

## Online Discussion Behavior Within Collaborative Learning Via E-Forum

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the students' online discussion behaviors on e-forum and discusses the behaviors within the concept of collaborative learning. Using qualitative research design, seventeen undergraduate TESOL students' postings in e-forum were analyzed as they were going through two TESOL courses. These two courses were conveniently chosen because the same instructors taught these courses and who also implemented e-forum in both courses. Two research instruments were utilized, namely content analysis and questionnaire to retrieve data from the participants. Analysis of findings suggests that there was active display of discussion behaviours and that e-forum was indeed an effective tool that motivated the students' collaborative learning at the university level. Finally, based on the findings of the study, some pedagogical implications have been recommended.

*Keywords:* Online discussion behavior; collaborative learning; e-forum; content analysis

### Abstrak

Artikel ini merupakan penyelidikan tingkah laku perbincangan atas talian pelajar di e-forum dan tingkah laku ini dibincangkan dalam lingkungan konsep pembelajaran kolaborasi (collaborative learning). Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, posting (postings) dari tujuh belas bakal siswazah TESOL di dalam e-forum dianalisis ketika mereka menjalani dua kursus TESOL. Kedua-dua kursus ini merupakan pilihan yang tepat kerana pengajar yang sama mengajar dan melaksanakan e-forum dalam kursus-kursus tersebut. Dua instrument kajian digunakan iaitu analisis kandungan dan soal selidik untuk mendapatkan data daripada peserta. Analisis daripada dapatan mencadangkan terdapatnya tingkah laku perbincangan aktif dan e-forum sememangnya alat efektif yang dapat memotivasikan pembelajaran kolaborasi pelajar di peringkat universiti. Akhirnya, berdasarkan dapatan kajian, beberapa implikasi pedagogi disarankan.

*Kata kunci:* Tingkah laku perbincangan atas talian; pembelajaran kolaborasi; e-forum; analisis kandungan

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### Collaborative Learning and Online Forum

The definition of collaborative learning may vary, but all of them share some common assumptions. For instance, Lee (2003) defined collaborative learning as a learning environment that requires learner-centred rather than teacher-centred instruction while the knowledge is viewed as a form of social construct facilitated by peer interaction, evaluation, and cooperation. Generally, a notable definition that has included all main stream definitions is the one presented by Smith and Macgregor (1992:1) who stated that "collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches that involve joint intellectual efforts by students, or students and teachers together". Many studies reported that learning collaboratively helps students to construct their knowledge effectively and improve their critical thinking and

problem solving skills (Graham and Scarborough, 1999). Consequently, in the early nineties, interests in collaborative learning rose sharply and since then various types of activities continue to be designed based on the collaborative learning theory. Undoubtedly, collaborative learning has received widespread acceptance by many educators.

Online discussion forum, or e-forum, is one of the Internet Mediated Communication (IMC) modes that has been used in education. E-forum is an online discussion platform, a medium that enables users, or students in this case, to share their ideas and interact with others in a non-threatening learning environment. Besides, e-forum is also a type of asynchronous CMC, which enables participants to communicate with others at different times. In many Malaysian universities such as Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), such online discussion is feasible as the university's management has provided readily available internet access to all lecturers and students. In fact, some lecturers have

chosen e-forum as part of their students' coursework assessment where the students are required to participate and make contributions to the e-forum in order to score. This kind of ICT offers alternatives to reorganize and refine collaborative education. As Lee (2003:13) indicated, "information technology offers options for reorganizing and refining collaboration in education". Thus, e-forum provides a conducive environment for collaborative learning, apart from a platform for them to socialise with others as Davis (2012) remarked, it is as useful a social media platform as any other like Facebook and Twitter. With its academic and social media features, online forum can be used not just for discussing academic issues but also for improving participants' social interaction with others.

Hence, many researchers have conducted their studies on the effects of implementing e-forum on students' collaborative learning. Tan (2006), for instance, conducted his study on 187 students who took two different courses in the same university. The aim of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of implementing online discussion in collaborative learning class as well as to examine the problems students face while using the e-forum to learn. In order to fulfil the objectives of the study, Tan did a survey on students' perception towards using online discussion strategy for learning. The results indicated that e-forums are beneficial in a number of ways, among others it promotes sharing of information/ideas, improves knowledge content of all users including the users' English language proficiency. Furthermore, he also mentioned a few problems that students commonly face while using the e-forum such as insufficient time to read others' responses and the difficulty to access the Internet. Tan also provided some suggestions to improve the use of e-forum in collaborative learning classes.

Compared to the earlier research being discussed, Lee (2003) selected a group of students from four Hong Kong secondary schools as participants of his study. He designed a behaviour coding scheme to categorize students' behaviour in online or in class discussions. To compare the results, a content analysis on the postings and recorded observations were carried out in addition to interview which Lee carried out with the teachers and students to acquire their perceptions on using online discussion as an enhancement to collaborative learning. The results are similar to the former study where informants reported that they have learned and created knowledge collaboratively through online activities. Obviously, the students perceived online discussion as an effective tool to encourage interaction and collaboration. In contrast to the e-forum learning mode, the traditional classroom discussion does not provide extra resources for students to be more independent and self-directed.

