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Pedagogical lessons from students' participation in Web 2.0

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Responses of Vietnamese undergraduate students majoring in English to the integration of a Moodle site during an upper intermediate macro-skill course highlight differences in learner autonomy and expectations. Students' general attitudes towards, and participation in, this online Web 2.0 environment provide the basis for the research reported in this paper. Qualitative data from individual interviews ranged from neutral to very positive. The data also identified three patterns of online participation: task-oriented, content-oriented and community-oriented. These patterns reflect a transition in the local students' learning expectations and behaviours towards controlling their learning processes and socialising activities in their formal learning. The paper concludes with a number of pedagogical suggestions for the process of technology integration in education in the local context. These are aimed at better engagement of students in the process of personalising online learning environments to suit their needs.

Keywords: *learning engagement; online participation; TESOL; Web 2.0*

Introduction

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) is now commonplace (Hubbard, 2005; Jung, 2005; Kanniah & Krish, 2010; Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Weaknesses in related research are acknowledged (Liontas, 2002). Nevertheless, the empirical evidence shows that appropriate usages of ICTs in EFL education are important for both the language learning process (Tschirner, 2001) and outcomes. For example, networked communication can increase students' learning engagement (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010; Sengupta, 2001; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996);

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improve their oral proficiency (Payne & Whitney, 2002), and offer them more opportunities to express their opinions (Kern, 1995) with richer linguistic production (Beauvois, 1992). Online communication tools such as discussion boards, blogs, wikis, instant messenger and social networking help to create a collaborative learning zone (Stickler & Hampel, 2010) for active participation and negotiation (Oliver, 2001; Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986). The online communication tools can also give students better simulated contexts for vocabulary development (Purushotma, 2005), enhance their confidence, and help them use the target language more successfully (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003).

Despite the evidence in support of online learning strategies in the context of higher education in Vietnam, the employment of ICTs for academic purposes is in its early stages. This is reflected through a lag between educational policies and practices. In 2008, the government officially started to invest in ICT infrastructure and support the use of ICTs in teaching and learning as dictated in the official letter No. 9772/BGDĐT-CNTT, Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg and the Directive No. 55/2008/CT-BGDDT. That means a commitment to hardware infrastructure, software applications and broadband Internet connection has been established and employed in teaching and learning activities across the education system. All are positive signs of advancement. However, observations made in the context of a public university in the south of Vietnam in 2009 indicated that there were few ICT resources available for EFL teaching and learning activities (Dang, 2010). Given that this university does not offer any programs in computer sciences or related areas, there was also no evidence that ICTs were integrated into the curriculum at any level.

In contrast, access to computers and the Internet at home and public places has been increasing, particularly since 2000. According to Miniwatts Marketing Group (2010), 27.1% of the Vietnamese population had used the Internet in 2010, an increase of 12034.5% during the period of 2000-2010, which made Vietnam the sixth highest-growth country in Asia for Internet use. These numbers explain the popularity of personal computers, laptops and other portable devices by most families in big cities (Dang & Robertson, 2010). The rise in Internet access has been boosted by the affordability of broadband. Most of the coffee shops in the city centre where the investigated university is located offer free Wi-Fi Internet access to the public. As a result, students' use of ICTs for study purposes appears to occur in places other than the university.

This paradoxical situation was a factor that contributed to interest in conducting the study described in this paper, as the motivation of local students' behaviours in online learning environments when introduced to the curriculum would help inform pedagogical practices.

In brief, the availability of ICT infrastructure access and the education policies on supporting ICT integration have created a dilemma for contemporary pedagogical practices. Teachers are informed that the integration of ICTs in the curriculum is encouraged. However, the universities, which are funded by the government, do not provide adequate facilities to students. Therefore, integrating ICTs into a course in any way requires students to manage their own access. Taking these situational factors into consideration, this study aimed to provide some insights into Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students' learning experience during a macro-skill course. The research particularly focused on their attitudes towards ICTs and behaviours in an online learning environment built around a Moodle site. The premise was that understanding these experiences potentially contributes to the course design and evaluation (Leach & Moon, 2008).

