MARY JEWELL
San Diego High School

Electronic Discussion Forums and English Learners

■ This article describes the benefits of using asynchronous comput-er-mediated communication (CMC), specifically discussion forums, with second language learners. Students have been shown to contribute more, and at a higher level of linguistic complexity, to CMC discussions than in face-to-face situations. Further, partici-pation is more equitable among students, and less instructor-con-trolled, in this type of discourse than in a normal classroom set-ting. The asynchronous nature of the discussion forum allows users to read the postings without the pressure to respond immedi-ately and provides a transcript of the conversation for conference or evaluation purposes. The article also discusses the author's use of a CMC discussion forum in her high school English as a Second Language class. Student postings and reflections are included. A list of free educational Internet forums is also provided.

English Language Learners (ELLs) make up about 10% of the national K-12 public school population, an increase of 104% in just the last decade (Kindler, 2002, p. 1). In states such as California and New Mexico, ELLs are closer to 25% of all students (Kindler, 2002, p. 1). Sadly, many of these children are not finding success at school, and only about half will graduate from high school on time (Padron & Waxman, 1996, p. 342). ELLs are often transitioned to the regular English classroom without addi-tional support before they are ready. These students are everyone's responsi-bility, and we must do everything possible to meet their needs. One tool that shows incredible potential for developing the language skills of our ELL stu-dents, both in ESL and in regular English classes, is the electronic discussion forum.

Forums Defined

Most discussion forums, one type of computer-mediated communica-tion (CMC), focus on one topic, such as political issues or raising children.

Members use the electronic medium to express their ideas and opinions "virtually." Users read messages others have posted, then post their own responses. Postings are usually short, from a few sentences to a paragraph in length. Discussion forums are asynchronous, or time-delayed, whereas live, text-based "chats" take place in real time. Asynchronous CMC is often more effective with second language learners than real-time chat because students have more time to read, reread, and respond to messages than in a live conversation. Another important feature of CMC is that the record of the conversation is available to review, if necessary (Sotillo, 2000; Warschauer, 1997). See Table 1 for a list of commonly used free educational discussion forums on the Internet.

Table 1
Computer-Mediated Communication Resources

Web site	*Description*
I*Earn http://www.iearn.org	Outstanding site connecting classrooms around the world to work on collaborative projects
Orillas http://www.orillas.org	Similar to I*Earn, with projects in English and Spanish
Dave's ESL Cafe Discussion Forums http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion	Discussion forums for students and teachers of ESL
Global Schoolhouse http://www.gsn.org	Online opportunities for collaborative learning
Yahoo groups http://groups.yahoo.com	Site where users can set up their own discussion forums
Voices of Youth http://www.unicef.org/voy/news/	A multilingual discussion forum on youth-related issues, organized by UNICEF

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 99% of all public schools are connected to the Internet, and most secondary teachers are able to go online in their classrooms (*School Connectivity*, 2002, p. 1, Table 2). Discussion boards are easy to set up and use, and they don't require extraordinary hardware or software. Even classrooms with just one computer connected to the Internet can have lively virtual conversations. Most students already use email extensively, and many use chat. It makes sense to harness the power of CMC, which is something students are obviously motivated to use, to improve their language skills.

More Language, More Often

Several studies have shown that students write more complex responses and participate more in asynchronous CMC conversations than in face-to-face classroom discussions and activities. The linguistic complexity of the writing increases when students interact with an authentic audience, as in a discussion forum activity (Kern, 1995; Li, 2000; Sotillo, 2000; examples of activities appear below). Kern reports that students involved in an online discussion forum in a college-level foreign language class contributed longer sentences of more linguistic complexity than students discussing the same topic orally (Kern, 1995, p. 465). Kern also reports that CMC discussions provide for more equal distribution of participation than face-to-face communication (Kern, 1995, p. 461). All students can contribute to a CMC conversation, not just a few of the most vocal in the class.

English learners often feel self-conscious about using their English publicly, yet posting their writings to a discussion board on the Internet gives them a nonthreatening way to share their work. Mabrito (2000) describes a project in business writing in which students were required to post messages to an anonymous newsgroup, a common type of discussion forum. The highly writing-apprehensive students reported that they felt more comfortable in an anonymous group, and their messages prove it. They contributed more often and at greater length, initiated more topics, and asked more questions than they did in a group in which they were identified. An anonymous group is definitely possible with high school students, though it would have to be carefully monitored to protect students from inappropriate content.

CMC discussions are also ideal for monitoring class participation. A glance through the postings, the written record of transactions, will reveal which students are contributing and which are not. The entire record of the conversation can be printed and used as a conference or assessment tool with students, whether to show growth or to address language issues. Teachers can also post messages to start a new thread in the conversation, thereby modeling correct language usage and format. Students can refer to the example as they create their own messages.