E-forum brings many benefits in facilitating students' collaborative learning as it provides the platform for students to interact with the instructor and their classmates so that the interpersonal relationship can be improved, to share knowledge and update information, and make changes in their data directly as long as they have a valid identity. These advantages directly omit problems such as unclear text and paper lost (Choo and Halimah Badioze Zaman, 2002). Nonetheless, many e-forum users are not using the e-forum as effectively as they should neither for academic purpose nor for social intercourse. Some users are not active in using e-forums as they see these forums only as a means to fulfil the requirements set forth by the instructors to score in their respective subjects, rather than as a tool that should be voluntarily used to share ideas and learn from others. In short, students are not internally motivated and this is reflected in their passive and reluctant participation in the forums; some even made meaningless posts. As revealed by Mcnamara and Brown (2008), some e-forums often produce discussions that are incoherent and shallow, with

students indifferent to giving responses to what other students have posted.

Another reason for ineffective use of e-forum is caused by the preference of teachers and lecturers. Many people have neglected the feature of e-forum as it is not only a platform for discussing academic issues but also a place to improve the participants' interpersonal relationship with others. In other words, e-forum is an academic-cum-social platform. Besides, some instructors prefer to conduct their lessons and discussions in the classroom due to the insufficient computer skills mastered by these instructors. In addition, in certain situations, some classrooms have no access to the internet and the time constraint to read and evaluate students' responses or postings also contribute to the ineffectiveness of using e-forum. Therefore, when the instructors or lecturers were asked to make use of e-forum, they were not willing to participate and thus, jeopardize the effectiveness of this technology.

Hence, this study utilizes Lee's (2003) coding system as the scope for the current study. Lee specifically identified students' online behaviour by categorizing them into Explanation, Planning, Interaction, Collaboration and Social Intercourse.

**Table 1** Behaviorcoding system (Lee, 2003; p.60)

Behaviour Categories	Codes	Descriptions
<b>Explanation</b>	Ex	Explanation or giving definition of academic terms.
<b>Planning</b>	Pl	Initiating and organizing group works and activities. It involves setting objective and initiating new questions or new trends.
<b>Interaction</b>	In	Inquiry and answer by which continuous dialogue is established, in some cases recurring interaction may occur. The subsequent replies include clarification, sharing of knowledge, judgment, public support, and opposition.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Co	Members working in a group and supplement each other to achieve a common goal. This process involves consensus making.
<b>Social Intercourse</b>	So	Conversation that is not directly related to the topic or common goal but can promote social relationship and understanding.

## 2.0 THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to examine the students' online discussion behaviour through e-forum. As a CMC (computer-mediated communication) research, Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor and Mohamad Hassan Zakaria (2008) have warned of the difficulties and problems with such research in terms of "understand[ing] certain nuances of cultural and social phenomena" and the "authenticati[on] of participants interacting on the internet" (p.315). Thus, despite of the difficulties of CMC research mentioned above, this study utilized qualitative research design in order to capture the social phenomena of the e-forum interactions. The instruments used were questionnaire and content analysis. A set of questionnaire was developed based on Likert-scale type of questions. The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate students' opinions towards using e-forum for discussing academic issues. The data from the questionnaire were analysed descriptively. In terms of the postings, the content analysis method was utilised to examine students' responses to questionnaire and categorised the results into Behaviour Coding System (Lee, 2003) (see Table 1).

The participants of the study were 17 undergraduates enrolled in Sociolinguistics and Curriculum Studies courses. Their age ranges from 20-24 years old. The study mainly focused on the participants' responses to questionnaire, and thus their behaviour and posts in e-forum were collected, recorded and analysed.

### 3.0 FINDINGS: STUDENTS' ONLINE DISCUSSION BEHAVIORS

The descriptions of findings in this section are based on content analysis of the postings and the results from the questionnaire. Based on the content of each message, the students' discussion behaviours were categorised into five types which are Explanation, Planning, Interaction, Collaboration and Social Intercourse in which detailed analysis as well as explanation on each category will be described.

Table 2 shows the number of each type of behaviour observed in the e-forum.

**Table 2** Coding results of online discussion

Behavior Categories	Code	TotalNumber of postings
Explanation	Ex	44
Planning	Pl	13
Interaction	In	69
Collaboration	Co	82
Social Intercourse	So	4
<b>Total number of postings</b>		<b>116</b>

Table 2 clearly showed that a majority of students had displayed the Collaboration type of behaviour, this was followed by Interaction, Explanation, and Planning types of behaviour. Postings that had exhibited the Social Intercourse type of behaviour were the least. Obviously, the students preferred to give explanation on academic items or express their ideas on specific issues, not on initiating a new activity or discussion thread. It should be noted here that some postings had shown two or more types of behaviour concurrently. The detailed discussion and examples for all behaviours are as follows.