Literature review

Prior research on the effects of ICTs on EFL students has suggested that students' attitudes towards ICTs and engagement behaviours in online learning environments are two important variables in mediating learning quality. Positive attitudes can lead to longer learning engagement and result in better outcomes (Pan, Gunter, Sivo, & Cornall, 2005). In addition, students from different cultural backgrounds tend to behave differently in the virtual environment (Chou & Chen, 2010). A brief review of relevant prior research literature follows along with the theoretical framework used to structure the study for the investigation.

Students' attitudes towards online learning environment

Research on foreign language education tends to suggest that students hold a positive attitude toward online learning environments (Ayres, 2002; Son, 2007; Stepp-Greany, 2002; Yudko, Hirokawa, & Chi, 2008). However, this positive attitude pattern is not maintained in other learning contexts when it is paired with different types of activities and modes of delivery. A majority of students in a study in Western Australia, for example, said that they

preferred not to work with online collaborative tasks (Dixon, Dixon, & Siragusa, 2007). Students reported that they did not appreciate the interactions that they experienced through peer exchange and group work activities offered online. To add to this confusion, other research also shows that students' preference for traditional, online asynchronous and synchronous mode is complex (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). Students expect to have more courses delivered online due to time constraints and learning opportunities. However, they value the traditional delivery mode more highly. Consequently, they do not appreciate the synchronous mode as it does not provide time flexibility. Perhaps students' preference for learning activities are more associated with learning styles and context. What we do know is that these studies suggest further investigations into students' online learning attitudes and behaviours when ICT is integrated in each socio-cultural context.

Students' participation behaviours in online learning environment

Research on the employment of ICTs in different socio-cultural contexts indicates that the process of ICT integration needs to be matched with the local students' learning styles and behaviours (Boulton, Chateau, Pereiro, & Azzam-Hannachi, 2008; Manochehr, 2006). Because the online environment is virtual, that is, its communicators do not share the same physical space, it is often perceived to be more relaxing and democratic in expressing ideas collaboratively (Dang & Robertson, 2010). Not all students, however, report that they experience the same level of democracy and collaboration in a learning environment. For example, over twenty years ago Tharp (1989) asserted that Navajo learners were not culturally programmed to work in groups as collaboratively as Hawaiian students. While acknowledging that some time has elapsed since that study, a possibility to take into account was that ICT may have greater influence on Western learners than Asian learners in promoting effective learning strategies and autonomy (Thang & Bidmeshki, 2010).

In the context of Vietnamese higher education, the issue of learner engagement is more about rhetoric. Under the influence of Confucianism, moral education has been integrated into the traditional curriculum (Doan, 2005), and students are expected to be obedient to the teachers (Le, 2008). In addition, rote learning approaches dominate; the class is more teacher-centred, and students are expected to be attentive listeners (Le, 2008; Pham & Ngo, 2008; Wong, 2004). Vietnamese education philosophy believes

that students only learn when their classroom activities are strictly controlled. In other words, students are culturally familiar with being offered little freedom in the classroom and this affects their learning behaviours. However, when they are exposed to other learning environments, such as those that pertain to Australia, they enjoy the democratic atmosphere in the class and are willing to change their passive learning habits (Wong, 2004). These characteristics of Vietnamese learners in face-to-face classroom environments have contributed to the motivation for the current study as almost no research on students' engagement behaviours in online learning space has been documented in the local context of Vietnam.

Theoretical framework

In constructing a theoretical framework for the current investigation, the seven good pedagogical principles for undergraduate education suggested by Chickering and Gamson (1987) were used in the study design. Empirical research has shown that these seven principles are useful guidelines for judging the quality of online learning environments (Bailey & Card, 2009; Brew, 2008; Morris & Finnegan, 2008-2009; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Young, Cantrell, & Shaw, 2001). These principles are:

1. Interactions between students and teachers in and out of classes need facilitating.
2. Team learning brings better outcomes than solo learning.
3. Structured exercises, challenging discussions, team projects and peer critiques can enhance learning engagement.
4. Proper and timely feedback is important for learning development.
5. Time management is a critical skill for both students and professionals.
6. Higher expectations need to be negotiated.
7. Diversifying course delivery is necessary; and different talents are expected.

(Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The nature of the medium would appear to indicate that technically, using the achievements of Internet technology and Web 2.0 which is employed in the current study, these seven principles can be satisfied in the online environment. Classroom time and space are no longer restricted in the virtual world when

Internet access can be comfortably achieved via computers and various handheld devices. Web 2.0 also supports the process of building knowledge from large groups of people (Surowiecki, 2004). The interactive and collaborative dimensions of both synchronous and asynchronous tasks can be quickly enabled, thanks to the availability of various platform infrastructures.

Pedagogically, these principles are aligned with those embedded in student-centred approaches to teaching, communicative language teaching and the knowledge construction theory of constructivism; all of which play a role in the area of second and foreign language education. They underpin reflective and collaborative interactions among teachers and students both inside and outside the classroom to improve communicative competence. The virtual space gives students an opportunity to stand in the centre of their learning processes and manage their communicative activities in real situations. Such an opportunity is sympathetic, too, to the communicative language teaching approach (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). In addition, structured tasks and appropriate feedback have been empirically researched and identified to be important for language learning and acquisition (e.g. Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Skehan, 2003).

Contextually, the principles of Chickering and Gamson (1987) are also aligned with the contemporary situation of teaching and learning a foreign language in Vietnam. Unlike traditional class spaces, where teachers are often prevented from giving students opportunities to actively participate in their learning activities due to the large class sizes (Pham, 1999), the virtual learning environment is not restricted. That means students have time and space for collaborative activities, feedback and free discussion. This is particularly important because, as indicated earlier, it has been argued that Vietnamese students value those opportunities in the learning processes (Wong, 2004). It is also necessary to note that these issues have been acknowledged in the local context for a long time, but they have not been effectively resolved.

Therefore, it is appropriate to apply these principles effectively in each local learning context when investigating students' behaviours. Morris and Finnegan (2008-2009) argue that teachers need to be actively involved in the program at the beginning to trigger students' engagement and identify suitable individual assistance. Students should also be encouraged to bring their prior online experience to their academic life by working collaboratively

with others to organise, share, modify and publish the content on which they are working (Lomicka & Lord, 2009a). As working cooperatively is always associated with negotiations for knowledge construction, the factors contributing to students' online negotiation processes become crucial for its achievement.

Research design and methodology

The study reported in this paper aimed to understand how Vietnamese EFL students respond to an online learning space which is physically and pedagogically different from their traditional learning environment. It particularly addressed both students' general attitudes towards the learning management system (LMS) after they experienced using it, as well as their participation pattern in this virtual interactive space. Although not reported in this paper, the teachers' general perceptions of ICT and their employment of the LMS during the course as well as other learning mediating aspects were also examined. Taking into account Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for best practice, the significance of students' perceptions of ICT integration and the socio-cultural values of the Vietnamese situation, this study used a Moodle LMS to create a collaborative learning environment for students. It served as a virtual extension of the physical classroom to give students more opportunities to produce better quality communication for learning purposes (Beauvois, 1992). It was also used as a connection, linking the in-class and out-of-class learning activities together.

Participants

Participating in the course were 247 EFL undergraduate students from a public university in Vietnam. They comprised five groups, taught by three teachers; the first two teachers working with two groups each and the other teacher working with one group. Most of the students were 18 to 19 years old and in the second semester of their candidature. The teachers were in their mid-twenties and all female. The course was upper-intermediate listening/speaking skills, and the class met once per week over a period of 16 weeks. Each meeting lasted for four hours. Neither the teachers nor the students had worked with any LMS as part of their school activity prior to this study.