Student Engagement

Unfortunately, classrooms with ELLs, including regular Language Arts classes, are often dominated by teacher presentation, with little student engagement or student-to-student interaction. However, instruction in classroom settings where technology is used even moderately has much less whole-class instruction and more independent, student-centered work (Padron & Waxman, 1996). Discussion forum activities can allow students to work together to create and share their knowledge, and provide for more student-to-student interaction. These authentic language contexts are critical for student motivation. Students also use more language, and more complex language, when responding to each other than when responding to the teacher (Kern, 1995, p. 459). Discussion forums also equalize gender relationships.

Young women, for example, are much more likely to propose solutions to problems in CMC discussions than they are in face-to-face settings (Warschauer, 1997, p. 473).

Discussion Forums and the Standards

Participation in discussion forum activities definitely contributes to students' meeting established standards in both ESL and in English Language Arts. For example, students can use the virtual discussion for "personal expression" and to "obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in…written form" in English (*TESOL Standards for pre-K–12 Students*, 2002, p. 6). The forum can provide students an opportunity to read and write in different genres and for different audiences and purposes. Students can also write for personal fulfillment and to become members of literacy communities, important goals for all students studying English and part of the standards for Language Arts students (*Standard for the English Language Arts*, 2002, p. 1). Effective discussion forum conversations incorporate activities and prompts to help students meet these standards.

Experimenting With an Online Discussion Forum

The research convinced me of the power of a forum to develop language skills, so I began a discussion forum with my high school English as a Second Language class. At our large, urban high school in San Diego, almost all of our students qualify for free lunch programs, many come from families that are not formally educated, and all have, according to our district standards, no more than an early-intermediate level of proficiency in English. Approximately 70% of our students do not have English as their first language, yet they are permitted just three years of specialized ESL instruction before being transitioned to the regular English class.

We also have a technology-rich campus. My classroom has four IBM PCs and a printer, all connected to the Internet by cable modem. Our campus also has two computer/writing labs, and almost every classroom has at least two computers for student use. Our staff works to infuse technology into every curriculum area so that computers are not something students use only in computing class. We use technology as the means to an end, that of student achievement. All students have a username and password that allows them access to the schoolwide network. Our discussion forum was set up through our school Web site and was password-protected so that only students in the class could get to the forum. As the teacher, I could organize, delete, or revise postings as necessary, but students could read and post only.

We began the activity with a short training in the basics of logging in to the forum. I trained 4 students in 2 before-school sessions; then they worked one-on-one with the rest of the class until all 23 students could log in and post independently. I gave them a few minutes in class each week to complete the posting assignment, but it was intentionally not enough time. I wanted them to use English outside of my classroom, the only place many of them

speak a word of English all day. Many students also have a computing or Spanish class in which they can use the computer, and there are computers in the library and career center as well. A few students have computers with Internet access at home, but the forum is accessible only from school.

For the first week's assignment, students posted a message telling something about themselves that the rest of the class might not know, such as an unusual hobby or experience. I posted an example as a model for them to follow. The second week, students were asked to respond to one person's message, commenting on the information posted in week 1. After these activities, which also served as an introduction to using the forum, we began to explore issues at school, such as ways to improve classes, social groups, and the condition of our school facilities.

At first, it was difficult to get students interested in posting to the forum. I posted a prompt each week related to the topic of discussion, and they were required to respond at least once. Some avoided it, some posted just one or two words, while others were definitely interested in the activity. Even then, the sentences were short, there were a lot of mistakes, and sometimes postings were not completely focused on the discussion topic. One student, for example, took every opportunity to talk about soccer. His suggestion for improving school follows (the capitalization is the writer's):

> The teachers are cool but they need to be cooler. Other important thing is more classes about soccer the teacher need to talk about soccer in their classes like read magazines about soccer, more presentations about soccer, read more newspapers something like that, the students need more responsibility.

At least he was using English! I gave participation credit for each post, but did not consider grammar or spelling in the grade. Below are some additional student messages about their ideas for improving school, one of our first discussion topics. (All names are pseudonyms, and the excerpts are unedited.)

> I think we can make many differents kind of plays, when the teachers ask to the students, question, and for each question that we could answer, they will give us points. because the students will want to participate and answer the questions to win some points. (Lisa)

> I think that make groupsworks in everybody the estudents for better class, and go to the visit diferents places. I think than the teacher want to try of the class was interesting and funny; also to the student than don't care I thing that student was supended. (Jorge)

> the teachers ask abaut of the class a the students and give a point for answe. work in partner for to improve the inglish because when the students don't know can ask a others students. (Graciela)

A few weeks into our virtual discussion, I noticed many more students interested in contributing. Several students would come to class early and spend their extra time reading the responses already posted before posting their own. Many would read the messages one day, write a rough draft of their response at home that night, and then post to the forum the next day. I also began finding dictionaries and scratch paper left near the computers. I was seeing evidence that students were taking a real interest in their work, because everyone in the class was going to see their writing. The authentic use of English and the authentic audience were definitely motivating factors.

