A computer-mediated communication project to promote EFL writing at a Thai University

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to explore the outcomes of a CMC learning environment-- discussion forum, when integrated with EFL writing. A pilot study is conducted at Walailak University as an initial survey of a possibility that the use of a network-based discussion forum can promote English language learning, particularly in the process of writing. The tool provides fifteen voluntary student participants with opportunities to 1) asynchronously *discuss* topics of interest with peers and foreigners before writing a composition on the topics; 2) *get feedback and comments* on the writing.
The procedures are based on the hypothesis that students will incorporate language and generate the ideas from the use of target language in authentic situations.

The paper presents the actual study, and the factors that constrained the study from achieving its goal.

1 INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication is believed to be an effective means for Thai learners of English since it allows them to connect to the world using English language as a medium. More likely, network-based tools could be made more beneficial in a rural area where little channel is open for authentic language use. The study is conducted at Walailak University, located in a rural area of southern Thailand. It focuses on the use of a CMC tool to support students' writing performance, focusing on the process of writing.

1.1 Keywords

CMC: Computer-mediated Communication,
EFL writing: English as foreign language writing,
Walailak University (WU): a newly established University in Nakhon Sithammarat, Thailand.

1.2 Hypothesis

Participation in a CMC discussion and exposure to feedback by efficient readers will have positive effects on students' writing performance.

1.3 Objective

To explore the outcomes of a CMC learning environment—network-based discussion forum, when integrated with EFL writing

2 RESEARCH PLAN

2.1 Research questions

Does participation in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) discussion forum and exposure to feedback by efficient readers affect students' writing performance?

2.1.1 Associated research questions

a. Is there evidence that students incorporate the ideas and change their language use and writing styles as a result of feedback given by peers and readers?
b. Does CMC affect students' learning strategies?
c. Does CMC promote language awareness?
d. Does CMC motivate learners to use L2?
e. With CMC environment, what do students do to acquire second language? To what extent do they do that?

2.2 Research tool

The main research tool for this study is a network-based discussion forum *(figure 1),* which includes:

'*Readers*' who are more competent user of the language.
'*Resources*' refer to related links on the Internet that support the forum work (e.g news report, dictionaries, grammar books)