#### Collaboration

The results from Table 2 supported the findings of Lee (2003), which stated that online forum facilitates collaborative discussion. In this study, the collaborative behavior was shown in the consensus making form; the students had worked collaboratively to make one or several common agreement on some issues. Table 3 shows an example of consensus-making among the participants.

**Table 3** Consensus-making in a group discussion

<p>Re: The real multicultural curriculum by <a href="#">RA</a> - Wednesday, 21 December 2011, 02:24 PM</p> <p>Multicultural materials in curriculum should not only address the multicultural elements on surface but it should also function as a practise for students' to learn the real meaning of being a person who has multicultural value. Just by saying through words will not reach students. In fact they should experience it for themselves. How? By conducting short plays on neighbourhood, friendships and on helping one another regardless of which race they belong to. The information that multicultural materials bring should reach students or else it will not be a good material.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
<p>Re: The real multicultural curriculum</p>

<p>by <a href="#">RB</a> - Saturday, 24 December 2011, 10:10 PM</p> <p>Yes, agree that multicultural curriculum can goes beyond the portrayal of multicultural elements within the curriculum and teaching materials.I found that the element of multicultural is not enough in English textbook and syllabus.As a future teachers friends, we have to prove that multicultural can do more in education especially English. Juts begin with as simple lesson integrated with adequate elements of multicultural and you can see how the beauty it is.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
<p>Re: The real multicultural curriculum by <a href="#">HCS</a> - Thursday, 29 December 2011, 01:15 PM</p> <p>Multicultural elements within the curriculum and teaching materials should be re-structure. More and more real life examples and activities can be included in the curriculum to provide an opportunity for students to expose to. Another way which can be done is presentation and sharing cultural stories in the class. This will help the other races and ethics understand better about others' cultures. Multicultural is not success until students really practise it outside of the classroom. If the multicultural curriculum only works in the class, then this curriculum can be deduced as a fail/ineffective curriculum. No matter how good the multicultural elements are in our education, educators have to be receptive and open-minded in sharing or promoting multicultural in the classroom. I believe a teacher who is bias towards certain races definitely will spoil the good multicultural curriculum before s/he teaches anything.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>

**Table 4** Example of the first common communicative goal

<p>Re: ETeMS and English curriculum by <a href="#">RB</a> - Sunday, 27 November 2011, 05:46 PM</p> <p><u>I Agree that when ETeMS was implemented, English curriculum has to changed accordingly</u> to strenghten's the used of English among students as it has been used as a medium of instruction for Science and Maths.It has to be done to make students's familiar with English and encourage them to use it extensively. Actually I am okay with ETeMS but i think there was something wrong with its implementation. People merely raised issue about students who are weak in English and could not understand during the implementation of ETeMS but why there were no any suggestions to help out these students? If we help them to improve their English i think they will able to cope with it very well. We can help them with the new renovation of English syllabus</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
<p>Re: ETeMS and English curriculum by <a href="#">TWT</a> - Thursday, 8 December 2011, 12:12 PM</p> <p><u>In my point of view, the English language curriculum should have been changed</u> based on the curriculum of the subjects which are supposed to be taught in English. For instance, when a school uses English in teaching Science, English teachers should also make changes to include Scientific vocabulary and concepts in their teaching. This is to ensure that students might understand the vocabularies used in Science class after they have learned it. Or else, it will be a hard task for the Science teacher to teach students without knowing the meaning of the words, vice versa. Therefore, there is a need for the content-based and language based teachers to communicate and cooperate with each other to make the teaching and learning process much effective.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
<p>Re: ETeMS and English curriculum by <a href="#">RB</a> - Thursday, 8 December 2011, 11:09 PM</p> <p><u>Again,I think Etems and English curriculum are connected.</u> Changing English curriculum is to improve students' proficiency and mastery their English as we have to make clear that ETems is teaching science and maths in English, the focus is not teaching English to the students. Thus, English curriculum has to be a good path to equip students with the language so that they will not struggling in order to understand the concept and content in ETems. Agree with jefry that English and Etems have to be well planned and restructured so that they can complement in helping students to learn science and maths and at the same time acquire the language.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>