When schoolwide testing and building construction prevented forum posting for two consecutive weeks, students protested! One girl complained, "I don't know what's going on with our class!" When students returned from an absence, the first thing they did was check the forum to see what was new. Thus, in addition to language development, our electronic forum eventually helped us build a sense of community. All students need to feel that they belong somewhere, and this is especially true of those struggling with language and culture. Contributing to the forum became a major way to belong to our classroom community.

To follow up the online activity, we also talked about the discussion topics in class. The reading and writing that students did in the electronic forum helped them feel more confident in the subsequent classroom discussions, as they had already had some experience with the vocabulary and language structures we were employing. We used ideas generated by the class online to write descriptive articles, persuasive essays, and letters to the principal. This integration of the forum with other class activities helped tie everything together, and students could see the connections between the online typed conversations, written papers, and oral work.

Though small, these steps in language and confidence are important. My students felt more comfortable using English, contributed more to the class, and were motivated to improve. The quietest students were often the ones who wrote the most. I also found the discussion forum was a place to challenge the students who were already very verbal but who needed to work on their writing. They became the class experts, suggesting words and structures to the other students and working to improve their written skills.

Considerations in Setting Up a Class Forum

Determine the program you will use to create the forum. Forums based on local school Web sites are probably the easiest for the teacher to manage and are more secure than global Internet-based forums. However, students can access an Internet forum from off campus. (See Table 1 for some Internet-based forums commonly used by schools.)

Review security issues. Make sure all students have a network Acceptable Use Policy form on file, and review with them the district's policy for posting student work to the Internet. Explain and enforce the rules of

"netiquette." Review the forum often, checking for inappropriate postings, especially in an anonymous forum.

Incorporate the forum into your other class activities. Make contributing a worthwhile event, not just one more thing to do for a grade. Use messages as a prewriting activity, to discuss and comment on each other's work, or as reflection.

Make sure all students have access to a computer. Allow enough time to complete the assignment so that students can use computers outside the classroom, if necessary. Let them know they can find access to computers outside of class.

Encourage students to use the spell and grammar check functions. If your forum does not have this capacity, have students review each other's work, or have them type the messages first in a word-processing program and spell check there, then cut and paste to the forum.

Hold students accountable for their participation. If posting is voluntary, the forum will not be an integral part of the class. Make sure all students know they are responsible for contributing. To facilitate lively discussion, you may want to consider giving a participation grade only.

Get administrative support. In this era of high-stakes testing, you may get some questions about why you are conducting a discussion board activity. Let your principal know you are not just playing on the computer, but are involved in pedagogically sound language development.

Make CMC interdisciplinary, if possible. Involve content teachers, or focus the forum on a topic or task. Chats about hobbies or "guess what happened to me today" are not interesting enough to maintain high student participation, and students do not use language at a high enough academic level in such topics to improve in proficiency.

Conclusion

We must embrace our English learners and what they bring to our classrooms, and do everything we can to help them succeed in school. Computer-based activities such as electronic discussion forums, when well designed and grounded in sound pedagogy, can assist these students in developing the language skills they need for school and beyond.

Author

Mary Jewell is an ESL teacher at a large high school in San Diego. She earned her master's degree in Educational Technology at San Diego State University, and she is a student in the Joint Doctoral program at the University of San Diego/San Diego State.

References

Kern, R. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal, 79*, 457-476.

Kindler, A. (2002, March). *How many school-aged limited English proficient students are there in the US?* Retrieved November 4, 2002, from George Washington University, National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition Web site: www.ncela.gwu.edu/askncela/01leps.htm

Li, Y. (2000). Linguistic characteristics of ESL writing in task-based email activities. *System, 28*, 229-245.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Internet access in U.S. public schools and classrooms: 1994-2001: School connectivity.* Retrieved December 2, 2002, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/internet/3.asp

National Council of Teachers of English. (2002, November). *Standards for the English language arts.* Retrieved November 10, 2002, from http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml

Padron, Y., & Waxman, H. T. (1996). Improving the teaching and learning of English language learners through instructional technology. *International Journal of Instructional Media, 23*(4), 341-354.

Sotillo, S. (2000). Discourse functions and syntactic complexity in synchronous and asynchronous communication. *Language Learning and Technology, 4*(1), 82-119. Retrieved November 10, 2002, from http://llt.msu.edu/vol4num1/default.html

Sutherland-Smith, W. (2002). Integrating online discussion in an Australian intensive English language course. *TESOL Journal, 11*(3), 31-35.

TESOL. (2002). *TESOL Standards for pre-K-12 students.* Retrieved November 30, 2002, from http://www.tesol.org/assoc/k12standards/it/01.html

Warschauer, M. (1997). Computer-mediated collaborative learning: Theory and practice. *Modern Language Journal, 81*, 470-481.