

## **Collective Scaffolding in Second Language Learning: A Window into an Online Business Writing Class**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the use of online teaching of negotiation and writing skills to second language learners in an undergraduate workplace English course. Using the case method as approach to get learners to work on authentic workplace issues through meetings and face to face sessions, the analysis of their embedded online discussions and comments for two writing tasks (online and face to face) revealed that while meaning negotiation, error corrections and technical actions did occur, social talk and content management happened to predominate online discussions. Further analysis revealed that the relationship among different types of online writings and subsequent writings and revision though complex where highly dependent on group makeup, proficiency level and learner motivation. Student reflections suggest that while being interested in online activities alone does not guarantee quality writing, the ability to see words in print enabled learners to understand the meeting process and this helped them use reported speech more efficiently. Writing instructors may need to proactively intervene from time to time to raise awareness on the required form, model, scaffold, and support revision activity to ensure learning takes place.*

**Keywords:** Second language; Online Business Writing; Workplace English course

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Second language research suggest that peer response has the potential to increase learners' chances for meaning negotiation and language practice (Lockhart & Ng,1995; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Liang, 2010), encourage collaborative reading and writing (Tsui & Ng, 2000), and promote writing revisions (Berg, 1999; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994, Min, 2006, 2008). Online peer response when used as an alternative to face to face (F2F) communication is

capable of blending spoken, written and electronic communication, promoting student motivation, participation and collaboration (Warschauer, 2002), raising awareness of audience needs (Ware, 2004) and enhancing critical analysis of linguistic features, negotiation skills (DiGiovani & Nagaswami, 2001). Then again, numerous studies have explored the usefulness of electronic technologies in the L2 writing class (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Rollinson, 2005, Nadarajan, 2011), few have looked at the nature of L2 interaction and the impact of peer response on online writing outcomes in academic writing courses. This study aims to explore L2 students ability to apply negotiation skills in 'online meetings' in the writing class.

### **Face to Face L2 Interaction versus Online Interaction**

As mentioned by Varonis and Gass (1985) "the types of linguistic activities that occur in NNS-NNS conversation differ from those in other types of discourse, particularly with respect to the negotiation of meaning when there has been an actual or potential breakdown" (p. 71). This can be attributed to the fact that during negotiation, L2 learners do notice linguistic features and modify messages (Pica, 1996). Long (1996) insist that speaking and writing partners in the L2 environment not only provide comprehensible input, but also facilitate learner output through meaning negotiation and error correction. Foster and Ohta (2005) found that in peer interaction, modified output in the form of self-correction and supportive talk tends to be more common compared to meaning negotiation. Liang (2010) views the relationships between revision related discourse and discourse related as not straightforward and calls for additional support systems to maximize learner centered, collaborative opportunities for L2 learning and writing (p.57). In a similar vein, Chen and Hung (2002) analysis of existing discussion forums outlined a range of collective knowledge representation mechanisms which supported group or learner communities but mechanisms were seen as not necessarily contributing to learners' internationalization of collective knowledge into personalized knowledge. The researchers further argued for the need to support personalized knowledge representations in order to cater for individual differences. Clearly, there is the need for more research studies to test the above arguments given L2 learning diversity. However, given the attractiveness of online discussion platforms within the context of adult education for workplace courses and issues surrounding knowledge capture, knowledge management and storage of knowledge that needs to be reused to serve the purpose of other users that is becoming important; it is logical to think of technology support in terms of collective use and for personalized representations. This in turns calls for the need to analyze how peers and mentors systematically support the diffusion of their own tacit knowledge to other mentees and in the process help the group arrive at new knowledge in workplace related classes.

