Online discussions forums: Its roles for EFL learners

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ABSTRACT The aim of this study is to find out how learners perceive the use of discussion forums (ODFs) in a learning platform used in the teaching and learning process. A descriptive qualitative method was implemented in conducting the study with total respondents of 39 second-semester students of the English Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. The study results indicate that having the ODFs has been effective in helping learners to share, comment, give feedback and understand the learning materials from their peers and the lecturer during the discussion activities throughout the learning process. The use of ODFs has a significant role in assisting learning for EFL learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Technology has become a crucial part of 21st-century education. In enhancing the teaching and learning process effectiveness, modern education must constantly embrace various technological tools and platforms in their educational settings (Salako et al., 2013). The use of technology has become a grand quest in facilitating the effectiveness of education. Therefore, using appropriate learning platforms and devices allows the increasing accessibility to learning sources and multiple learning approaches to meet the needs of varied learners (Delahunty, 2013; Salako et al., 2013; Sahin, 2007; Syaimar & Sutiarso, 2018). One method of using technology in education is through Online Discussion Forums (ODFs) that provide both synchronous and asynchronous interaction. ODFs bring learning to a more flexible environment, allowing learners to have a convenient learning place. Access to asynchronous discussion forums is seen as one way to 'take the distance out of distance learning', according to the University's website (Al-Husban, 2020), by encouraging and, in some cases, requiring students to contribute to discussion forums for a range of purposes. Premagowrie et al. (2014) stated that familiarity with ODFs has been the flexible tool to respond and post comments or messages at a preferred time of the learners. It provides them with multiple modes of knowledge representation and comprehension, which enables them to contribute their intellectual growth and critical thinking to acquire greater learning outcomes (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010). In addition, they are also able to read the thread at any convenient time as frequently as possible. This provides learners with fruitful discussion among learners and their peers, apart from the existing barriers between learners and instructors or lecturers (Xiaoling, 2016). ODFs have also proven to engage learners to interact outside the classroom by commenting and posting messages in discussion threads (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010). In addition, ODFs often lead to better in-class discussions. Students can engage virtually, often having their thoughts and opinions validated and more willing to share out loud more thoughtfully in class afterwards (Jeff, 2019).Premagowrie et al. (2014) and Lombardi & McCahill (2004) suggested that instructors are advised to have pivotal roles in monitoring the activities in the ODFs by facilitating enquiries and promptly providing feedback to the learners. Instructors' availability will increase the bond between them and their learners. This can assist instructors in understanding their learners better and helping them to overcome their learning constraints (Xiaoling, 2016). In addition, Hughes et al. (2004) also noted that ODFs allow learners to be more engaged by participating actively in the forums during the learning process. They are encouraged to share their thoughts, understanding, and critical thinking on what they have learned in the provided sources in the online learning platform. Rich-technology classrooms have proven that learners performed more excellent attitudes, involvement and engagement with the course content (Dorman & Fraser, 2009). Many different topics and ideas raised in the forums, either from the learners or teachers (facilitators), can boost learners' better understanding of the course materials being learned. Four patterns of online participation in the ODFs; Socratic questioning, sharing personal thoughts and experience, brainstorming and reaction posting as learners posted their feedback, comments, and suggestions toward the other learners' posts (Tella & Isah, 2011). This is due to the demand for social interaction learning necessary for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners (Yen et al., 2015). ODFs have provided a platform for productive interactions, idea generation and knowledge exchange.

2. METHODS

The study was conducted for one semester with 39 students of the English Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, Indonesia, in a Guided Writing class as the respondents. The data was collected from two sources; (1) learners' comments/interactions on their peer posts and (2) their reflections on their experience through an open questionnaire. The study used a content analysis of learners' interactions and a thematic analysis of the reflections.

3. RESULT & DISCUSSION

As depicted in Table 1, as a media for learning and sharing, most learners positively perceived that ODFs have helpful, fun, exciting and practical features to help them learn the materials during the course. As it has been recorded, 29 (74.36%) of learners considered ODFs a helpful feature in terms of assisting them in learning the materials being taught, spotting their weaknesses from the shared comments and feedback, and having self-correction on the mistakes they made in completing the given task.

