

## PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

### THE USE OF ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM IN TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Hlavisio Motlhaka. The Use of Online Discussion Forum in Teaching and Learning of English First Additional Language in South African Higher Education -- Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 18(18), 1027-1037. ISSN 1567-214x**

**Keywords: Online discussion forum, Coronavirus pandemic, community of inquiry model, preservice teachers, individualization of learning, critical thinking, student autonomy.**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The study investigated preservice teachers' experiences in using online discussion forum in teaching and learning in a South African Higher Education Institution as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research population of this study included ten fourth-year preservice teachers between the ages of 18 to 25 registered for a Bachelor of Education in Senior Phase and FET degree majoring in English and Life Orientation in the School of Education at a South African rural university and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study suggest that online discussion forum leads to positive student performance outcomes and facilitates active learning, shared knowledge, and promote social interaction and a supportive eLearning community. The findings of this study show that online discussion forum enhances preservice teachers' positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others which lead to student autonomy. However, the study shows that preservice teachers experience challenges of not opening up in the discussion and intimidated by other students who posted better than their own which resulted in limited discussion and non-substantive posts. This study recommends future mixed-methods research that will explore student-teacher perceptions on online discussion forum in teaching and learning of English First Additional Language in Higher Education Institution.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide resulting in widespread closure of schools, colleges and universities as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The disease started in Wuhan province in China in

late December 2019 (Al-Balas et al., 2020; Elsamanoudy, Al Fayz & Hassanien, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020). On the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases confirmed that a suspected case of COVID-19 has tested positive to a 38-year-old South African male patient who travelled to Italy with his wife and they were part of a group of 10 people who arrived back in South Africa on March 1, 2020. In response to the COVID-19 situation, South Africa announced state of emergency on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020 (Motlhaka, 2021). During the nationwide lockdown, all South Africans had to stay at home and they were not allowed to leave their homes except under strict controlled circumstances which included the seeking of medical care, buying food, medicine and other supplies or the collection of social grants.

All educational institutions were closed as well as educational activities including clinical medical education were suspended. This situation resulted in distance E-learning as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance E-learning has been proved as an efficient modality of learning in different educational institutions as an optimal solution to learning processes in exceptional and emergency situations such as COVID-19 pandemic (Balas et al., 2020; Ihm et al., 2021). In other words, distance e-learning provides easier and more effective access to a wider variety of information which allows a personalized approach in learning for students to have more control over the educational content, learning sequence and time. Most universities in South Africa adopted e-learning as a new method of teaching and learning to ensure that the academic year is not lost. Therefore, various platforms and applications had been implemented in distance learning including ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, Moodle, and Skype in South African higher education. Many higher education institutions around the world have adopted Blackboard-based instruction as way of integrating technology in teaching and learning because of its easiness and accessibility (Motlhaka, 2020). In addition, Motlhaka (2020) found that Blackboard-based instruction ensures equal participation among students, unlike face-to-face discussions which tend to be relatively unbalanced because one or two students may dominate class discussions.

Online discussion forums through Blackboard-based instruction are synchronous communication tools that foster online interaction and enables instructors to understand and intervene in learning activities as well as giving students time to think and formulate answers (Hill, 2019; Jan, Vlachopoulos & Parsell, 2019; Naik et al., 2021). Therefore, well-coordinated online discussion forums are valuable tools to promote reflection on learning, share information and perspectives, and connect students. Online discussion forums are considered an extension of traditional learning that promotes dialogue, reflection, knowledge construction, and self-assessment. Online discussions have the potential to improve students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, decision-making ability, and written communication skills and contribute to students' ability to organize and analyse information (Nolan-Grant, 2019; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Rahayu & Wirza, 2020; Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020). They can help foster a sense of community and encourage peer-to-peer interaction and improve student engagement. In other words, discussion can

take the form of debate or reflective sharing, giving students the opportunity to expand upon and clarify their understanding of content. This could happen when the teacher creates discussion questions that get the conversation going without much involvement on the teacher's part.