Vygotskian social constructivist learning theory suggests that learning takes place between people through participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991;

Wenger, 1998) and is mediated by tools, such as computer technologies (Lin, 2008; Lin & Yang, 2011). Developments in technology enhanced learning has also opened up opportunities for educators to bring in new sets of learning scenarios and experiences to the language classroom, by which self-motivated learners get to collaborate, engage and challenge one another on common projects and through simulated activities, share learning material and study together (DeSanctis & Monge, 1998; Gimenez, 2006). Van Lier (1996, 2000) specified the importance of contingency in collaborative dialogues where through a shared social context for interaction, where “participants are jointly focused on the activity and its goals, and they draw each other’s attention into a common direction” (van Lier, 1996, p. 161). Engagement theory and collaborative learning theory also suggest the use of discussion forums as bringing students directly in contact with the content material of the course which allows students to build their knowledge instead of relying on simple memorization skills. However, given that recent forum platforms also offer additional tools such as emoticons, webchats that can be used for personalized knowledge that enables passive students to comment without necessarily participating in the main thread, makes it equally important to investigate the relative effectiveness of different levels of interaction going on simultaneously as found in some of the more commonly used forms of online learning exercises (e.g. individual discussion and group discussion forums).

A number of L2 studies have looked at the active learning features of online web interaction and their implications for engaging learning. Negretti (1999) cited in Liang (2010) found participants using explicit and economical strategies to manage procedures and task and maintain social cohesion (p. 46). Darhower (2002) noted that L2 speakers and instructors create a sense of intersubjective communication by means of teasing, joking and off topic discussions as well as ideas within their conversation. Analysis of students’ contributions on forums revealed substantial evidence for collaboration with a distinct difference between f2f and asynchronous networked environment. These differences include the lack of ‘challenge and explain’ cycles of interaction often thought to characterize good interchanges in f2f tutorials. Jonassen and Kwon’s (2001) comparison of the patterns of communication in f2f and computer mediated groups in problem solving situations discovered students perceiving their patterns of online interactions to be of a high quality and more satisfying compared to that of f2f students. Similarly, students in computer conferencing groups appeared to prefer online conferencing for its flexibility and convenience but this experience also caused students to associate flexibility with deep and reflective thinking skills which was not necessarily accurate. These observations coincide with Olaniran, Friendreih and VanGrundy (1992) and Chidambaram (1996) who found group interaction in online discussions to be more task oriented compared to f2f discussion and this differs from Olaniran et. Al (1996) who found the f2f groups as perceiving f2f to be more effective, easier and more satisfying suggesting that exceptions do exist. Clearly more research needs to be done to test the above assumptions and approaches given that it is becoming an increasingly popular practice among instructors to modify existing courses for online delivery and

integrate online forums as regular features of university led language courses.

### **Peer feedback and Revision Related Discourse**

L2 researchers have developed multiple frameworks for discussing revision related discourse and areas of revision in synchronous online conferences. DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) examined L2 students revision related discourse based on questions, explanations, restatements and suggestions – in both online and f2f oral settings and found the number of negotiations in F2F to be higher and the proportion of agreement and disagreement with ideas and negotiation to be higher in asynchronous peer discussions. Jones et. Al. (2006) investigation into online peer response revealed that EFL students in first year writing classes are more likely to discuss textual issues (e.g. grammar, vocabulary and style) in F2F session but prefer to focus on broader concerns (e.g. content, organization, topic and thesis) and relational communication in synchronous online sessions. Both studies suggest that there are different functions of peer comments for both modes of communication and instructors cannot assume that the latter can replace the former or vice versa. Hewett (2006) examined the types of communicative utterances (e.g. content, form, process, context and phatic) in English classes to discover that half the talk centered on interpersonal connections, interaction facilitations and workspace discussions. As for student's revision related discourse, 25% has been found to be content, context of writing, 62% on writing problems and processes and 13% on mechanics of writing and citation issues. A comparison of revision related discourse and actual revisions revealed that most writings despite being related to writing and revisions may not be directly related to the conferencing discussions. Hewett's study is significant because it showed that synchronous online conferences could result in new writing practices and revision changes in an L1 writing context but relationships for the types of interaction and their connections to revision remains unclear within the L2 context.