The extract from the open questionnaire will help us to have more apparent evidence:

"The existence of the forum discussion can help me better understand the addition of material explanations and questions submitted by the supervisor and other friends." (TRS)

Also, it helps them better understand the shared comment and feedback during the learning process.

"....discussion makes us more active in learning as it is active in the class. We also learned to comment on incorrect posts from our friends. Discussion forums give us more knowledge because we teach each other. With the discussion forum, we know our mistakes in making sentences." (NLD)

Another learner also mentioned a similar point:

"In my opinion, a good discussion forum, so students can correct the mistakes of their friends. So from there it is known that the student understands or not in the material provided." (DS)

It shows that ODFs have provided them abundant opportunities to share their thoughts as they posted comments and feedback toward the other learners' posts (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Hughes et al., 2004). This also supports the idea that ODFs in the online learning platform have assisted learners to be more aware of their mistakes as they have self-corrected actions toward their tasks after reading and replaying their classmates' posts through deep and interactive messaging in the online learning platform (Premagowrie et al., 2014). As Tella & Isah (2011) suggested, students, are eased in forming answers for the tasks given in the learning platform. It is due to the enormous opportunity the platform has provided for the learners to have vast access to some threads of discussions and suggestions that have been made ready in the course content that enables them to build their confidence to attempt more accurately to questions that arise. It can be seen from their response to the open questionnaire:

"I think the discussion forums are quite important too. Yeah, it helps me to get a better understanding of the lesson. It helps me because, in discussion forums, I can see the other's opinions and corrections about each other's answer". (YH).

He continued his response by writing :

"About that, I think it is fairly effective. Because of comments and feedback, I can know where I did wrong and fix my wrong answer by revising my answers. It just takes time to scroll down the discussion because every student is told to respond to at least five other students" (YH).

These two statements show that learners have chances to take control and manage the discussion among themselves. They become more critical of the response they receive from their friends' posts. Thus, it helped them to be aware of completing their tasks. As the learners become more aware, their achievement in learning also increases as they can spot their own mistakes while completing the tasks in learning (Tella & Isah, 2011).

Another important thing is that ODFs support learners-centred learning. They allow learners to interact deeply and interact through messaging while sharing their comments, feedback, or clarifications that reflect their understanding. Still in line with Tella & Isah (2011) that ODFs can create deep yet interactive idea sharing, 7 or 17.95% of the learners have responded that ODFs are fun, engaging, and effective. Extract from the thread below gives a more transparent view of it:

The ODF was designed to be available at the time as the lecturer has arranged the period when they can have the online discussion. This allows the learners to share their thoughts and understanding through comments, suggestions, or feedback toward the others' posts. Therefore, they feel it is fun as they can manage their own time to participate in the forum.

They considered that from ODFs, they can have virtual interactions and share their thoughts with other learners and the lecturer, learn how to have interactive yet polite exchanges with the other learners and lecturer, help them to build connections and good relationships among class members without being limited by "time" and "place" Onyema (2019) as they can choose their convenient time and place during the arranged period managed by the lecturer to write and respond to the posts in the ODFs. Moreover, they find it an effective way to share their thoughts and understand the materials learned. Therefore it is an effective way to comment and give feedback and corrections to the other learners' posts.