**Table 5** Example of the second communication goal

<p>Re: ETeMS and English curriculum by <a href="#">WSC</a> - Tuesday, 6 December 2011, 10:07 AM</p> <p><u>In my opinion, English curriculum and PPSMI are totally different.</u> Firstly, learning a language is different from learning subjects like Mathematics and Science! You cannot use the same way you learn Mathematics and Science to learn any languages, let alone English. If we were to change the English curriculum accordingly to the implementation of PPSMI, I do think it is not relevant, because as I mentioned, the learning methods of these subjects are very different. However, little changes may be done, for instance increasing the vocabulary bank (Add more scientific or mathematics terms in the syllabus to expose the students to the subjects). Overall, I do think the English curriculum should be changed accordingly to PPSMI.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
<p>Re: ETeMS and English curriculum by <a href="#">NA</a> - Tuesday, 6 December 2011, 03:39 PM</p> <p><u>i totally agree with you...i do think that learning English language itself is explicitly distinct from acquiring it through the study of science and mathematics.</u> as in ETeMS, the syntactic structure of the language is not stressed too much. it is more of the content of the subject matters (in this case science and mathematics). however, in learning English as a second language, learners have to be accurate in terms of the syntactic structure as well as other linguistics structure underlying the language. therefore, i really think that ETeMS and English Curriculum should stay like the original way...</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
<p>Re: ETeMS and English curriculum by <a href="#">NB</a> - Thursday, 8 December 2011, 10:09 PM</p> <p><u>I strongly agree with SC that PPSMI and English curriculum is totally different from one another.</u> If the ministry wants to improve students' proficiency, then they should have just changed English curriculum instead of asking the students to learn math and science in english. We all know that both of the subjects are content based. Those subjects are not easy to score. <i>Then why make it harder for them?</i> In my opinion, we should get back to PPSMI objectives. If they want to provide an early 'preparation' to these students in learning math and science in English (so that they would not struggle so hard in learning both subjects in college), then yes, I think that PPSMI somehow does have its own benefits. <b>But it will take time!</b> But then, they dont have to change English curriculum. It's either two, you only get to <b>choose one</b>. PPSMI or change English curriculum. You cant have both at a time. Well thats my 2 cents</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>

## Interaction

The interaction behaviour was also significant among the participants. Undoubtedly, the students had to interact with each other in order to work collaboratively to reach a goal. Because of this, two types of interaction behaviour emerged from this, they are explicit interaction and implicit interaction. The students had expressed their agreement either explicitly by stating: 'I agree with ××', 'As ×× has mentioned' or implicitly by giving detailed explanation to support their view. Example 1 presents the example of explicit interaction behaviour whereas Example 2 shows the implicit interaction behaviour.

### Example 1

<p>Re: PPSMI and language rights by <a href="#">NA</a> - Tuesday, 6 December 2011, 09:59 PM</p> <p><u>totally agree with NZ.</u> most of the students only memorize the terms used. they don't even understand what they are learning. by the end, the learning outcome set by the teacher won't be achieved. Plus i believe students especially in rural area also will be having a great problem in understanding english. and for those who are originally facing some</p>
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<p>difficulties in science and maths will be burdened up with another critical problem which is learning those subjects in english.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
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Example 1 was extracted from the e-forum that was discussing: 'Why should the medium of instruction for, especially, your learners be in the learners. L1?' This particular participant expressed his view by saying that students should not only memorize the learning terms. This view was seconded by another female participant, and she gave more detailed explanation on this.

### Example 2

<p>Re: PPSMI and language rights by <a href="#">MK</a> - Wednesday, 23 November 2011, 03:26 PM</p> <p>Mathematics and Science are concept subjects. Thus, they should be thought in a language that students understood the most. In this case, why bother using English as the medium of instruction when the students do not even understand. They were like "takfaham pun, hafal je" What was the purpose of learning then? So, in order to teach these subjects learners' L1 should have been used as the medium because at least they understood what have been taught and not only memorizing.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
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Example 2 was taken from the same forum as Example 1. The students managed to forge a consensus that the medium of instruction should be the learners' first language. This participant, MK, did not specify whether he agreed with other people, but his content clearly showed that he had interacted with others in a supportive manner.

In contrast with the supportive interaction, students who had different opinions did not state explicitly that they disagreed with others. Instead, they stated their views. Example 3 shows the example of such interaction.

### Example 3

<p>Re: ETeMS and language rights by <a href="#">WN</a> - Friday, 25 November 2011, 04:45 PM</p> <p>Since I was in the first batch of PPSMI implementation, which was in 2003, I wasn't really care about that at first. And frankly speaking, I can't even compare which one was better, whether mother tongue or English should be used as the medium of instruction for Science and Maths. Personally, PPSMI implementation helps me to improve my English. And I never thought of it beyond that. I've watched news, where several people's opinions were recorded. And some of them thought it was good and some thought vice versa. However, thinking of it in sociolinguistics perspectives, it was indeed all about language rights issue. People who are very particular of their mother tongue such as Malay, Mandarin and Tamil might think that their mother tongue cannot be attained and might fade in the future. Thus, English as the medium of instruction for Maths and Science learning is indeed a language rights issue.</p> <p><a href="#">Show parent</a>   <a href="#">Reply</a></p>
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Although almost everyone in this forum had discussed the bad effects of the implementation of PPSMI (ETeMs), this participant had courageously refuted their opinions. Based on the content of her message, it seems that she has benefited from PPSMI. However, she had not explicitly stated her disagreement with anyone.