Toyoda and Harrison (2002) examined the negotiation of meaning between students and native speakers of Japanese over a series of chat conversations and discovered that difficulties in understanding one another can trigger negotiation of meanings between students even when no specific communication tasks were given. The study stands out because it sorted out negotiation patterns into nine categories according cause of difficulties: a) recognition of new word, b) misuse of word, c) pronunciation error, d) grammatical error, e) inappropriate segmentation, abbreviated sentence, f) sudden topic change and g) intercultural communication gap. Fitze (2006) compared f2f and written electronic whole class discussion from two intact classes and found that advanced students utilized a wider variety of vocabulary and communicative strategies (e.g. clarification request, disagreement statements, social formulations, topic managements) in online discussions. Drawing from studies that looked at both meaning negotiation and collaborative learning in f2f context and online learning, Liang (2008) proposed a framework which outlined six major types of synchronous online interaction to help explore L2

peer groups' engagement in a summary writing and revision task. They include a) meaning negotiation, b) content discussion, c) error correction, task management, e) social talk, and f) technical action. The findings found the total percentage of turns for meaning negotiation, error correction, task management and technical action to be rather low with two thirds of the turns being spent on social talk and content discussion. Liang (2010) used a similar framework and found different composition of groups to be able to generate different proportion of interactions while the use of chat episodes were not used as compensation for better comprehension by L2 learners, but as deliberate strategies for managing chat discourse. Sotillo (2000) investigation into the discourse functions and syntactic complexity in L2 learner output revealed the quantity and types of discourse functions present in asynchronous discussions to be more constrained compared to those found in synchronous discussions. As for syntactic complexity, the delayed nature of asynchronous discussion was construed as giving learners additional opportunities to produce syntactically complex language which works well for the L2 writing classroom.

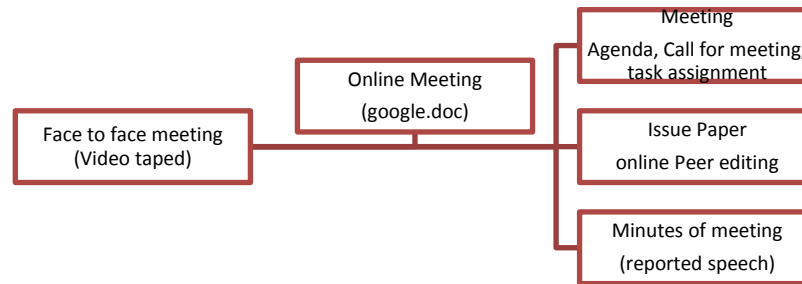
## **THE STUDY**

The present study is part of a larger research project that investigated the online interaction patterns of L2 university students and language development. This study focuses on the use of synchronous and asynchronous online interaction. Specifically, the study looks at three questions:

1. What are the common patterns of revision related interaction in online writings?
2. Is there a variation in the types of learning strategies used in synchronous and asynchronous writings?
3. What is the relationship between active learning skills in online writing?

The study involved 45 undergraduates from a workplace English course from a public university in Malaysia. The course was opened to all students from the sciences and humanities with above average proficiency in English. Due to the complexity of the readings, the students had to have a Malaysian University Entrance Test Band of 4 and above. The objective of the course was for student to communicate in both oral and written form using a variety of workplace discourse. The course adopted a case study approach and focused on getting students to solve a workplace problem through a series of f2f and online meetings. Course grades were determined by their in class participation and online participation and e- Portfolio submission.

The portfolio was evaluated based on a) participation in a 20 minute face to face meeting ( to be video recorded), b) letter of calling and agenda, c) online meetings, d) supporting documents used in meetings, e) minutes of a meeting, f) an issue paper, g) word choice and grammar, and h) editing and revisions as indicated in Figure 1.