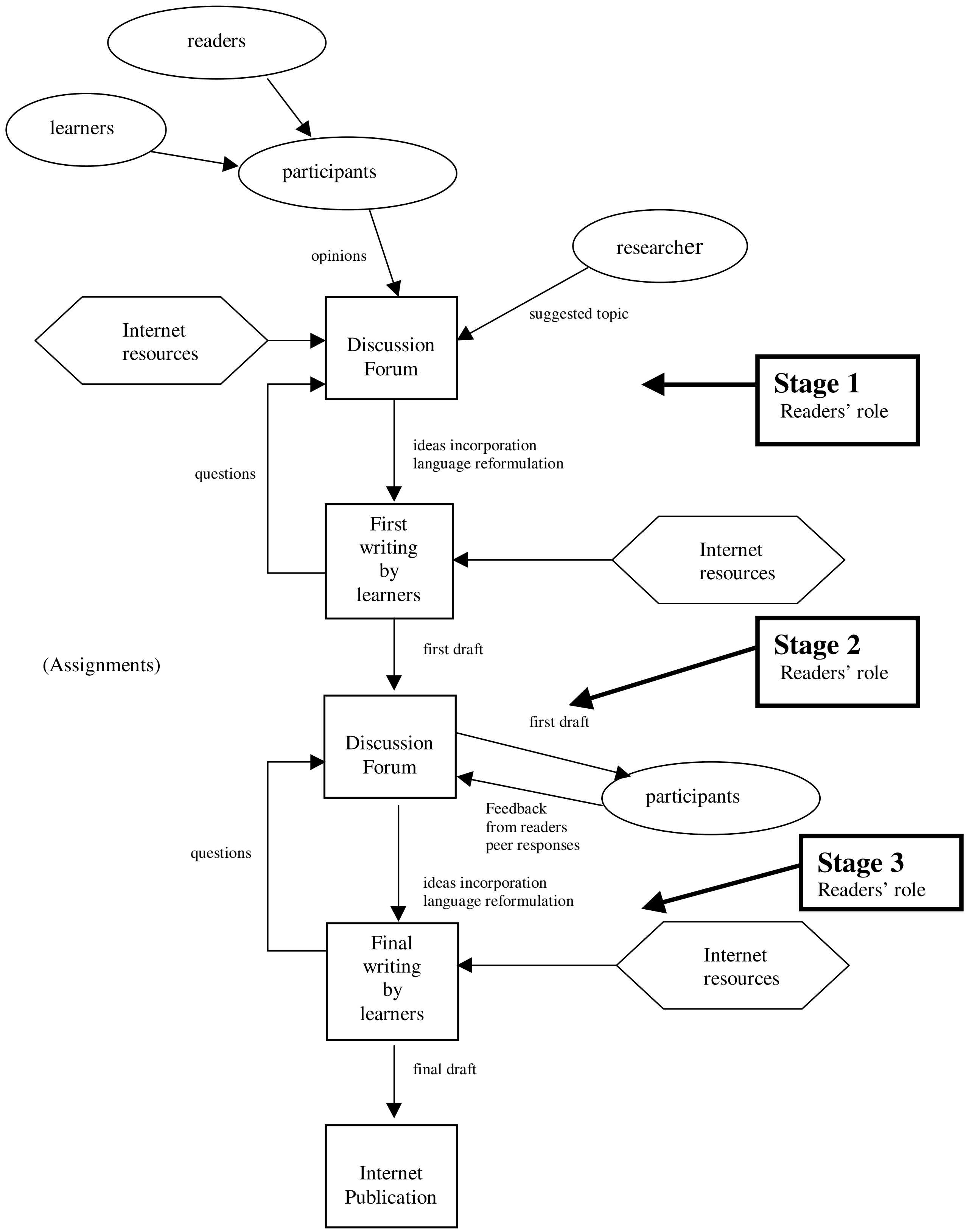

Figure 1 – The Project Model

3 PILOT STUDY

3.1 Subjects

The subjects were 15 second year students in Mass Communication, Nursing, Agricultural Technology at Walailak University, Thailand**.**

3.2 Students' background

All of the students passed the English 5 course, which was the last compulsory module at WU. They did not take any English course during this term. They all claimed they like English language; but I have no records of their previous grades in English. In addition some students experienced being abroad on an exchange program, or an English course. Most of them have some experiences with computers: some are regular users while others use computers only occasionally. One of them mentioned not to check very much his e-mail. They also used the CAI program for English reading purpose created by the CAI team at WU. All of them use chat programs and e-mail in both Thai and English.

3.3 Research methods

The students were randomly divided into three groups of five. They were asked to participate in the forum by logging in and they were asked to contribute a message at least once or twice a week. Apart from the students, there were three other foreign participants (non-native speakers of English). A rough schedule was set for each group to control the discussion. Apart from the forum, a questionnaire was also carried out asking for general information about the students' attitudes towards the computer and their use of English.

3.4 Research tools

The tool used in the study was an asynchronous network-based discussion forum provided by *Media and Learning Technology Service* (*MALTS),* Edinburgh University. The forum was accessed via a link present on the English Sanuk project Website at *http://www.ed.ac.uk/~wwararat*.