In addition, ODFs make learners more aware of completing the tasks. Regarding how ODFs help learners better understand the lessons learned, some learners consider it helpful when it helps learners from each other's posts. However, it is only beneficial when learners are active during the discussion. Learners inactive in the forum cannot take advantage of the ODF optimally, as they rarely or never participate in the discussion. Therefore, they could only learn a little from the offered activity in the ODFs. At the same time, those who were active could easily acquire the ability to formulate answers to assignment and examination questions by paying attention and also responding to the messages shared in the discussion threads in the course
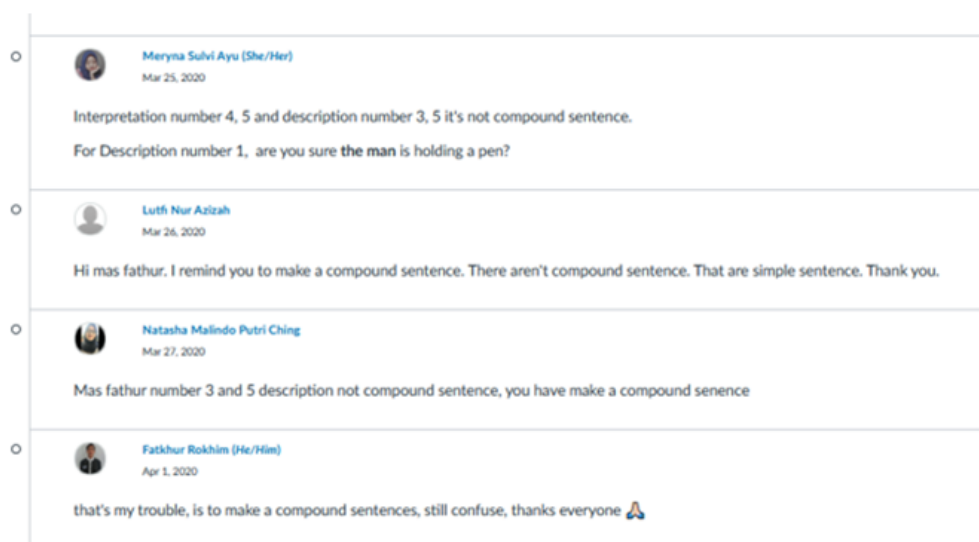
FIGURE 1. Extract from Discussion 2

learning. In addition, for those who were active in the discussion, it can help them to build confidence to make efforts to reply more precisely to the cases or problems that arise in the forum during the course.

It is seen from the result that 7 (17.95%) learners considered ODFs fun, engaging, and practical features for having virtual interactions and sharing their thoughts with other learners and also the instructor, learning how to have interactive yet polite exchanges with the other learners and lecturer. Moreover, ODFs could help learners build connections and good relationships among class members, an effective way of sharing their thoughts and understanding about the materials learned, an effective way to comment and give feedback and corrections toward the other learners' post, and makes learners more aware in completing the tasks (Dorman & Fraser, 2009). One student (2.56%) also added a similar response toward ODFs that he learned from his friends' posts in the ODFs. The rest of the students mentioned that they needed help understanding the ideas shared (2.56%), and the other student (2.56%) was inactive during the discussion forum.

In terms of the effectiveness of the posts made by learners in the ODFs, table 3 shows a clear view of the results.

Based on Figure 3, a significant number of students, 37 students (94.87%) out of 39, assumed that the feedback and comment shared through ODFs were effective in helping them get a better understanding after reading the shared comments and feedback and helping them to be more aware of mistakes they made in completing their tasks. The feedback and comment were from both peers and the instructor. As they posted comments or feedback on the discussion thread, the other learners/peers commented or suggested the posts written in the ODFs. This creates bonding among them. They felt more engaged and validated as they were encouraged towards them. They shared more about their thoughts as they got validation from their classmates when sharing their opinion and responses to the others' posts in the forum (Jeff, 2019). As the instructor has also validated the posts through questioning, sharing personal thoughts and experiences, brainstorming and reaction posting as learners posted their feedback, comment, and suggestion toward other learners' posts, the instructor

knew the learners better. This assists them in treating each other better during the learning process (Dorman & Fraser, 2009).

On the other hand, one student (2.56%) stated that the feedback and comment became ineffective once they were too much, they seemed to be told directly what the answer was, so the learners did not try to learn or understand the materials learned. Meanwhile, the other student (2.56%) added that he did not learn anything about group discussion; only very minor learners participated, so the interactive information exchange did not occur during the discussion. This phenomenon required the instructor to be more active in commenting to encourage the learners to be more active in the discussion forum. They can ask questions, confirm understanding, or post comments or feedback on other posts. Online Discussion Forum for teachers encourage and facilitates the sharing and exchange of teaching experiences and expertise, and it serves as a repository for content in various media (Kusmawan, n.d). Here is the evidence that the instructor's role is crucial in ODFs to build a bond with the learners during the teaching and learning process to ensure that learners are engaged.

The responses from the open questionnaire also show evidence that the availability of instructors is crucial during the discussion in the ODFs as they respond to the question of how effective the feedback and comment shared through the discussions help you with your understanding of the lessons learned.