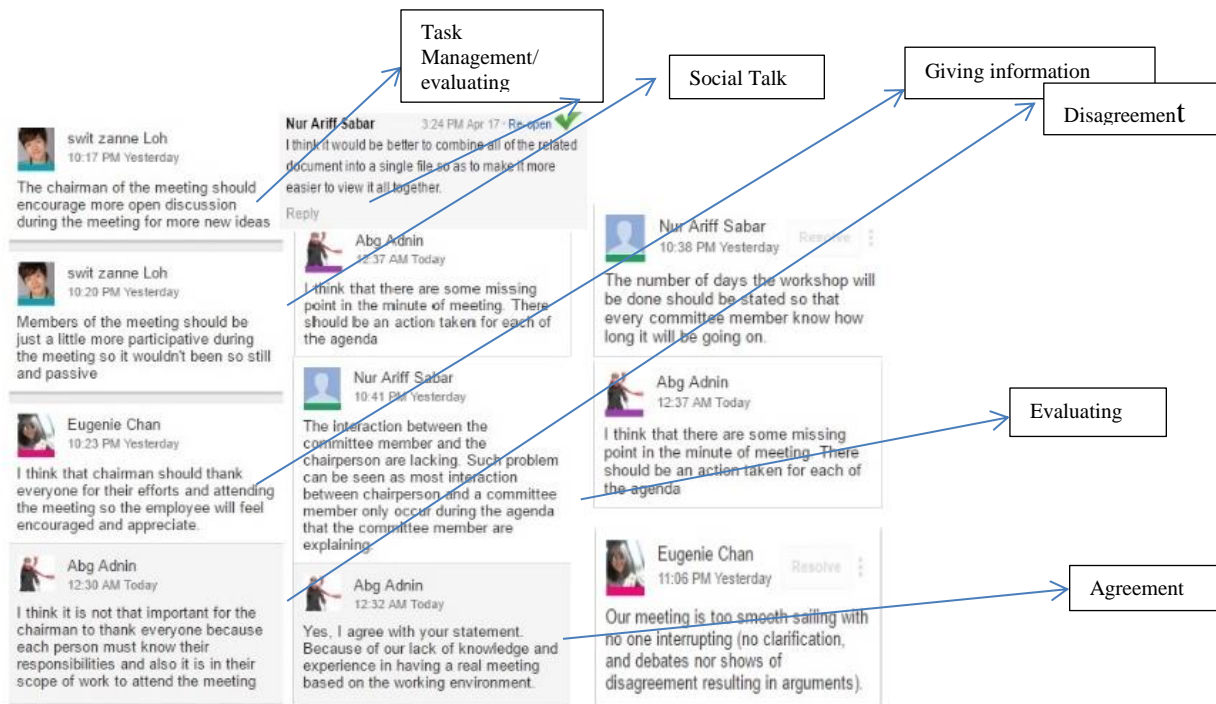


**Fig.1** Task distribution in portfolio

In the first in class meeting, the students were presented a task which was to work on authentic social issues as a project, through print and multimedia prompts (e.g. video, audio, advertisements). The instructor led the class to practice peer response strategies in class and how to help one another write better. The class discussions on revision related strategies were organized around the following topics: a) Editing for Grammar and Punctuation, b) Working and writing in teams b) Building critical skills c) Group think and d) Planning, conducting and recording a meeting. All materials were made available online through the university the course site. Students participated in a f2f meeting during class time as part of the course requirement. During this stage they were briefed of the role of the leader, the secretary and task distribution. They were placed in groups of five and told to appoint their respective office bearers at to begin work on solving a larger problem. The online sessions therefore provided opportunities for the students to seek and give information, summarize, and evaluate their reports over time taking into consideration the adopted organization's culture, discuss, negotiate and push through their ideas at various stages of the project. They could add comments (See Figure 2).

1<sup>st</sup> online meeting: This was a one two hour online session. Students brainstormed ideas for their project. During the process, the secretary with the Chairperson created a workspace using google.doc. and posted the call for the meeting with the agenda. During the meeting, the chairperson introduced the issues and conducted the meeting using Robert's Rules of order.

2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting: There were two 2-hour sessions on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> weeks. Before the online meetings students posted the links to their data, summarized some of their suggestions, left comments on their peers draft by asking questions or making suggestions. This session was used to access the active learning skills such as coordinating, encouraging participation, checking feelings, solving problems, blocking, dominating, clowning, agreement and disagreement.