As the course started, the first two teachers used the LMS participation as a compulsory component of the course. This participation contributed 15 per cent to the overall course

assessment. The third teacher made the LMS component totally optional and participation in her virtual class was not assessed in any way. At the end of the 16-week course, all students were invited to take part in an individual semi-structured interview. Eighteen of them responded to the email invitation, but none of them was from the fifth group. Ultimately, only eleven interviews (two from the first group and three from each of the other three groups) were documented and included in the analysis.

Research design

The LMS design generally aligned with the seven principles of best practice suggested by Chickering and Gamson (1987). Structured activities, opportunities for feedback and space for reflection, negotiation and collaboration were provided. It used various forms of the online discussion tool as the primary mode for students' interactions because it has been argued that this tool supports a constructivist approach to learning (Malikowski, Thompson, & Theis, 2006). Other tools such as synchronous chat and collaborative wiki writing were also introduced. In addition, the teachers were made aware of different methods to foster students' engagement in the learning process such as encouraging students to critically consider others' perspectives and use their own experiences to facilitate interpretation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

The LMS was kept fairly clean with clear signposts to ease navigation. Players for the Voice of America (VOA) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio channels were integrated and placed on the home page. A randomly shown clip box from YouTube was also added to the home page. These add-ons were to provide updated resources for the listening practice. In addition, the default blog module of Moodle was replaced by the Open University blog for Moodle, giving students more flexible options such as comment adding and visibility setting for each entry. A function for posting voice messages, using NanoGong technology, was also included in the site. This module allowed students to record their talk in an audio file, replay it and embed it in their posting with a few clicks. This was made to support the speaking practice.

The site was password-protected and structured into three main sections: a personal section, a course section and a public section. The first allowed each student to update a number of personal details such as nickname, favourites, instant messenger username and blog URL. The second section could be accessed

only by members of each respective class. It featured a number of activities facilitated by the class teachers, and students' learning performance in this place contributed to their course assessment. The public section included a notice board, a technical support forum, a general discussion forum, a chat room and a global blog. In addition, every site member could always track the login record of others with a simple click. It was expected that enabling this feature for students would culturally encourage students' participation.

Methods

As this exploratory study attempted to document the responses of students after they worked with the LMS, the data collection process was designed to be able to accommodate the widest possible range of reactions from the participants. Semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were the tool selected to give students opportunities to express their opinions and report their experience according to a set of guided questions. This method may also access attitudes and preferences (Tuckman, 1999). Interview questions were kept fairly open to give students enough space for expression while taking into consideration the local socio-cultural characteristics such as relationship maintenance, a positive atmosphere, and appropriate motivating stimuli during the interviews. Virtual observation during the course added to the information collected. This supporting data source was then used to provide general background information and inform the interview management process, thus increasing the reliability of the data collected.

Students were given a course-long period to actually experience the LMS before interviews were conducted. The questions for students to reflect on in the semi-structured interview focused on their general attitudes towards and engagement process in the LMS. For example, guide questions included: "What do you think about the LMS? What do you often do with the LMS and why?" and "What are the challenges/advantages that you have with the LMS?" These questions were principally informed by the themes in the two surveys of Lee and Tsai (2005) and Yang (2001), which were conducted in Taiwan and America respectively, with the open-ended survey questions being adapted for the semi-structured interviews in the current study.

Students were also encouraged to talk about any particular events that were of interest to them, and provide examples to

illustrate their retrospective descriptions. In addition, they were advised that they could use any English words or phrases to express their meanings during the interviews, although the language used in the interviews was their mother tongue. Interview data were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. General themes emerged from the data along with possible patterns or trends in students' general attitudes towards the LMS environment and their behaviours during their LMS engagement process. Any details that did not conform to any of the identified patterns were also taken into account. Local issues related to the LMS access, learning content and assessments were integrated into the discussion. Finally, relationships between students' attitudes and engagement patterns were analysed.

