Input and the Instructor Roles in Online Discussions

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Drawing on sociocultural perspectives of language learning, this study explores the relationship between input, online discussions and the instructor roles on the bulletin boards in graduate courses. To explore instructor roles in academic online discourse, this study proposes a new analytical framework that uses both qualitative and discourse analytic methods. The analysis of academic online discourse using the functional aspect of language reveals the intricate relationships among the students, instructors and the medium of communication. Furthermore, the instructors' role in the online learning environment was revisited as a valuable input to the discourse community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the recent decades, there has been a growing interest in online education, and instructors in higher education increasingly turn to the Internet to supplement or replace conventional face-to-face instruction. This transition of the learning environment triggered much research into the effects of online education on students' outcomes. However, little attention has been paid to how online education accommodates the needs and concerns of second language (L2) speakers in academic classes in Western universities. A few studies that address second/foreign language learners have not gone beyond investigating language learning classrooms. The paper tries to explore the roles of online education for L2 learners and related instructor roles by relating them to the current trend of input theory.

This paper will (1) provide a brief overview of input theory in second language acquisition (SLA), (2) present a study that examined, in terms of input, two university courses using two different modes of communication, face-to-face in class and online learning, and (3) examine the relevant roles of the instructor in the online learning context. In presenting the overview of input, I will focus on the basic concept, different views on the role of input and the current accounts of input in SLA. I will then discuss the concepts

of input within the context of online learning.

II.   OVERVIEW OF INPUT

1. Definition

Input in SLA refers to the language to which the learner is exposed either orally or visually (Gass, 1997). Input has been discussed from various perspectives and with different assumptions in SLA literature. Gass (1997) explains how input converts to output in five stages: apperceived input, comprehended input, intake, integration, and output. The language acquisition process starts by recognizing input and matching it against existing knowledge (apperception). *Comprehended input* turns into *intake* as a learner processes the input and stores it in the long-term memory (Brown, 2000; Gass, 1997). *Integration* takes place as a result of developing and storing the linguistic information. *Output* is the manifestation of the language acquisition process. Language acquisition cannot take place without input.

2. Different Views on the Role of Input

From the behaviorist position, which views learning as habit formation, reinforcement, and practice, input is the controlling power of language acquisition. Therefore, there is little room for the learner to take charge of any active processing (Ellis, 1985). Chomsky's language acquisition device and the universal grammar (UG) framework take a slightly different position. The UG hypothesis assumes that there is a set of principles common to all languages. Once a learner is exposed to input that exemplifies a core part of the grammatical structures, s/he can learn the clusterings of other properties without direct input. From the UG perspective, input serves only as a trigger to activate the innate language device. On the other hand, the input hypothesis of Krashen (1985) maintains that acquisition takes place almost exclusively as a result of *comprehensible input*. According to Krashen, understanding input is enough, and language acquisition occurs by understanding input that is a bit beyond the learner's current competence level. Gass (1997), however, distinguishes between comprehensible input and comprehended input by arguing that the former assumes the speaker controls the input whereas the latter focuses more on the learner and the learner's engagement.

From the information processing view, language processing can be divided into automatic processing vs. controlled processing. This view assumes that the amount of input humans can process is limited (Gass, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Learners can pay

attention only to parts of input at earlier stages of their second language learning. In order to learn, a learner needs to 'notice' a gap between the knowledge they have and the new language system. Through repeated performance and training, input becomes automatic. Unlike the behaviorist view, which treats a learner as a passive recipient of input, the information processing view requires the learners' conscious effort to practice.

The interactionist view, in contrast, sees language acquisition as a result of collaborative efforts between the learner and interlocutors (Ellis, 1985; Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Long (1983), in particular, emphasizes the role of *modified input*, *modified interaction*, and *negotiation* to make input comprehensible to second language speakers. His study reveals that when native speakers interact with non-native interlocutors, they tend to use more comprehension checks, clarification requests, repetitions and expansions than when they speak to native interlocutors. Swain (2000), however, argues that no research has proven that the greater comprehensibility achieved through negotiation leads to improved second language learning, except for the case of acquisition of concrete nouns. Swain further argues that comprehensible input does not necessarily lead to production skills (writing and speaking) nor does it push learners beyond their current interlanguage level. He believes that 'output' functions to stimulate learners to move from comprehension at the semantic level to accurate production at the syntactic level. This also allows the learner to test out hypotheses about the L2 and to eventually develop L2 acquisition.