## Explanation

Apart from the collaboration and interaction behaviours, the content analysis also showed that some students preferred to give detailed explanation on some academic items. For instance, in Example 4, the participant had put forth his interpretations of PPSMI from two different views: The politics of language and the language of politics.

### Example 4

Re: ETeMS, its language and politics  
by [AB](#) - Friday, 18 November 2011, 09:58 PM

As we have discussed in class earlier, ETeMS (PPSMI) can be viewed from politics of language and language of politics. ETeMS (PPSMI) from politics of language view. We view usage of Malay language (BM) versus English (BI) in teaching Science and Mathematics. In this case, the "politic war" is between Malay and English language. When it was first introduced, the government insisted that when students learn Mathematics and Science in English, they would benefit more. At that time, the argument was that English is considered as a superior language as English is regarded as the language of science and technology. However, the public protests that it would be hard for Year One students who are not familiar with English to learn Mathematics and Science in this foreign language. People keep on comparing Malay and English language, arguing that one is better than another. However, I do think that this is not so as we were taught that all language are equal, there is no language superior than another. ETeMS (PPSMI) from language of politics view. From this perspective, we can see how the party manipulate language for politic purposes. In ETeMS case, the government manipulate this issue to gain supports from the voters, and to convince and persuade Malaysian people that the government is doing all this for the people's sake. Previously, they proposed ETeMS to gain support from non-Malays and various other ethnic groups. Now, as the election is coming soon, the government wanted to abolish ETeMS as they want to gain favor from the majority public voters (who mainly consist of moderate - low income family whose children would benefit more if they learn Mathematics and Science in mother tongue.) All this politics are greatly affecting our future generations.

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## Planning

There were 13 messages in total that had shown the Planning behavior from the eight discussions being held. Based on the content analysis, none of the participants had initiated a new activity; instead, they started some new discussion threads within a forum by explaining in more detail or providing an internet link to other resources. However, no one had responded to the discussion thread with such hyperlink. Example 5 is an example on the students' Planning behaviour exhibited by giving more explanations.

### Example 5

Re: PPSMI and language rights  
by [NS](#) - Thursday, 17 November 2011, 08:36 PM

Well, as you can see, PPSMI has always been an issue ever since it was been developed. the major issues hits whereby the question was whether the national language (Malay) has no longer been preserved when English has taken a major part of the students' learning process. Rural area students suffered the most when this happens. another major problem derived from it is the capability of the government to seek for teachers who are capable enough to teach these two subjects (maths and science) in english. as we all know, teachers have been trained ages ago to teach in Malay. thus, language rights are questioned here.

[Show parent](#) | [Reply](#)

The example is taken from the forum: 'ETeMS (PPSMI) is a language issue. Discuss.' In this forum, the lecturer only posted the general topic without giving a more specific frame for discussion. However, participant NS had directed the discussion trend towards the status of Malay and the implementation of PPSMI. In other words, she had initiated two new discussion topics in the forum.

## Social Intercourse

The least obvious behavior was Social Intercourse. This behaviour entails actions that can promote closer relationships among the group members. This may have emerged due to the feature of the e-forum, which is to provide a conducive environment for the students to share their ideas and to learn collaboratively. Since they could freely express their opinions, some of them posted messages that had strayed away from the topic. Nevertheless, four postings had been identified as showing the Social Intercourse behaviour. This is expressed through the following example.

### Example 6

Re: ETeMS and English curriculum  
by [NS](#) - Friday, 9 December 2011, 10:25 AM

i get your point aya.

[Show parent](#) | [Reply](#)

The message in Example 6 does not contain any information related to the discussion topic; it is a gesture to show the student's agreement to another student's previous posting. This result is in line with Bryce's (2006:1) statement: "One way of improving the social intercourse is to give positive response to others". Besides that, the author also mentioned that another effective way to improve one's social intercourse with others is by participating in a conversation, and this has also been validated by the results of this study through the example given below.

### Example 7

Re: ETeMS, its language and politics  
by [MK](#) - Friday, 9 December 2011, 11:00 PM

Nowadays it is all about politic. Politic this, politic that, politic much isn't it? In the end of the day, this matter only benefited certain group of people and not merely focusing on the education of our younger generation. And now comes new thing, "bring some of native speakers of English to teach that subject in our Malaysian School". As if, Malaysian is running out of English teachers at all and it is like saying that Malaysian teachers are not good enough to educate students as in teaching English? What is going on here?

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The participant in Example 7 did not express his opinion on the issue being discussed. Instead, he posted a message with weak relation to the issue, most probably to release his anger of the current situation. This message clearly illustrated the participant's eagerness to participate in the conversation.