Results

Students' general attitudes towards the LMS

Students' responses in the study presented mixed attitudes towards the LMS, ranging from neutral to positive and very positive. Three of the eleven interviewees indicated that they initially participated in the LMS because it was part of the course requirements. However, after taking part in the online activities, they became interested in the diversity of friendly topics and relevant content available online. As a result, their attitudes towards that learning environment became more positive. Five people said that they were interested in participating in these online interactions right from the beginning, and their attitudes were even more enhanced as the course went on, as a result of the useful discussions and reflections they experienced with the LMS. However, there were two comments suggesting a casual use of the LMS. For example, Student 11 indicated that because he did not know much about how to use the Internet, he only logged into the LMS a few times during the course.

There were also two opposing perspectives regarding the kinds of comments that teachers should make on students' postings. Student 8 did not expect to have many specific comments from the teachers because "that would make students have a feeling of being checked for mistakes all the time". In contrast, Students 2 and 10 said they would like to have as many as possible specific comments from their teachers; for example about spelling, grammar, word use, content or personal thoughts. They believed that the teachers were more experienced than them and could clearly point out the mistakes for them to learn from. Although they may have felt a little embarrassed once their mistakes could be seen by all of their classmates, they thought it would be good

for their progress. Moreover, the LMS was the only opportunity to obtain teachers' specific corrections because there was no time for that during in-class hours. These comments were similar to those which were reflected in the teachers' attitudes towards the online space.

Students' participation in LMS

Students' participation in the LMS reflected the outcomes of teachers' attempts to nurture the virtual class community. Because Teacher 3 only introduced the LMS to her students but did not try to integrate it into the course nor include it in the course assessment as the other two had done, there were only a few login attempts and no posting was found in her virtual group. One of her students even emailed the webmaster, requesting to move her LMS account to another group because she would like to have opportunities to engage in the online learning space. In the other four groups, more communications were found towards the end of the course; once students had become more familiar with one another and could identify their own favourite content and peers with whom to interact.

The synchronous chat room in the public section was not used much by students. The chat log showed only a few chat lines because students did not log into the chat session at the same time to be able to communicate with each other although many may have been in the LMS at the same time. Further investigations of students' use of technology indicated that their chat community was through other channels such as Facebook, instant messenger, or mobile phone. However, the global blog in the public section was favoured by a lot of students. This was an unexpected outcome, given that this section was only for general communication, and not part of the course requirements. There were a lot of new entries and comments every day, and many students even found this public section more interesting than their course section. It appeared to meet their need to communicate or perhaps to socialise with their peers.

As expected, reading, reflecting and posting were the activities that students reported having done most in the LMS. Most of them said that they were very careful when placing a posting in the LMS. For a few others, simply meeting the course requirements was their only purpose. There were those who liked reading the messages and resources only. There were also those who preferred reading to sharing materials and those who were

interested in doing both. Those who had postings reported that they often engaged in a cyclic process of placing a posting, following it up, reading the comments if there were any, responding to comments, and following up again. Going through this process also triggered a lot of other activities, such as reading the comment-makers' profiles and postings in the LMS (Student 5), searching Google for further details of the posting topics (Students 1 and 8), and going to the original sources of the postings for other materials (Student 2).

Through the study sampling, the three patterns of students' LMS engagement that could be identified were task-oriented, content-oriented and community-oriented participation. Task-oriented participants were those who logged into the LMS only to meet the course requirements of the online component (also suggested in Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). After placing a posting, they probably stayed in the LMS to meet the onsite time requirement, but they did not actively participate in the LMS activities. In other words, they did not cooperate with their peers as documented in previous studies (e.g. Lomicka & Lord, 2009b). Very often, their postings were not well-prepared, their interaction with the LMS was one-way directional, and their tie with the online space was very loose (as suggested by Kent & Facerw, 2004). For example, one female student said: "Because my teacher only required the number of postings… I just posted anything. I did not have to proofread it carefully because even if I did, no one would read my postings" (Student 1).