Deriving from Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, on the other hand, van Lier (2000) proposes an alternative term to input: *affordance*. Borrowing this term from the psychologist Gibson (1979, cited in van Lier, 2000), who explained a reciprocal relationship between an organism and a particular feature of its ecological environment, van Lier extends it to refer to the relationship between an individual and a learning environment. The basic idea of the sociocultural approach is to view both the individual and the social environment as "mutually constitutive elements of a single, interacting system" (Cole, 1985, p. 148). The environment provides language learners with opportunities for active engagement and participation. In this context, learning shifts its focus from mere input reception to the learners' relationship with their environment. In other words, language learning is a relationship between learners with each other, with other members in a society (the instructor and the target language group), with learning activities and with their environment. Unlike traditional views that treat learners as empty containers passively receiving input, current views describe language learning as an interaction between input providers, learners, and the learning environment. Teachers take an important role as they provide learners with an environment that engages them in a variety of activities.

Some researchers have proposed the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as a way to facilitate comprehensible input and planned output of L2 learners (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996; 1997). This is based on the belief that text-based

communication will alleviate the pressure on L2 students to simultaneously attend to the linguistic form and process their thoughts when they participate in face-to-face class discussions.

III. METHODS

1. Data Collection

In order to explore the relationship between the roles of CMC and instructors in the online learning environment, I used a qualitative multiple case-study approach. The participating groups were two graduate seminars in the Faculty of Education at a large Canadian university, Children's Language and Literacy (Course A) and Educational Technology (Course B). Both courses were offered in the 'mixed mode,' where students and the instructor meet regularly in a classroom and use the online discussion forum as an extension of class discussions. Each regular class was 2.5 hours long throughout the 14-week semester. Participation in the online discussion forum, the so called Bulletin Board (BB), was a major requirement of both courses. Course A had 14 students and Course B 16.

In Course A, class times was often spent on synthesizing weekly readings, the students' small group discussions for their final projects, or the instructor's short lecture. In the face-to-face seminars of Course B, class was usually started by one or two students who were responsible for leading a discussion on the week's topic. These 'discussion facilitators' were expected to present a brief summary of the main ideas and a critical analysis of the major themes in that week's readings. At the end of the presentation, the facilitator(s) often formed small groups to discuss question(s) they had prepared.

To increase the rigor of the study I observed both face-to-face classrooms and online learning settings, and compared the perceptions of L2 with L1 participants across the two courses. Twelve focal students (six L1 and six L2) and their instructors provided more detailed information through written questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Other valuable data include the researcher's field notes and course documents (syllabi, handouts, written feedback from the instructor, etc.). I interviewed each L1 and L2 participant twice, at the beginning and at the end of the semester.

Both course instructors (Dr. Taylor in Course A and Dr. Wall in Course B) have taught in higher education for more than 10 years. The focal students in Course A are three L2 speakers (Ping, Mei, and Sunny) and four L1 speakers (Dana, Michelle, Chris and Hilary). Ping and Mei came from mainland China, and Sunny came from Taiwan. The focal students in Course B are three L2 speakers (Chang, Daehan and Sohee) and two L1

speakers. Chang came from mainland China and Daehan and Sohee from South Korea. Except for Kathy in Course B, who is American, all L1 focal students are Canadian. The focal participants' ages ranged from mid twenties and mid forties. Among the six L2 students two students were male.

2. Data Analysis

In general I followed the inductive logic of the qualitative method, which seeks to find salient themes and key concepts emerging from data (Patton, 2002). Particularly to answer the question of the instructor roles on the BBs, I used a discourse analysis method by creating an analytical framework that identifies participant roles in terms of speech functions and message topics. This is closely related to Eggins and Slades' (1997) functional approach to language. According to them, choices of speech functions are associated with the social role a participant assumes. I used this idea to define both the instructor and student roles by identifying the speech functions and the message topics in BB texts.