## The Concurrently Occurring Behaviors

Analysis of findings also found that some postings had revealed more than one type of behavior. The three most obvious concurrent occurring behaviors were *Interaction*, *Explanation*, and *Collaboration*. It is evident that sufficient interaction among the participants had ensured collaboration to take place. Besides that, the detailed explanation given by some students had helped others to make their own decisions to agree or disagree with a statement.

These brought to a common ground at the end of the discussion. The following example shows a posting with the three behaviors shown together (kindly pay attention to the underlined parts).

### Example 8

Re: The real multicultural curriculum  
by [AB](#) - Saturday, 24 December 2011, 09:33 PM  
Yes, I do agree with what WN and IZ have said. As the topic mentioned "The real multicultural curriculum goes beyond the mere portrayal of multicultural elements within the curriculum and teaching materials.", i believe that the curriculum can actually do more. instead of just portraying the multicultural element is class or use the elements for teaching materials, teachers as curriculum implementers can actually go beyond the classroom and create authentic activities that will involve and expose students to multiculturalism. For example, they can take part in creating or organizing a small scale cultural event that will involve all students with different ethnic and cultural background. this type of real and authentic activities would teach the students more about multiculturalism than using hundreds pages of the curriculum.  
[Show parent](#) | [Reply](#)

Firstly, the participant had displayed an explicit *interaction* behavior by stating that she agreed with the other two participants. Then, she explained her opinion and to support the commonly agreed statement of this forum: 'The real multicultural curriculum goes beyond the mere portrayal of multicultural elements within the curriculum and teaching materials'. Moreover, this study also found that students had worked not only collaboratively through better interaction with others and giving explanation on their opinions, they had also done so by promoting social intercourse. This is shown through Example 9 below (kindly pay attention to the underlined parts).

### Example 9

Re: Discussion for Team A, Team F, Team J.  
by [RA](#) - Thursday, 24 November 2011, 09:20 PM  
Hello everyone to me i would say yes. School is the place where learners first learn to acknowledge their failure. learners learned what hardship is, they learn to work on their own because no one is there to help them as compared to when they are at home( where parents protect them). The good news is some school addresses the learners failure and help them to do better the next time, sadly not all school practise these procedure. I think it is very important to guide learners when they fail or else they will have the perception that they are useless and they can't do something without failing. People learn from mistakes and once a failure it does not mean the person is a failure for a lifetime. This statement should be instilled in every soul.  
[Show parent](#) | [Reply](#)

This participant initiated her message by greeting everyone, and such action is in line with Bryce's (2006:3) statement: "Greeting with others is one way to improve the social intercourse". She then expressed her opinion regarding the specific issue and worked collaboratively with others to achieve the common communicative goal: 'School is the first institution that teaches young learners'.

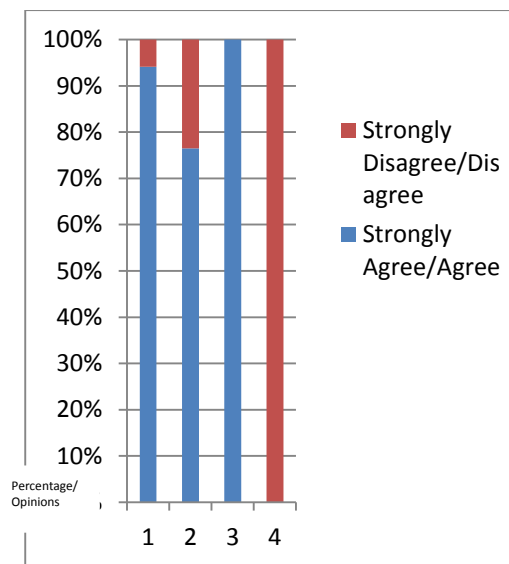
Apart from the previously mentioned phenomena, some students had also concurrently displayed the Planning, Interaction, and Collaboration behaviors. The following example clearly illustrates this point (kindly pay attention to the underlined parts).

### Example 10

Re: ETeMS, its language and politics  
by [NB](#) - Tuesday, 29 November 2011, 12:56 AM  
"I sacrificed this generation for the sake of next generation"—TunDr Mahathir (I am not sure if I quote this right)  
I read somewhere this above quote from newspaper when TunDr Mahathir was being asked about his opinions on ETeMS. ETeMS may have it pros and cons. Even though some may say that it would benefit those children in the future, but i believe that it was just some kind of "political play" by the government. Like some of my friends' opinions, they wanted to attract votes from the non-malays. They wanted to show that they actually care for them as malay is not their first language, so they changed the concept. This explained the language of politics; they use **language for political purposes.**  
If you want to enhance student's level of proficiency in english, then why even bother change the Math and Science system? You can just re-design English curriculum or maybe come out with new "formula". It is same like, you want to minimize the total no of accidents on road, and you decide to change all cars body parts when all you have to do is give "extra" driving lessons to those drivers.  
Nowadays everything will have to be connected to politics. Not only education but also sports and music.  
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The participant interacted and collaborated with others to prove that the goal of the implementation of ETeMS is to win the vote from non-Malays. Then, she initiated another topic to improve students' English language proficiency. The results of the content analysis showed that the students had worked collaboratively in the online forum to achieve some common communicative goals. Besides that, the Collaboration behavior sometimes took place with the Interaction, Planning, Explanation, or even Social Intercourse behaviors at the same time.