The second type of participation was content/information-oriented. These students tended to target the postings related to their interests. They preferred to work with high quality content and often ignored short messages for relationship building or maintenance. They also became frustrated easily and left the LMS if they could not see anything appealing to them. They often paid attention to the thread titles and the length of the messages before considering the details (Students 2 and 8). They did not care much about the authors of the postings (Student 3). Their postings were often initiated by what they read on the LMS. In particular, they prepared their postings carefully before hitting the post button and followed them up (Student 4). Sometimes, they reported that they first typed their message but did not post it because they did not believe it to be sufficiently interesting.

The third pattern of engagement involved community-oriented participants, who tended to come to the LMS to interact

with the peers they knew. They often targeted messages written by familiar people (Student 4) or those attracting many people (Student 10). Also, they often expressed their personal feelings and used dialoguing connectors such as adding "hello" or "thank you" in responding to the authors. They appeared not to pay much attention to a discussion topic if they could not see any of their close friends participating in it. In other words, their online participation appeared to be significantly mediated by their relationship with their online peers and the number of online crowds. Student 11 said:

> I do not go online very often… However, if there is a close friend of mine posting something in the LMS, I'll have to come to see what he/she writes about… For the postings of the others, I may look at them later.

Student 5 added:

> I look at the number of people participating in each discussion thread [to decide if I need to read it]… If the thread has already attracted two or three comments, I will come to see. If the thread has not received any comment, I will not come to it... Therefore, never am I the first person responding to a posting.

Discussion

Students' attitudes towards and participation in the LMS

As indicated in prior studies (Yang, 2001), students' computer proficiency and access were limited. However, these continued to be among students' concerns in the interview data regardless of the study procedure on technical support. Students 11 and 5, both living away from home, reported that they had technical difficulties with, and limited access to, a computer. However, they reacted differently to the LMS activities. Student 5 only encountered technical problems at the beginning of the course. She then quickly learned how to use the LMS and participated in the virtual class regularly even though she had to go to a computer service provider to access the technology. In contrast, Student 11 indicated that his computer skills were not improved and he had the same problems for the duration of the course although he went home almost every weekend and had access to a home computer. These comments suggested that the LMS activities were not strong enough to motivate him to learn more about computers.

Students' extensive use of the global blog and very low use of the chat room appeared to reflect their desire for communicating

with a bigger audience and building community ties. Although these two sections were not included in the course assessment, the students' participation in these two spaces did not indicate an assessment-driven approach. Blog entries about topics other than those prescribed in the course seemed to trigger a lot of voluntary communicative exchanges, raising the issue of community building and providing learning opportunities. The free growth of this spontaneous community was probably fostered by friendly topics and the supervision-free atmosphere. Similarly, as the content in the synchronous chat room could only be conveyed to those concurrently in the room, and it was not archived, a very small audience was able to access that content. Therefore, this tool was not widely used by students. Topics of interest appeared from this study to be among the most important facilitators for online environment engagement.

The data on students' attitudes towards the LMS and their participation patterns indicate a positive relationship. If students recognised the benefits of the LMS to their learning, they would be more active in that environment, as argued by Belz (2003). In addition, the more they interacted with their peers in the LMS, the greater their sense of belonging appeared to be (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). Of course the engagement quality was also essential in mediating these relationships. Importantly, these responses reflected the diversity of Vietnamese students' online participation styles; these were rather different from those that have stereotypically been accorded to them; for example a preference for working alone, or passive learning styles (Dixon et al., 2007; Tharp, 1989).

In addition, it was suggested that the quality of students' online interactions was characterised by the participating roles that they adopted. It seemed that task-oriented participants participated in the LMS at a peripheral level, given that the task provided in this study only emphasised the number rather than the quality of the postings. Meanwhile, content- and community-oriented participants seemed to engage extensively in and even tried to control the virtual environment. While Farmer (2006) suggests that the LMS could force participants to work on "shared communication spaces, rather than on the individuals" (p. 95), this study suggested that it depended on the participants' learning preferences. Content-oriented participants were interested in the shared spaces, while community-oriented participants focused more on interacting with fewer individuals with whom they had good relationships.