Compared to Eggins and Slade's model, the categories in this study may look quite general and inclusive. I did not neglect the diversity of speech functions they outlined, but a simpler category set better serves the objectives of this study while also allowing focus on the most relevant categories. For example, Eggins and Slade place *initiate* and *react* at the start of every conversational move. In this study, however, I united *initiate* and *react* into the function of "expressing knowledge/opinion." This does not mean, however, that only the domain of expressing knowledge/opinion contains initiate and react moves. Subcategories were determined based on the research purpose (analysis of academic discourse) on one hand, and on the other by the salient characteristics of each function (the importance of initiation and reaction in expressing knowledge/opinion in academic discourse).

A new code was given every time there was a shift in either the speech function or the message topic, and therefore one message could manifest multiple speech functions or topics, and the author of the message played multiple roles. Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the definitions and sample clauses or sentences of each speech function and message topic obtained from the data. The three categories of speech functions are quite distinctive from each other in that each function is often distinguished by certain grammatical forms such as declaratives or interrogatives.

TABLE 1
Summary of Speech Functions

Speech Functions	Codes	Examples
Expressing knowledge/opinion (EK): Give factual information or attitudinal/evaluative information	- *Initiate*: initiate conversational exchanges [EK- In]	The digital divide can be separated into two distinct issues; regional and global.
	- *React*: replying to a particular message usually in response to a request, providing assistance or feedback [EK-Re]	What I do is write my posting in word and then copy and paste it into this dialogue box.
Making request (MR)	- *Request for assistance*: Making questions or statements that seek assistance or input/ feedback [MR-RA]	Is it possible to write our discussion postings on Word and then attach it? –anybody knows how to do that?
	- *Making commands*: Making a request that directs class activities [MR-CO]	Post your evaluation to the pertinent discussion forum and receive feedback
Social formulas (SF): Codified social responses of courtesy, such as greetings, thanking, acknowledging, apologizing, etc.	- SF	Thanks for posting this provocative discussion starter, Elsa.

Table 2
Summary of Message Topics

Message Topics	Codes	Examples
- *Course topics* (Topics that are related to course readings or course assignments)	CT	I'd like to pose a more specific question to all of you: "Why do educators study language development?"
- *Course logistics* (Comments related to course logistics, such as meeting time or group member structure)	CL	You'll find that the course calendar has been updated.
- *Quality of messages* (Comments related to the quality of messages)	QM	I am very impressed with the posts that I have been reading.
- *Communication/Medium* (Comments on communication or medium)	CM	Are your messages showing up at the level you want them to? This is determined by whose message you are replying to.
- *Social matters* (Comments on social matters that are unrelated to the course subjects)	SM	Hi, Hilary, Everyone's working on a Sunday night! What has become of us?
- *Other topics* (Topics not related to the above)	OT	A virtual conference on copyright started last Monday and there are some interesting postings there.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Roles of CMC

The L2 students in my study continuously felt insecure about their language ability, particularly during whole-class face-to-face discussions. Mei in Course A, for example, said:

> If I speak, I need to organize them [my thoughts]. So while I am thinking, I am not concentrating on other people's talking.   *(Interview II)*

Since it took a lot of energy, courage, and time to plan her thoughts and speak accurately in English, she chose not to speak so that she would not risk missing part of the in-class discussions. Daehan and Sohee in Course B also expressed consistently in the interviews their difficulty in understanding and speaking English during the whole-class discussions. It was evident that the quick pace of in-class discussion did not allow L2 students enough time to formulate proper sentences to make comments or questions. The online environment, however, was different from the face-to-face setting. One of the distinctive characteristics of BB is its asynchronicity, which has been claimed to provide learners with flexibility in participation, since they can take time before composing messages (Bullen, 1998; Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Kern, 1995; Moller, Harvery, Downs, & Godshalk, 2000). The time- and space-independent nature of online learning seemed to lower the pressure L2 students experience in a face-to-face classroom. The online texts seem to help L2 students grasp the discourse better than oral discussions because they can reread messages until they understand them. L2 students themselves identified deliberate and planned output as the great advantage of using the BB as the discussion channel. As Sohee in Course B said:

> [When writing messages] I tried to understand the reading material first, and I read others' opinion before I started to write. Even though I finished my writing, I read again and again to figure out if my conclusions and theories are okay.   *(Interview II)*

Since L2 students tend to have difficulty in fully comprehending fast-flowing face-to-face class discussions, the use of text-based communication may serve as a scaffold which enhances their understanding of a course subject.