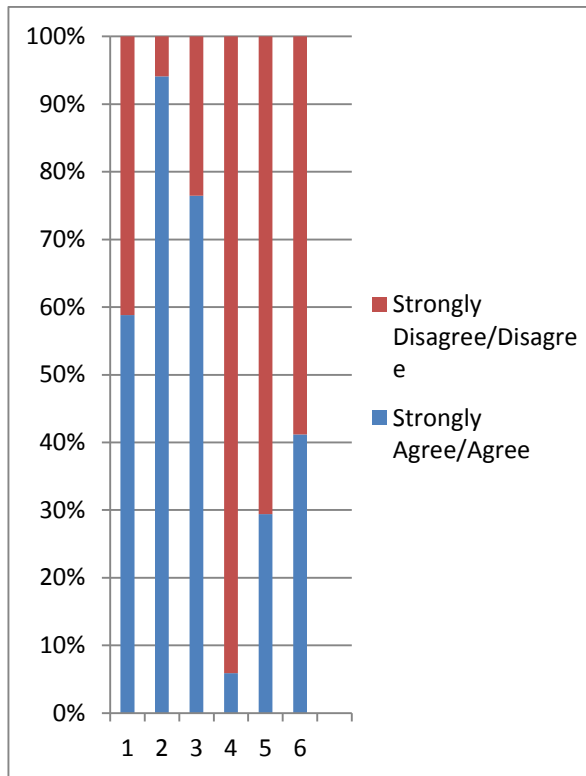
In the self-designed questionnaire, four statements in section A and six statements in section B were tailored to investigate students' opinion towards the use of online forum (Figure 1) and the behavior they preferred to display while discussing online (Figure 2).



1 – Online discussion helps me to get more information from others  
2 – I can get help from lecturer through online discussion  
3 – Online discussion provides me a platform to share my ideas with others  
4 – I do not think others' opinions are trustworthy and valuable

Figure 1 Students' opinion towards using e-forum in class

Obviously, most of the participants agreed that online forum is a good platform for them to share their own ideas and to learn from other participants as well as from their lecturer. In other words, the valuable opinions from other participants have helped them to widen their perspective on a certain topic. This result is in line with the findings from the content analysis of this study that collaboration behavior was most frequently displayed, and has proved Lee's (2003) statement in his study: 'Students gain knowledge interactively, actively, and collaboratively through exchanging ideas in online forums'.



- 1 - I always start a new discussion thread
- 2 - I always read others' posts before I write my post
- 3 - I always give comments on others' posts
- 4 - I never read others' posts
- 5 - I always help others to clear their doubts
- 6 - I build better relation with my classmates through online discussion

Figure 2 Students' discussion behavior in e-forum

In Figure 2, the first statement at the far left concerns the Planning behaviour, the second to fourth statements are related to the Interaction and Collaboration behaviour, the fifth statement touches on the Explanation behaviour, and the last statement is about the Social Intercourse behaviour. It is evident that most students preferred interacting and collaborating with others online. However, they were not interested in helping others to clear their doubts by giving more explanation; they would rather initiate a new discussion thread. The results from the questionnaire contradict the findings from the content analysis since it shows a high occurrence of the Explanation behaviour rather than the Planning behaviour. Nevertheless, both showed that not many students favored the Social Intercourse behaviour.

The findings from the content analysis are consistent with the results from the questionnaire and interview. The e-forum is indeed

an effective tool for students to learn interactively and collaboratively, although it does not necessarily promote social intercourse.

#### Example 11

Re: ETeMS, its language and politics  
by [AB](#) - Friday, 18 November 2011, 09:58 PM

As we have discussed in class earlier, ETeMS (PPSMI) can be viewed from politics of language and language of politics. ETeMS (PPSMI) from politics of language view. We view usage of Malay language (BM) versus English (BD) in teaching Science and Mathematics. In this case, the "politic war" is between Malay and English language. When it was first introduced, the government insisted that when students learn Mathematics and Science in English, they would benefit more. At that time, the argument was that English is considered as a superior language as English is regarded as the language of science and technology. However, the public protests that it would be hard for Year One students who are not familiar with English to learn Mathematics and Science in this foreign language. People keep on comparing Malay and English language, arguing that one is better than another. However, I do think that this is not so as we were taught that all languages are equal, there is no language superior than another.