Online discussion forums encourage student dialogue by asking thought-provoking questions that stimulate in-depth reflective discussions and hold students responsible for their thinking. Students can participate from almost any location around the world, and the use of asynchronous instructional techniques can increase temporal flexibility. For instance, discussion forums allow students to prepare their responses, which may lead to the quality of the discussion and offer an easy way for students to engage with each other on a regular basis. They avoid loss of data, as the students' written messages are stored in the virtual space and can be retrieved and reviewed anytime, reaffirming the importance of information records for instructors (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Rahayu & Wirza, 2020; Uziak et al., 2018). Thus, online discussion forums offer many pedagogical advantages consistent with the principles of social constructivism, while the asynchronous text-based nature of online forums can encourage reflection, analysis and high order thinking. However, it is worth-noting that this dramatic shift to online learning is associated with anxiety, in addition to the sense of that change is imposed and the fear of affecting the process of learning, which could lead to the unwillingness of students to be fully engaged. This suggests that the effectiveness of online forums depends on a myriad of design and facilitation factors. In other words, online discussion can result in inadequate feedback, low levels of cognitive engagement and students may feel isolated which can result in limited participation of lack of depth and quality of the discussion. This study aims to identify benefits and difficulties of using online discussion forum from the preservice teachers' point of view to mitigate the challenges and lead to a more participatory forum. The findings of this study will enable a greater understanding of how preservice teachers use this type of resource and its perceived value for teaching and learning.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is underpinned by community of inquiry model through Blackboard Ultra where discussion forums are widely used to mediate social interactions which provide real-time visualizations of social interaction with peers. It enables students to engage meaningfully in a community, through developing interpersonal relationships that allow them to communicate openly and freely and pursue intended academic goals and gain a sense of belonging to the community (Fiock, 2020). This suggests that online discussion forums through Community of Inquiry model could make online learning a more humanized experience by creating knowledge that is of value to others inside and beyond the classroom (Fiock, 2020; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Jan, Vlachopoulos & Parsell, 2019). It goes beyond accessing information and focuses on the elements of an educational experience that facilitates the creation of communities of students actively and collaboratively engaged in exploring, creating meaning and confirming understanding. In other words, online learning supports Community of Inquiry model by facilitating collaboration (i.e. shared creation) and knowledge creation and aid students' deep understanding and flexibility of time and space (Nolan-Grant, 2019; Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018).

The collaborative generation of learning resources can also be studied from a social learning theoretical lens, which emphasises examining learning from the perspective of social networks. Therefore, online discussion forum serves as a social network to the extent that it comprises individuals connected to other persons (e. g. peers, educators and facilitators) who share resources, artefacts, mutual trust and social interaction to facilitate social learning. In this case, students focus not only on the topics they are exploring but on the process of gaining the most from each other as members of wider online community.

### **PROBLEM OF THE STUDY**

Coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide resulting in widespread closure of schools, colleges and universities as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In response to the COVID-19 situation, South Africa announced state of emergency on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. During the nationwide lockdown, all South Africans had to stay at home and they were not allowed to leave their homes except under strict controlled circumstances which included the seeking of medical care, buying food, medicine and other supplies or the collection of social grants. All educational institutions were closed as well as educational activities including clinical medical education were suspended. This situation resulted in distance E-learning as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, various platforms and applications had been implemented in distance learning including ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, Moodle, and Skype in South African higher education. This study aimed to investigate preservice teachers' experiences in using online discussion forums in teaching and learning in a South African Higher Education Institution as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Significance of the Study***

The results of this study will provide a scientific database for making decisions regarding successful implementation strategies of online discussion forum in teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study used qualitative research to understand the perceptions of preservice teachers about the use of online discussion forum in teaching and learning in Higher Education Institution and to determine strategies teachers can use to mediate online discussion forum through semi-structured interviews. I created a discussion forum to offer preservice teachers a structured opportunity to interact with each other online for revision purposes and preparation of examination on questions uploaded on Blackboard or any other questions or concerns they have on the course. In other words, preservice teachers were encouraged to post questions and responses as way of depending more on each other and less on me in the time leading up to the exam and to work together to find the answers to questions that they were having difficulty with.

### ***Research Questions of The Study***

The present study seeks to answer the following two main questions:

- What are preservice teachers' perceptions about the use of online discussion forum in teaching and learning in Higher Education Institution?
- What are strategies preservice teachers can use to mediate online discussion forum?

### ***Sampling***

The research population of this study included ten fourth-year preservice teachers between the ages of 18 to 25 registered for a Bachelor of Education in Senior Phase and FET degree majoring in English and Life Orientation in the School of Education at a South African rural university.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

### ***Semi-Structured Interview***

The data collection technique used in this study was semi-structured interview to explore the experiences and challenges of respondents in using online discussion forum through community of inquiry model which facilitates collaboration (i. e. shared creation) and knowledge creation and deep understanding and flexibility of time and space. Drawing from community of inquiry model, this study draws from multiple voices and a socially oriented research procedure which put control of the interaction and construction of knowledge in the hands of respondents rather than the researcher. The interview session lasted for 60 minutes.