Unlike face-to-face classrooms, where discussions are controlled mainly by the instructor and a few L1 students, the online learning environment yielded more evaluative comments by the students (both L1 and L2) than by the instructors in both courses. For

example, Ping in Course A wrote on the BB:

> That's a good observation, Jenny. Children's innate knowledge on linguistic
> aspect is a key one. *(Excerpt from the Bulletin Board)*

This kind of evaluative remark was made almost exclusively by the instructor in the classroom, but the L2 students on the BB were more assertive in expressing their ideas or needs, in contrast to their quiet and 'passive' attitude in the face-to-face classroom.

Perhaps the most salient difference between face-to-face discussions and CMC is the mode of communication: oral/aural versus text. Written communication usually requires more explicit and logical presentation of thoughts than spoken communication. Even though researchers often highlight the informal and dialogical aspect of online communication as it is placed between spontaneous speech and academic formal writing, the online texts produced by students in this study remained as refined as academic essays. They were marked by lexically dense, edited and information-loaded messages. The students in both courses often used explanatory and expository genres of writing. In Course B, in particular, the students summarized the main points of the weekly readings and elaborated on their points or other people's messages by applying, analyzing, and evaluating the content at a much greater length. The length of messages became steadily longer as the course proceeded, and by Week 11 messages exceeding 1,000 words sometimes appeared.

According to Cummins (1984a; 1984b), who proposed the BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) and CALP (Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency) model, CALP is more difficult and takes longer to acquire than BICS. He states, "it takes language minority students considerably longer to attain grade/age-appropriate level in English academic skills than it does in English face-to-face communication skills" (1984b, pp. 11-12). The focal students in this study, however, expressed in the interviews that they were more confident in written tasks such as BB writing or writing term papers than in oral participation in class. This may be partly explained by the fact that these students tended to spend more time reading and writing academic material compared to the time they spent on oral practice. Their reticence in oral discussions in class, on the other hand, seemed to be confounded by various factors such as their lack of linguistic ability, or other psychological and sociocultural factors.

Students in Course A and Course B were given approximately a week to read weekly readings and post messages. However, since they had to complete the weekly readings prior to posting, the students tended to post messages during the last four days before the weekly meeting day. As a result, it was often the case that once students posted a required number of messages on the BB, many of them did not get online again. As in the

face-to-face discussions where L2 students felt uncomfortable asking for clarifications, no instances of negotiation of meaning were found in online discussions. Both L1 and L2 students commented that they could not get immediate responses and often did not get a response at all through CMC. Students' questions to other students' messages often remained unanswered once the forum of the week closed, when the messages from the previous forums became as outdated as old newspapers.

2. Roles of the Instructor

Both Course A and Course B followed quite a structured order of activities in class throughout the semester. In Course A, a quarter of the class time was often spent on the instructor's *providing information on communication/medium,* or *course logistics.* For example, if there were any new items the instructor had uploaded on the course Web site, he demonstrated the sources and how to access them.

Overall, the in-class discussions were mostly interactions between a few L1 students and the instructor. For example, during the 70 minute PowerPoint presentation of the instructor during the class of Week 8, there were 54 exchanges of conversation between the class members. During this communication, 50% of the exchanges were taken by the instructor, and the rest of the exchanges were distributed among seven students. It was the instructor who played the major role of information provider or resource person, facilitator (particularly in Course A), motivator, director and evaluator in face-to-face classes. On the whole, the instructor was most prominent as an information-provider in face-to-face classes. His role could be more appropriately termed 'coach,' 'mentor' or 'assistant,' which came up in the interviews with the focal students and the instructor himself.