**Fig. 2** Some evidences for the responses and comments made online

## Training

Students in groups of 4 to 5 were required to go through the self- access module to obtain supportive materials on the purpose of meetings (e.g. evaluating, making decisions, creating documents and motivating members). In small groups students were made to practice collaborative skills involving active listening skills by paraphrasing (e.g. “you are saying that ...”), mirroring feelings (e.g. It sounds like ...”), stating one’s feelings (I’m frustrated that ....”), asking for clarification (e.g. what part seems most ...) and offering help (“Is there anything else...”). Students were also given a checklist to correct errors and manage task.

## FINDINGS

### Common Patterns of Peer Interactions during Online Writings

The descriptive analysis revealed student attempts to correct their peers to be few and largely self –corrections. Both content management and error correction were among the common forms of peer revision as indicated in Figure2, the excerpt below and in the statistics in Table 1.

Excerpt OMTxt 5:

*Chan: Sorry for interrupting and I regret that I voice out the sponsorship request idea at first. But, now I think that Ms. Natasya idea is way better because sponsorship request will require longer period to gain the fund as compared to fundraising campaign such as charity run.*

*Chong: It's ok, charity run is also a good idea. We can add that idea as well.*

**Table 1**  
 Types of revision activities used during online writing

	N=15	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Meaning Negotiation		.00	5.00	1.53	1.68
Content Management		.00	9.00	3.07	2.69
Error correction		.00	7.00	2.13	2.20
Task Management		.00	3.00	1.53	.99
Social Talk		.00	3.00	.87	.92

The one sample t-test revealed all activities to be significant except for social talk (refer to Table 2).

**Table 2**  
 One Sample T-Test for types of revision strategies

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Meaning Negotiation	2.376	14	.032	1.033	.100	1.966
Content Management	3.702	14	.002	2.567	1.080	4.054
Error correction	2.876	14	.012	1.633	.415	2.851
Task Management	4.041	14	.001	1.033	.485	1.582
Social Talk	1.551	14	.143	.3667	-.140	.874

### Types of Thinking Skills Used in Online Interaction

The analysis indicated that synchronous helped learners to think on the feet since they had to respond immediately to unanticipated questions as in the excerpt below.



*Wee: The motion is therefore carried. So, we agree that RM100, 000 contract which last for 3 years will be assign to Ms. Goh Liu Ying as our brand spokesperson and ambassador. Now, can we proceed to summarizing the budget plan for this project?*

*Steff: The overall budget plan including organizing competitions, events, training programs, prizes, scholarships, funds in building badminton courts are in total of RM 600,000.*

*Florence: I sorry to interrupt, but I have something to say about this matter. Does the budget plan of RM 600, 000 include the budget for the contractor's fee as how we discussed just now?*

In fact while the synchronous interactions revealed a range of innovative discourse patterns (incomplete sentences and hanging sentences), the asynchronous activities were better worded, consisted of complex sentences and this was to be expected given that students had more time to interact and revise their ideas.

**Table 3**  
 Types of thinking skills used

	<b>Interaction type</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Seeking information	synchronous	6	.5000	.83666	.34157
	Asynchronous	9	2.8889	3.05959	1.01986
Giving Information	synchronous	6	1.0000	1.26491	.51640
	Asynchronous	9	2.3333	2.44949	.81650
Conflict resolution	synchronous	6	.6667	1.03280	.42164
	Asynchronous	9	1.2222	1.39443	.46481
Summarizing	synchronous	6	.8333	1.16905	.47726
	Asynchronous	9	1.1111	1.53659	.51220
Evaluating	synchronous	6	.1667	.40825	.16667
	Asynchronous	9	1.3333	2.06155	.68718

There was a higher emphasis on giving information. The ANOVA test (Table 4) showed seeking information as salient. As for collaborative and active listening skills, there was greater concern for relieving tension, solving problems, approval and minimizing dissent as indicated in the except and Table 5.

