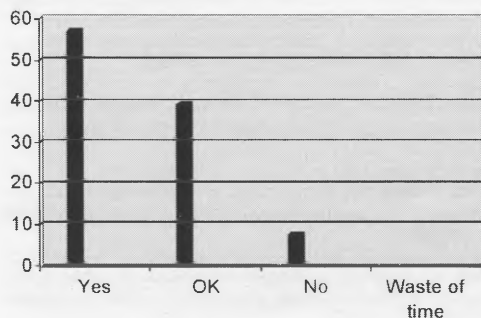
it. It was pleasing to note that 12.5% asserted that they had enjoyed the exercise very much.

*Figure 3: Degree of enjoyment*



Secondly, there is the question of whether the students found the exercise advantageous or useful. More than 50% of the students responded affirmatively (Figure 4), while only 6% of students did not find it useful. No one considered the exercise to be a waste of time. This was crucial, considering this was the first attempt at this type of task and is an evaluation method which needs to be used more actively in the future, as the use of the online facility is playing a larger role in academic life (Browne and Jenkins, 2003).

*Figure 4: Relative usefulness*



Thirdly, the open question 'Why do you think we used the online method for discussion?' elicited numerous favourable responses.

Chiefly, the students were of the opinion that it would improve their reading and writing skills. Why they believed their writing skills would improve is not quite certain, as none of their contributions were corrected. In any case, they were making use of English in a formal academic style to communicate their ideas, an essential part of learning to write. Furthermore, the act of reading others' contributions and being able to compare grammar, vocabulary and the level of sophistication of an argument with one's own writing is a key aspect of peer learning, and greatly emphasised in second-language learning (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Grabe, 2001; Vincent, 1999). In addition, students felt that the exercise would allow them to analyse ideas more clearly and to think more independently. This may be linked to the fact that in this type of discussion they could formulate ideas without pressure due to language ability and peer observation. This is particularly relevant to the quiet students who are often unwilling to be in focus in a class situation. Some students did consider that it would allow everyone more time and more opportunities to discuss ideas and was particularly useful for the shy students. This is what was hoped for. Often the amount of time for discussion in class is limited, so allowing students this extra time to debate is of great importance.

Finally, it was necessary to see if the students thought they had learned something from the exercise. In this case, only five of 112 students said no, whilst three said, 'not really, but it was good to practice'. Thus the great majority were of the opinion that they had learned from the task. Whether the students' perception is borne out in reality was not the

focus of this research but should be researched at a future date. The areas they highlighted were being able to see the grammar mistakes of others, and being able to learn from them. Here the previous comment on peer learning is reflected. The students decided that their knowledge, vocabulary and discussion skills had been enriched by the task. Some also considered that the experience allowed them to share ideas better than in class, and allowed them to feel more confident about giving their opinion. This is a core issue, as many international students, especially those from East Asia, usually have a great deal to say but lack the confidence when surrounded by local students with whom they often have minimal actual contact. If their confidence can be initially improved in this way, one hopes it can be extended to class situations. The chance to summarise and organise ideas better was another issue mentioned. These are essential skills all students need.

### Conclusion

Postgraduate international students at UK institutions of higher education often find difficulty dealing with seminar-type discussions. An attempt was made to help students with this by utilising the group-discussion facility of StudyNet. However, as most of the students were from East Asia and often consider education as an essentially passive process, it was felt necessary to investigate whether they would undertake such an activity and what the benefits were. Despite some criticisms, the students took part in the activity seriously and saw its usefulness. They were generally found to understand the purpose of the activity and felt they had learned from it. Thus, overall, when the activity was clearly seen to be related to the learning outcomes and integrated into

the course, the verdict was overwhelmingly positive and the rationale understood. In the future it is planned to take the points students made and adjust the task slightly, integrating the online discussion more into class work, involving the lecturers more, and thinking more about the chosen text. By these means the positive outcomes can hopefully be further cemented, further areas probed, and students helped to take part in seminar-style discussions more confidently and competently.

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#### Biographical notes

**Andy Gillett** is Principal Lecturer in the School of Combined Studies at the University. He has spent most of the last thirty years teaching English both in the UK and abroad and for the last twenty years most of his work has been involved with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in British higher education. He is now mainly involved in organising, planning and teaching EAP courses to international students taking a wide range of courses at the University. He is the current Chair of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP).

**Claire Weetman** is a teacher of English with a variety of experience in Poland, Turkey, Thailand, Australia and the UK. She has a Masters degree in TESOL from Deakin University in Australia. She is primarily interested in student motivation, the use of innovative teaching methods, the use of authentic texts and the creation of materials to suit individual classes. She is currently an Associate Lecturer in the School of Combined Studies at the University.