In particular, the role of the Course A instructor as a socializer was so prominent that, as one student put it, he was "forming a sense of community with the group in the class" *(Hilary; Interview II).* There were frequent occurrences found on the BB of the instructor setting the friendly mood for the participating students. For example, the instructor often posted a short message immediately following a discussion facilitator's initial message, acknowledged their posting and encouraged students' participation, as in the following message:

Message no. 389 [Branch from no. 384]
Posted by Tim Taylor
Subject Re: Discussion Question

Thanks for posting this provocative discussion starter, Jenny. I suspect the question of purpose and point of view will arise in a discussion of the role of

corrections! Tim
(Dr. Taylor, Forum 2B)

Another L1 student, Michelle gave a very similar account of the instructor's roles as follows:

> In face-to-face discussions, it's interesting. I almost see that he was fostering a more social atmosphere and trying to have everybody get to know each other at a more personal level. He would be interested in what's happening in our personal lives. One of our classmates had a baby, and we talked about that. Or he always brings us refreshments. I think that helped encourage more personal relationships with each other because we were only seeing each other only twice a month.   *(Interview I)*

The dominance of a few L1 students and the instructor in class discussions was obvious in Course B, as well. The interview data revealed that the instructor had a prominent image in the class as an expert and a knowledge imparter. Despite the fact that the classes were led by student facilitators, analysis of the classroom observation log revealed that the instructor's turns in Course B were much more frequent and longer than the instructor's in Course A.

The account of an L1 student, Rory, corroborates this interaction pattern:

> I feel that the instructor also worked to facilitate the discussion and bring in her ideas on what was going on. So basically she just kind of makes sure everything stayed on track and also put in her ideas. And sometimes this was good and bad, because we learned what she thought, which is very important. But at the same time, it kind of took away from the presenters. So then it was sometimes ended up with the presenters were just standing there, and the instructor was just talking.   *(Rory in Course B; Interview II)*

In contrast to the face-to-face classroom where the instructor was the main resource person that members depended on for knowledge, the online forum seemed to provide the students with more opportunities to demonstrate and share their knowledge and perspectives with their colleagues. This reflected the instructors' pedagogical goals for the courses as they stated in class. The instructors in both courses made it clear in the interview that they intended to maximize students' learning by promoting student-to-student discourse rather than instructor-to-student discourse on the BBs. Dr. Taylor explained it as

follows:

> I mentioned already that I do not intervene in the discussion forums because I think that the way they were structured works better to fulfill the academic goals we have for the course. I'm not intervening and drawing all of the discussion back to me. I would much rather that be student-to-student debated discussion. So we widen the scope of the perspectives on the course readings, and just as important for this course, the educational applications in professional practice that the variety of participants can bring to bear on the course readings.   *(Dr. Taylor; Interview)*

Except for the length of messages there were no explicitly stated rules made by the instructor. After the instructor made the first entry on the first forum to post a discussion starter question, he handed the facilitator role of to his students and had only limited presence while the students discussed readings on the major forums. Throughout the semester the instructor posted 86 messages, which was 23% of the total (367 messages) posted on the BB.

As I was reviewing the online discourse texts in Course A, I noticed that most of the discussion leaders seemed to have used the first entry made by the instructor for the first forum as a model to follow when they facilitated the discussions. In doing so, they provided a brief summary of the points made by the author of the week's readings in presenting questions, and frequently wrote feedback in response to other members' messages and closed the forums with a note of thanks. Dana, for example, recollected in an interview her experience as facilitator as follows:

> When I was leading it, what I tried to do was that I remembered what he [the instructor] did for the first discussion. I gave the question out to everybody. And then I allowed the people to answer. I didn't jump in right away. And then I put my answers. And then perhaps I would comment or add to what other people would have said. So I tried to emulate what he had done with us. *(Dana; Interview I)*

Table 3 and Table 4 are quantitative summaries of speech functions and message topics based on discourse analysis of two weeks of messages on the BBs from the focal students and their instructors. The "L1" and "L2" columns show the mean frequencies of message categories, and the "instructor" column gives the raw number of the frequencies. L1 students in general used slightly more expressing knowledge as a response on course topics than L2 students. Across the courses, L2 students in Course A used a wider range of speech

functions and message topics than their counterparts in Course B. Besides using the speech
function of expressing knowledge/opinion, the students in Course A were actively using
requests for assistance, social formulas and social matters, which are the clear indications
of interaction dynamics and diversity of participant roles in the online forums.