> Giving feedback and comments is quite effective. Because so far, the comments and feedback given are complete with an explanation. So that I know my mistake and can fix it. Moreover, maam Kristi's comments are very clear and make it easy for me to know my mistakes in making sentences. But the problem is I cannot ask directly face to face about material that does not quite understand".(NLD)

The response shows that instructor feedback and comment, provide a clearer understanding of the learned material so that learners can have better mastery in learning. However, if the learner is not active during the discussion
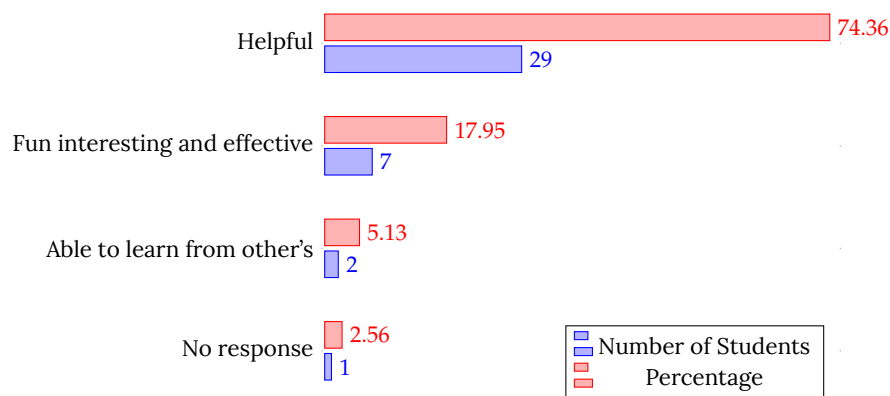
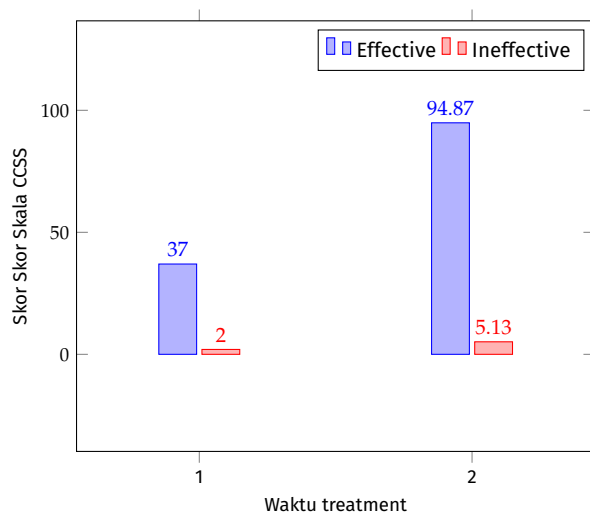**FIGURE 2.** Learners' Perceptions on ODFs

FIGURE 3. Percentage of the effectiveness of comments and feedback.

in the ODFs, he will not be able to catch up with the material as he was not willing to search more from the thread in the ODFs. This is seen in the reply below.

"In my case, the discussion forum did help me a lot. Friends are always being active and correct each other sentences. Sometimes when I did the task incorrectly, my friend tells me to read the instruction again and then I can revise the task. However, there are also times when some of the students do not become quite active as others, maybe because all the option of the wrong answer is already revised, so they do not see any mistakes, especially for the last student who post the replies." (FM)

Another learner also mentioned a similar point of view :

"Of course, it is very effective and beneficial. From the feedback, we can know the mistakes in our sentences to repair them. We should not just forget the feedback from our friends. We must remember it and apply it when making sentences. This shows that we understand this material." (RS)

At this point, the activeness of learners during the discussion in the ODFs was effective in helping them with their understanding (Onyema* et al., 2019). However, again, the learner who was not active in the ODFs will slightly get nothing from the feedback and comment posted in the forum.

4. CONCLUSION

ODFs have helped learners to discover new ways of interacting through an online learning platform. The discussion held in the ODFs allows them to share their understanding and get a better one from the comment and feedback shared in the thread. A conducive learning environment can be created through online interaction in the ODFs, of course, with the instructor's availability, and the learning could be more encouraging and practical. Being actively engaged in the virtual interactions made them more aware of the mistakes they made in their tasks. Thus they become more careful in completing the tasks or examinations provided in the learning platform.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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