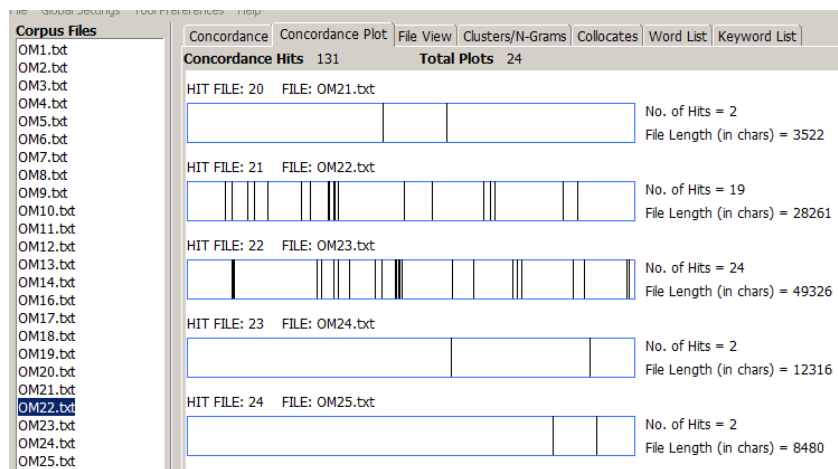
**Table 4**  
 Test of ANOVA for thinking skills being used

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Giving Information	Between Groups	6.400	1	6.400	1.486	.245
	Within Groups	56.000	13	4.308		
Seeking information	Between Groups	20.544	1	20.544	3.407	<b>.088</b>
	Within Groups	78.389	13	6.030		
Conflict	Between Groups	1.111	1	1.111	.691	.421
	Within Groups	20.889	13	1.607		
Summarizing	Between Groups	.278	1	.278	.140	.714
	Within Groups	25.722	13	1.979		
Evaluating	Between Groups	4.900	1	4.900	1.829	.199
	Within Groups	34.833	13	2.679		

**Table 5** Types of active listening skills

	Mean	SD	P-value	Sig (2T)
Coordinating	.867	1.995	1	<b>.000</b>
Agreement	1.600	2.971	.292	.292
Encouraging participation	.467	.915	.271	.328
Relieving Tension	1.267	2.051	.777**	<b>.001</b>
Check Feeling	.800	1.473	.816**	<b>.000</b>
Solving problem	.800	1.264	.809**	<b>.000</b>
Blocking	.333	.899	.305	.269
Dominating	.600	1.242	.352	.199
Clowning	.200	.414	.380	.162
Withdrawing	.133	.351	.231	.408
Approval	.467	.990	.793**	<b>.000</b>
Disagreement	.600	.985	.552*	.033

An analysis of the various online files through AntConc revealed that students were generally in favour of agreeing rather than disagreeing. :



**Fig. 4** Concordance plot for the word 'agree' to depict approval strategies

Excerpt 3: OMtext 7

*Chairperson: Why don't we put this point to the vote? So how many of you **agree** with it?*

*Manager: I **agree** with this point of infrastructure development. It makes a lot of sense.*

*Research & Development: I also **agree** with this point.*

*Secretary: I also **agree** with the infrastructure development.*

*Public Relations: Well, I **disagree** with it.*

*Chairperson: So, **majority agree with the idea** of raising fund and seeking assistance from NGOs as well as government agencies to develop basic infrastructure in Kampung Muhibbah.*

Any indication of conflict is often ignored as indicated in the excerpt above suggesting that students may not be ready for conflict management.

## DISCUSSION

This study of revision strategies, use of thinking skills and active online learning skills have taken place in relative isolation. While much is being spoken about the benefits of online learning, there is conspicuous lack of research examining the impact of learner feedback and the use of argumentative skills, blocking, dominating in the L2 classroom. In this study there was minimal evidence of dominating or blocking strategies. If there were students simply did not pick up on the matter, and some chose to withdraw which reflected a submissive workplace culture. Most relevant to the present work is the lack of research on how effectively learners learn from the process. An extract from the students' evaluation would probably provide the context.