TABLE 3
Quantitative Summary of Speech Functions

Speech Functions	Course A			Course B		
	L1	L2	Instructor	L1	L2	Instructor
Expressing knowledge-In	2.25	1.67	9	2.5	2.3	1
Expressing knowledge-Re	6	4	5	2.5	1.33	0
Making requests-RA	2.75	3	2	2	.33	0
Making requests-CO	.25	0	1	0	0	0
Social formula	2.75	3	9	0	.33	0

TABLE 4
Quantitative Summary of Message Topics

Message Topics	Course A			Course B		
	L1	L2	Instructor	L1	L2	Instructor
Course topics	7.25	5.33	6	2	3.67	0
Course logistics	.25	.33	11	0	0	0
Message quality	2	.33	3	1	.33	1
Communication /medium	.5	.66	3	1.5	0	0
Social matters	1.5	1.67	2	0	.33	0

In terms of the instructor's presence, the Course A instructor appeared more frequently on
the BB with a wider range of speech functions and message topics than the instructor of
Course B. What should be noted here is that the types of message functions and message
topics indicate that Course A instructor was, in fact, not dominating the BB discussions. As is
shown in the tables, most of his entries were on course logistics rather than on course topics.

A social formula, according to Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999) supports
both cognitive and affective objectives "by making the group interactions appealing,
engaging, and thus intrinsically rewarding, leading to an increase in academic, social, and
institutional integration and resulting in increased persistence and course completion" (p. 52).
In this study, this was evidenced by higher numbers of postings (Course A = 281, n = 14:

Course B = 271, n = 16) and Course A students' positive interview accounts of their participation. In general, there is a higher frequency of social formulas used by both the students and the instructor in Course A.

This kind of finding reflects the instructor's intentions, as he described as his main role to "make sure that discussion forums were open at the right time," close some of the early discussion forums, and "monitor the discussions to be sure that everyone was having an opportunity to be online." The following message is one example, posted by the instructor to encourage students' participation in the BB. The message was posted by the instructor after a majority of students had failed to respond to an earlier message to post a tentative version of a term paper topic after 10 days:

> Message no. 400
> Posted by Tim Taylor (Course A)
> Subject: Your topic urgently needed here! Tim cracks the whip...
>
> I am a bit concerned that class members not delay getting their *tentative* statements of topic interest posted here. This is a course requirement for *this* forum, remembering that the objective is to identify a few groups of people who can work together on this major term paper task. I don't want to see people rushed at a later stage, and the way to avoid that is to "front load" the thinking a bit.
>
> Let me encourage you to post in this forum sooner rather than later: it will pay huge dividends later in the course.
> Tim
> *(Dr. Taylor, Forum: Term Paper Draft Topics)*

As is illustrated above, Course A instructor continually monitored the students' discussions on the BB, and intervened when he perceived that the students were off track.

According to the interviews, all the focal students in Course A expressed a desire to receive more input and direction from the instructor through the BB. Their reactions, however, were not always displayed in the same pattern of participation within a community. An L1 student, Hilary, had particular zeal for getting more input from the instructor on the BB. She made an effort to engage the instructor by explicitly calling for help from the instructor in her message. An L2 student, Mei, on the other hand, acted differently in response to the lack of the instructor's presence online. As a strong believer in learning from "the expert," she did not find the online environment helpful in achieving her personal goals of either practicing spoken English or listening to the lecture in Course

A. She posted the minimum required and stayed off-line throughout the semester. In fact, she ended up contributing the lowest number of postings to the online discussions in her course.

Interview data indicate that students in Course A felt more ownership in constructing online discourse than those in Course B. At the same time, they were aware of the instructor's presence online and appreciated his balanced feedback and timely assistance and monitoring of discussions, as reflected in one student's recollection:

> He [Dr. Taylor] is very good about letting us go our own course … I think in one of our chapters, we were maybe getting a little off-topic. So he interjected and said, "I think these are good points, but maybe you guys should concentrate more on-" I can't remember exactly what it was, but he redirects us when he sees necessary. And other than that he posts all the pertinent information we've discussed in class elsewhere. So it's there for us to refer back to, which is nice.   *(Michelle; Interview I)*

He also showed consideration and accommodation for L2 students on the BB. For example, when Sunny posted a message saying she was having difficulty with technical terminology, the instructor instantly posted resources called "Jargon Busters" in response to her needs.