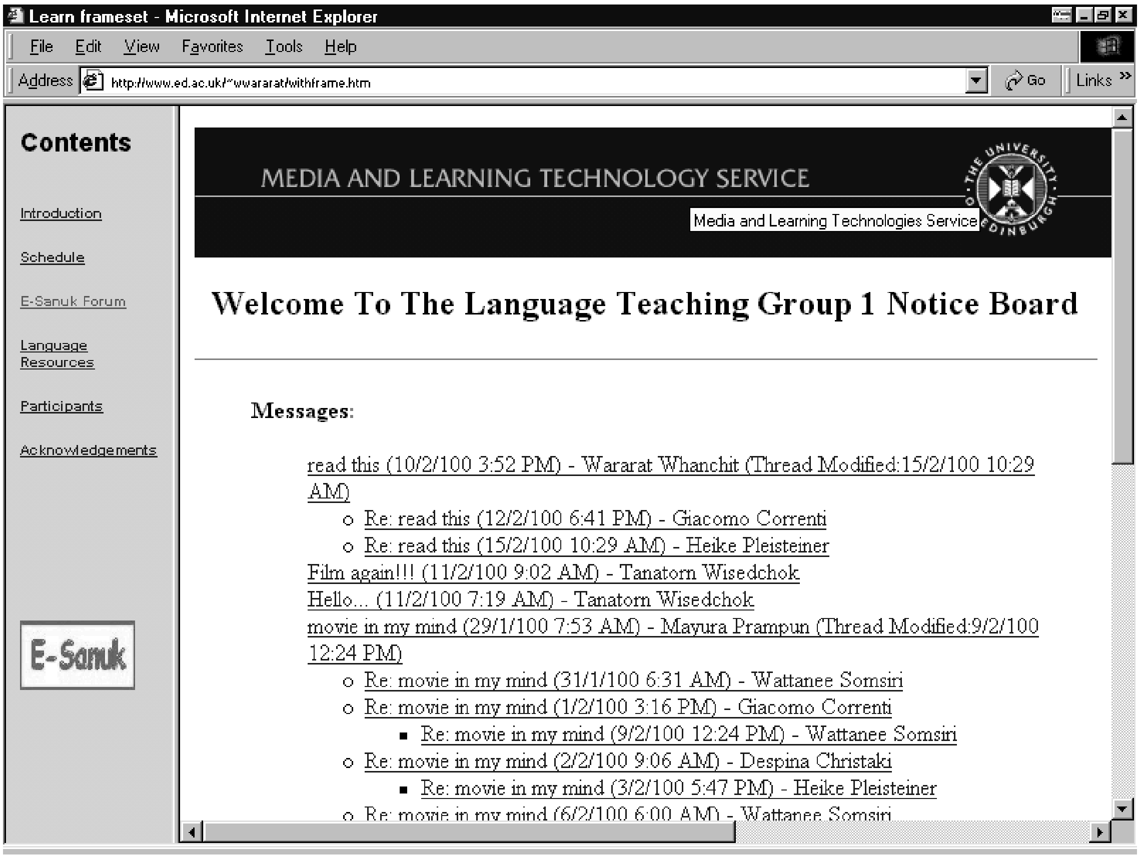

Figure 2 – Screenshot of the actual forum

4 OUTCOMES

The questionnaires show students' positive attitudes towards both English and the computer. However, the students mentioned the difficulties they encountered with the computer system. As a result they did not participate in the forum as expected. Hence, the study did not achieve its aim at the stage of students' essay writing.

Table 1 shows the small number of messages contributed by the students versus those of the readers.

Table 1 - Summary of outcomes (25/01/00 – 28/02/00)

Group	Messages (students, readers)	Tasks
1	16 (8, 8)	Self introduction and film discussion
2	9 (3,6)	Self introduction and discussion about touristic places
3	6 (3,3)	Self introduction

4.1 Pilot study constraints

The pilot study has revealed a number of problems with the research project bearing in mind that the pilot was conducted over a short period of time.
Possible constraints could be the following:

(1) voluntary work instead of classroom-based activity
    a. priority is always given to classroom activities

(2) motivations

    a. topics of interest, or task design might not be interesting enough
    b. rewards or incentives should be given to the participants
    c. the forum interfaces and thread layout were not very well-organised

(3) technical problems, Internet connection and access to the Internet

    a. lack of technological support e.g. ISP
    b. intermittent blackout
    c. inconvenient access to the computer and the Internet

(4) time constraints

    a. relatively short time for the study
    b. term time activities interruption e.g. mid-term exams
    c. the tri-semester terms does not allow much free time for extra activities

4.2 Example sets of outcomes

Fourteen messages sent by eight students were examined briefly. There seems to be few points from their writing that could be useful for further study.

(1) The [messages] writings are presented in informal language. For example, subjects are quite often omitted, and features of spoken language are used (using uhmm, uh..huh, …):

    a. happy to know you all
    b. I'm (her name)…nickname is (her nickname)…uhmmm I don't know what I should to say…but in this forum………

(2) The language used was very much influenced by Thai language. This includes styles, grammar patterns (e.g. tense form, sentence structure, the use of long sentences without proper punctuation):

    a. **I come back again with happy*
    b. **It wonderful*
    c. **It very beautiful*
    d. **I should to say*
    e. **It's a Italian's film by Roberto Benigni after I saw this film it gave me a power to live because it show that life's beautiful and don't worries about anything it'll be fine if we're enjoy and face to problem smilingly*

(3) It does not seem that the students noticed the language used by other participants. There was no obvious sign of language incorporation. That is, they did not notice the tense usage, word choices, or other grammatical patterns:

a. **My gramma is more good*
b. **Watch the film*

The data collected during the pilot study, however, are not enough to answer the research questions. Furthermore, there was no actual essay writing in the pilot study, which would be a significant data set in the research. At the stage, it is important to mend the research plan in order to conduct an actual study in the approaching term. Data collection will be based on the same framework with some slight changes in the procedures and tool.

5 CONCLUSION

Although the pilot study did not achieve its goal, the constraints illustrated what to be done as amendments. The next plan is to restart the project and integrate it with an English writing course for a whole academic term (June-August 2000). By this means, it is more likely that a group of students will attend the forum as part of the course activities, write essays, present their work to the others through forums, and do peer evaluation.

Update Note: Since the paper was presented in June, another experiment has later been conducted from June to August 2000. The data are under analysis. For more information, please contact *wwararat@holyrood.ed.ac.uk*.

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