In terms of learner awareness and satisfaction, the learner's forum discussions said that they were challenged by the new writing tools (See Table 1). Students feedback on the online experience are shown below:

Group Leader	Meeting Topic	Comments
Kasmita	Equal Pay	Google drive helped me organize my workplace efficiently. Google Doc really help me to learn how to conduct the meeting more efficiently. Google Doc enables us to post and keep our drafts and comments. Google Doc also helps us to write the minute meeting report on the spot and edit it later at our pace. It does not waste our time to do another report after the meeting and is an essential classroom tool. It has made learning efficient reachable through our smartphones.
Rosalynd	Workplace Bullying	The initial process to explore the google doc was quite handy and miserable but we managed to get used to it with help from one another. Then it became rather handy.
Aizat	Glass ceiling	need to have internet to attend the meeting and this might take away our smartphone data
Nellie	Workplace Bullying	Google doc did help us conduct our meeting more efficiently as we can see the history of each member that edited it. We were also able to advise and provide suggestions which were valuable
Chan	Glass ceiling	Google docs, drives and online meeting options ease the burden of every group members since everyone does not require to gather at a place for group and materials can be made available on the same platform.
Margie	Sexual Harassment	Online meetings does make the meeting process transparent and reported speech to be understandable better compared to actual meetings where one can just directly communicates with others. In this matter Google doc was just the answer for my needs.

## CONCLUSION

The whole case study took place for five weeks with approximately 10 hours being devoted to it in class. The instructors succeeded in increasing the students learning time by providing opportunities for students to connect online. Obviously, allowing the students opportunity to manage their own learning, make modifications provided great confidence to the learners. A week following the submission of the portfolio, the students were expected to view their video and make a brief presentation based on different activities (e.g. SWOT analysis – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and more precisely the various parts of the problems faced in developing the Portfolio from start to finish. Once the presentation was over, it was considered more adequate to focus on feedback rather than get students to continue presenting. The final session was devoted to looking through the various comments. Paramount to this was clarity of mind and students were required to appraise their learning. The personal comments of student revealed that students valued both online learning and in class learning for specific reasons. The students certainly saw themselves as being responsible and capable of charting their own direction for their learning process. Many of the leaders saw themselves as stewards of their team's progress.

The following are some of the issues raised from the project:

- Student readiness to come up with a storyboard and name cards is reflective of students' initiative to channel their creativity in varied ways not prescribed by the instructor.
- Running through some of the online discussions and reports through a concordancer revealed that students were the basic forms e.g. agree (as opposed to agrees, agreement, agreeing,) and learners need to be taught to vary their words more convincingly to get their message across. (refer Fig. 2)
- The use of the online meeting format via google doc. enabled the students to see the general flow of conversation more vividly and take stock of the situation, which in turn favored more constructive ideas and views, since more students had time to think and participate.
- Providing students with the initial stimulus saved time since students came prepared with information and had identified some additional documents to be read and supplemented with. This helped students run the meeting smoothly.
- The interruption and midway expressions in real life could pose difficulty for understanding the speaker's message when other students are not able to see the speaker. The need to produce complete statements however, facilitates the realization of the documentation phase.

- Likewise, the availability of all documents online on google drive made it possible for all members to understand what was being spoken, and correct inaccurate grammar and word use.
- The feedback via the forum provided an idea of what learners need, want and lack.
- The portfolio where students submit the various stages increased student's motivation for creating and synthesizing their knowledge and helped develop greater confidence in their learning process.
- Finally, the online feedback phases provided both students and instructors with a global vision of their performance in the meeting and learner motivation for case method.

In sum, case studies as an approach helps narrow the gap between theory and practice by making connections between knowledge and practice but online learning has made it easier to present relevant and fresh material, confront learners with real situations and fostering various skills and confidence which student need in order to feel at ease in the community of Business English practitioners (Boyce, 1993). In addition they work well with the learning styles of adult learners (Jackson, 1998). Drawbacks if any would be that case studies fall among the more difficult strategies to be used (Esteban, 2008, Boyd, 1991) but given the enhanced features of modern day technology, the lessons can be become very interesting as in Figure 3.

The success of the online case study largely depends on the teacher's role, a non - traditional one which makes educators uncomfortable and some student's. The instructor needs to realize that learners need to take responsibility for their own learning and eventually become self- regulated learners which incidentally are the desired learning outcome for most learning programmes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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