Students' adopted participation roles could also be linked to patterns of attitude towards and engagement in the LMS. For instance, those students whose adopted goals were content-oriented and community-oriented tended to move from peripheral to integral levels of participation because more interesting content was produced and closer community ties were developed as the course went on. Once their participation level increased, they found themselves more associated with the environment and developed more positive attitudes towards that space. This observation raises pedagogic considerations about the activity design rather than learning styles, as has been proposed in previous studies (Dixon et al., 2007; Stepp-Greany, 2002) in order to effectively engage task-oriented participants in the virtual learning space.

The relationship among the three patterns of participation was complicated. The interview data showed that students often reported having characteristics consistent with more than one pattern of participation. For example, Student 11 indicated that he was a task-oriented and a community-oriented participant, whilst Student 4 reported being content-oriented and community-oriented. The relationship among these adopted/shifted roles also depended considerably on the quality of each object orientation. For example, a good posting should be able to draw attention from different people, and enable comments to be added. Similarly, when a student came across a thread with many comments, he/she expected that the posting would be interesting (e.g. Student 10). However, these were not always necessarily accurate as a lot of students responded to a thread simply because of their relationship with the author. These preliminary findings suggested that there is room for further investigation into students' roles in online learning environments.

The fact that students expected different degrees of teachers' comment and participation indicated individual differences and led to concerns about mediating variables. Examining the interview data, it seemed that those who were more task-oriented (such as Student 1) did not expect a lot of comments from the teachers. Meanwhile, those who were more content-oriented and community-oriented (such as Students 2 and 10) stated that they would have preferred to receive more teachers' comments. These preferences were understandable because task-oriented participants often did not prepare their work carefully, while the other two types were interested in the quality of their postings and opportunities for community interaction. However, if the requirement of the online task had been more about the quality than the quantity of the

postings, as in this study, task-oriented participants might possibly have expected more comments from teachers to improve their score. These remaining questions provide suggestions for further research in task design and students' goals.

Pedagogical implications

While the study reported in this paper was exploratory and the conclusions to be drawn from it must be interpreted with caution, the three patterns of students' online participation presented in the study sample suggest different ways of promoting students' online learning engagement. As effective interaction for learning purposes cannot be automatically created, proper facilitation is required. First, an online task needs to be designed in such a way that its completion needs a certain level of student interaction. Second, general guidelines for a posting to be included in the course assessment need to be provided and possibly negotiated with students at the beginning of the course. Third, the relationship among online community members has significant impact on the quality of the online learning process. Therefore, taking advantage of students' offline relationships to develop the online community and using their online relationships to promote new offline connections helps to enrich the learning community. Fourth, the level of teachers' comments in the online environment is critical as it can either trigger or inhibit further interactions. Thus, there is need for teachers to pay attention to students' individual differences when making online comments.

Conclusion

Driven by the paradoxical situation regarding ICTs in higher education in Vietnam, this preliminary documentation of local EFL students' perceptions and usages of a Web 2.0 LMS presents three patterns of students' virtual participation. These reflect their varied behaviours, learning preferences and expectations in a learning space. In the results reported, there were those who only wanted to complete their tasks as traditionally expected. There were also those who were attempting to include informal life stories into their learning environment although this space is traditionally expected to be formal in the local society. Some even went beyond the course requirements and exercised their learner autonomy capacity through establishing interactive linkages with either the information from various resources or other peers. As a result, the boundaries between online and offline life were very big for some, but rather small for others.

The students' reported experience also confirms the importance of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles in EFL education. Structured opportunities for interactive communication, collaborative activities, negotiation and feedback continue to be acknowledged as contributing to better learning and different talents. The connection between school and home activities created by the LMS can enrich both learning and social space of students (Kent & Facerw, 2004). However, the connection needs to be nurtured by appropriate assessment design, attention to attitudes, expectations and individual learning preferences in a certain socio-cultural context. These potentially contribute to the conceptualisation of an effective online community for academic purposes and challenge the complex roles of teachers as facilitators in technology enhanced environments.

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