### ***Data Analysis***

Grounded theory method was used to analyse data after the transcription of the interview. Grounded theory method is a scientific method that uses a set of systematic procedures of data collection and analysis to generate, elaborate and validate substantive theories which emphasis learning from the data rather than from an existing theoretical view. According to Strauss and Corbin, grounded theory is based on the idea of coding to analyse the data. The coding process can be divided into three: open, axial and selective coding. Open coding involves breaking, analysing, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing the collected data to give sense to it. The analysis of data was guided by the following research questions:

- What are preservice teachers' perceptions about the use of online discussion forum in teaching and learning in Higher Education Institution?
- What are strategies teachers use to mediate online discussion forum?

## **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

This study aimed to investigate preservice teachers' perceptions in using online discussion forum in teaching and learning in a South African Higher Education

Institution as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following themes emerged and discussed during the analysis of data.

### *Individualization of Learning*

Individualized learning, or individualized instruction, is a method of teaching in which content, instructional technology and pace of learning are based on the abilities and interest of each student. Individualized learning can help students gain self-confidence because lessons are tailored to their specific abilities as indicated below by respondents:

#### Excerpt 2

*I think online discussion forum helps students to gradually build comprehension and mastery of more complicated material, and gain self-assurance that they have the skills they need to be successful. I think reading my classmates' ideas gave me a broader perspective.*

#### Excerpt 3

*Online discussion forum is convenient and good mode of teaching to individualize teaching and learning because individual responses are not limited in time or the length hence students have the freedom to continue dialogues about the topics that interested them most.*

#### Excerpt 4

*Online discussion forum leads to positive student performance outcomes and enables students to learn more and prove to be the most important process of learning.*

These excerpts show that online discussion forum provides preservice teachers the opportunity to have the freedom to work through course material at their own pace while being provided a safety net of support from peers and the lecturer. The findings of this study suggest that online discussion forum leads to positive student performance outcomes and facilitates active learning, shared knowledge, and promote social interaction and a supportive eLearning community. In other words, it helps and prepares preservice teachers for the 21st-century workplace, including learning how to share ideas, express opinions, and manage time. The findings of this study are supported by a number of researchers who conducted investigations into online collaborative discussion forums focusing on the ways in which discussion activities move students from student to expert by providing them with opportunities to reflect and share viewpoints. In other words, preservice teachers learn to listen attentively to each other and value the efforts of shared knowledge and input by responding to questions and offering peer feedback to support the sharing of new information. Thus, online discussion forum allows one to create conditions for the most complete realization of students' personal potential, their academic mobility, and the construction of an individual educational trajectory, i.e. to

maximize education towards the student's personality (Karpenko, Lukyanova, Bugai & Shchedrova, 2019).

### ***Promoting Critical Thinking***

Online discussion forum promotes critical thinking by checking if the students understand what they have been taught, and to enhance students' involvement and to promote students' creative thinking in classroom interaction because questions posted in the discussion forum are open-ended and designed to encourage students to take a position on issues and carefully considered reasons to back up previous comments (Ekahitanond, 2013). Online discussion forum can foster students' interaction, communication, learning to learn, questioning, critiquing, teamwork, interpersonal skill development, and ability to challenge one another, as well as build autonomy as a learning agency as indicated below by respondents:

#### Excerpt 6

*Online discussion forum has the capability to challenge students' knowledge and beliefs, and introduce new ways of thinking about ideas and reflecting on their own learning journey which promote critical thinking.*

#### Excerpt 7

*I think open-ended questions that are posted on online discussion forum stimulate thinking which increases students' higher-order thinking and diminish copycats of others' opinions.*

#### Excerpt 8

*Online discussion forum empowers students to become more autonomous and interdependent by learning to learn through peers by providing constructive suggestion, and articulating positive aspects of their peers' work.*