ETeMS (PPSMI) from language of politics view. From this perspective, we can see how the party manipulate language for politic purposes. In ETeMS case, the government manipulate this issue to gain supports from the voters, and to convince and persuade Malaysian people that the government is doing all this for the people's sake. Previously, they proposed ETeMS to gain support from non-Malays and various other ethnic groups. Now, as the election is coming soon, the government wanted to abolish ETeMS as they want to gain favor from the majority public voters (who mainly consist of moderate - low income family whose children would benefit more if they learn Mathematics and Science in mother tongue.) All this politics are greatly affecting our future generations.

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In fact, most of the participants agreed with AB's view. Example 12 shows another participant was in line with AB's opinion (pay attention to the underlined sentences).

#### Example 12

Re: ETeMS, its language and politics  
by [TWT](#) - Thursday, 8 December 2011, 12:33 PM

Very good points from Jaclyn. I agreed that the policy makers should let students themselves to choose and decide which language they want to use as the medium of instruction when learning content-based subjects such as Science and Mathematics. They should not be forced to use the language set by the authority and changing from time to time, which is so said the politics of language. Students should not be the ones who suffered because of the changes made under the policy of language.

On the other hand, I think the language of policy is somehow the language used by the government and policy makers to play around with the situation. They tended to assert the advantages of implementing PPSMI in education, but in fact, they never think in the teachers, parents and students' shoes. Are they really wanted to make changes for students' advantages or they wanted to take advantages from it? There are many different answers.

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#### ■4.0 DISCUSSIONS

This section will hopefully discuss and interpret the results of the findings. Overall, the online discussion is indeed an effective tool for collaborative learning. All the students took part in the discussion, interacted and collaborated with others actively.

First of all, the study investigated the participation of the students in the online discussion forum. The results showed that although all the students participated in the discussion online regardless of a few poor quality messages, the results from questionnaire explained that this may be due to internet problems, technicality of the e-forum, and time allocation. This result is in accordance with Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor and Shalini SrikaBala's study (2010), students' participation in online forum is affected by some factors such as accessibility of internet and the speed of access. Hence, they participated out of responsibility since it was compulsory for them to participate for the marks awarded.

Secondly, the study analysed students' online discussion behaviour based on five criteria developed by Lee (2003): (1) Interaction; (2) Planning; (3) Collaboration; (4) Explanation; and (5) Social Intercourse. Based on the postings analysed, it was found that the students had worked collaboratively in the online forum to achieve some common communicative goals. Besides that, the **Collaboration** behaviour sometimes took place with the **Interaction, Planning, Explanation**, or even **Social Intercourse** behaviours at the same time. The results seemed to agree with Lee's study (2003) which indicated that online discussion forum is an effective tool to encourage interaction and collaboration. A possible explanation for this is that, the online discussion forum is an academic platform for students to express themselves, share the knowledge and interact with others actively and freely which allows the collaborative learning to take place in a subconscious way (Chan and Rapman, 1999; Wegerif, 1998). In addition, the results from the interview and questionnaire also proved that e-forum is an effective tool for students' to learn interactively and collaboratively.

Last but not least, some problems of discussing in online forum have been stated by the students. The responses showed that the biggest problem that they have encountered was the overwhelming messages followed by the technical problems of e-forum and internet. The results stated above are in part supportive of Tan's (2006) study which stated that many problems are caused by the internet. However, the findings have refuted Tan's (2006) finding that students do not have time to read others' postings. The students in this study admitted that the number of messages posted were overwhelming, but that did not hinder them to read those messages. This may be due to their interest in the topics or the compulsory requirements from their lecturer. For example, the compulsory participation may result in the poor quality of messages. A few of the reasons for this could be: i) the culture of Malaysia restricts the students to freely express themselves regarding some sensitive issues in public such as the Internet or online forum, ii) the curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education does not accommodate online forum, face-to-face teaching and discussion methods are still prioritized at the moment; and iii) the neglect of the academic-cum-social platform feature of the e-forum. This is in line with Rozner's (2000) study who highlights that the use of online forum as an academic as well as social platform has yet to gain widespread attention from the users, even now.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that e-forum is indeed an effective tool for collaborative learning among the students. As Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986: 9) have stated: 'Communication of meaning is always a collaborative activity between the participants, at the same time, it also sets up the condition for collaborative learning to take place.'

#### ■5.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the following inferences can be drawn from the study: the e-forum encourages students' to learn interactively and collaboratively. The results demonstrated that the e-forum can act as an academic-cum-social platform, and therefore, instructors should carefully design the discussion or activities in the online forum so that the students can achieve both purposes. For example, the instructor can assign some online collaboration activities to the participants or can provide opportunities for the students to initiate new topics within some specific areas so that students are not merely discussing academic-related issues but also sharing their personal feelings and experiences. By doing so, the collaboration and socialization behaviors may take place at the same time. As Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan, Wan Fara Wan Adlina and Mohamed Amin Embi (2011) have stated, teachers have benefited from exchanging and sharing ideas from others as well as improved their social interaction with other participants via online collaboration activities.

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