One aspect that makes the BB different from other writing tasks such as traditional written homework is that the BB is a public place where all members can read each other's messages and use them as a basis for further discussion. The students appreciated how their colleagues responded differently to the same question and they used BB text produced by their colleagues as a tool for developing new ideas through extending and questioning. According to the interview data, students who lacked an academic register tried to adjust their writing style to other students'. Most L2 students stated in the interviews that they paid attention to their colleagues' colloquial expressions, in particular, which they had rarely had a chance to learn.

Course B, on the other hand, showed a contrastive atmosphere among students. For example, an L1 student, Kathy constantly felt constricted on the BB. As she said:

> She (Dr. Wall) likes us to generate a critical analysis of both theoretical and methodological strengths and shortcomings. So, really, what she says a lot is we have to read with an idea of what the author is saying, what are the points, what are the strengths of his argument and weaknesses, instead of saying, "Oh, you know, this is how I teach, and these are my philosophies, and I don't think that will work, blah-blah." She doesn't like us to talk about things like that. So

that's why I feel like I can never get into a discussion, because all these ideas in my head, opinions, and you know, I'm DYING to get them out. But she says it's not academic.   *(Kathy; Interview I)*

One salient change for the students in Course B took place between Week 2 and Week 3, after the instructor intervened and encouraged the students to write in an academic and professional way. After the instructor's intervention the students started to mainly repeat the article and pass on information. The range of the student roles in Course B was restricted mostly to providing information. In comparing the range of student roles between Course A and Course B, the focal students (both L1 and L2) played more diverse roles in Course A.

Although the Course B instructor found the BB messages by the students to be in the desired form, as she commented both in the interview and on the BB, the students showed dissatisfaction with their use of the BB. They described the writing task as "very fixed," "constrained," and "uncomfortable." If the range of roles members play in the community indicates development of academic competence, as Gutierrez and Stone (1997) suggest, the BB seems to be an efficient addition in support of expanding student roles and in knowledge-building. The students (both L1 and L2) in my research were given the opportunity to play more diverse roles on the BB by sharing responsibilities of discourse with the instructor as a facilitator, evaluator and information provider or resource person. However, the comparison of two courses shows that this would not be realized without instructors' inputs such as careful course planning, creative facilitation, and consistent management of the discussion activities.

V. CONCLUSION

Through text-based communication, L2 students in both courses played a more active role than in face-to-face class, where the instructor dominated most of the conversation. The L2 students were able to read and reread messages to improve comprehension and plan output. It is still questionable if the writing competence students gain from online communication is transferred to their speaking competence. The data collection took place over four months, which was not long enough to capture noticeable changes in L2 students' participation or transformation in the face-to-face class. More longitudinal studies are encouraged to address this issue. However, the use of online forums is definitely one option if the goal is to promote more comprehensible input and a more equal level of participation among students as the findings of this study show.

In exploring the instructor roles in online academic discourse I introduced a new

analytical scheme through examining speech functions and message topics. Comparison of each message topic with its speech function generated participant roles such as information-providers/resource persons, information/help seekers, motivators, directors, evaluators, monitors and socializers. The distribution of roles in the online discourse indicates, to a certain extent, the shift of the relationship and power among the participants in two learning settings. The examination of the BBs in two courses showed a shift in participant roles by diffusing instructor expertise and placing the students in a more active position as information providers and resource persons, with the instructor coaching or monitoring from the periphery.

What seems to be particularly beneficial for L2 students is the asynchronous written nature of CMC, in which students can process communication in a more deliberate manner without time constraint. What makes a difference, however, in maximizing student learning is not the mere introduction of the technology. The instructor in Course A, for example, monitoring the discussion forum, would send a message to a student privately who was not visible on the BB to see if she had any problems in posting. As Palloff and Pratt (1999) and Shotsberger (1997) emphasize, responsiveness of the instructor to the needs and concerns of students is crucial to the success of distance learning. The answer to encouraging student participation in online discussions may not be absence of the instructor role online. The students in Course A appreciated the instructor's timely intervention in and redirection of discussions when their dialogue veered off track. The findings of this research strongly suggest that creating engaging discourse communities should accompany careful course design and an instructor's suitable strategies for facilitation and management of discussion activities. In addition, instructors should be more flexible in managing online discourse, by allowing personal communication among students while they communicate course content and share resources.

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