The above responses indicate that online discussion forum elicits diverse responses, which provide a source of information and learning for further discussion and encourages a non-threatening learning environment in which students ask each other questions to enhance their critical thinking skills. Students' questions and responses on online discussion forum serve as a source of desire to extend their knowledge as they articulate their understanding of a topic and produce comprehensible output, with many opportunities to enhance students' critical thinking skills (Motlhaka and Wadesango, 2014; Motlhaka, 2016; Kalsoom, Kalsoom & Mallick, 2020). The findings of this study suggest that preservice teachers through online discussion forum take charge of their own thinking, monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully by expanding their learning experience and making the language more meaningful for them. In other words, online discussion forum promotes the development of critical and creative thinking in EFL/ESL/FAL contexts by encouraging interaction and cooperation among students, self-reflection in action and the ability to reflect on both the individual and the collective

responses during and after knowledge construction. Thus, it fosters self-directed learning skills, promotes deeper learning, provides students with opportunities to experiment with what they already know and to find new perspective and encourages open-minded, reflective, critical and active learning.

### ***Student Autonomy***

Online discussion forum enables students to work within and beyond the classroom to develop their language skills independently and assume responsibility for their own learning which may lead to a deeper and better learning. The social aspect of learning is embedded in Online discussion forum which entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person. Through Online discussion forum, students are able to reflect on their own learning through knowledge about learning and willing to learn in collaboration with others where they can direct their own learning as indicated below by respondents:

#### **Excerpt 1**

*Online discussion forum helps students to have the flexibility of reflecting on their thoughts and read the responses of others. This is safe environment to freely discuss your ideas and ask questions. I could not do the same thing in a physical classroom because it is very stressful to discuss your ideas when everyone is looking at me.*

#### **Excerpt 2**

*Online discussion forum gives me the opportunity to routinely discuss questions posted on the forum with friends and family outside of class before putting my comments online. The questions in the discussion forum helped me know what to study and how to argue and make my point in discussion forum in a stress-free environment.*

#### **Excerpt 3**

*I think online discussion forum gives me responsibility to learn independently as well as from others by setting learning goals and taking initiatives in planning on how to ask questions and respond to questions. I found that classmates look through the topic from different lenses, and this enriched my viewpoint.*

The findings of this study show that online discussion forum enhances preservice teachers' positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others which lead to student autonomy. Thus, this study supports the notion that students have the power and right to learn for themselves as a fundamental tenet of successful language learning by willing to take risks to communicate in the target language at all costs, complete homework whether or not it is assessed and place importance on accuracy as well as appropriateness (Iamudom & Tangkiengsirisin, 2020; Mtshali & Govender, 2020). In other words, students



will monitor their own learning which will in turn make them confident and give them a sense of achievement.

### *Difficulties in Online Discussion Forums*

Difficulties in online discussion forum may include students who do not contribute to discussion threads, **students plagiarizing other students' postings**, Students offering very weak, non-substantive posts such as "I agree" or "That's cool!" or "Nice post" offers little as indicated below by respondents:

#### Excerpt 8

*I think that difficulty that I have observed with online discussion forum is about a large volume of messages, which was overwhelming and hard to follow, even stress inducing.*

#### Excerpt 9

*I have noticed that while the majority of the comments demonstrate a relatively high degree of language skills, this is by no means always the case. I have seen comments written in an abbreviated SMS-style.*

#### Excerpt 10

*It takes longer than verbal conversation to reply to all questions in a message, which may easily lead to leaving questions unanswered.*

The above responses indicate that students feel shy about opening up in discussion and intimidated because other students posted better than their own which resulted in limited discussion wherein other students offer very weak, non-substantive posts such as "I agree" or "That's cool!" or "Nice post" and other students plagiarizing (Douglas, James, Earwaker, Mather and Murray, 2020). The more posts like this, the thinner the impact of discussion, and some students will stay away believing not much can be learned from the discussion.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study investigated preservice teachers' experiences in using online discussion forum in teaching and learning in a South African Higher Education Institution as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study suggest that online discussion forum leads to positive student performance outcomes and facilitates active learning, shared knowledge, and promote social interaction and a supportive eLearning community (Mtshali & Govender, 2020). Students' questions and responses on online discussion forum serve as a source of desire to extend their knowledge as they articulate their understanding of a topic and produce comprehensible output, with many opportunities to enhance students' critical thinking skills. The findings of this study show that online discussion forum enhances preservice teachers' positive attitude, a capacity for reflection,

and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others which lead to student autonomy. However, the study shows that preservice teachers experience challenges of not opening up in the discussion and intimidated by other students who posted better than their own which resulted in limited discussion and non-substantive posts. This study recommends future mixed-methods research that will explore student-teacher perceptions on online discussion forum in teaching and learning of English First Additional Language in Higher Education Institution.

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