

**Genre and Discourse in Online Discussions: A Study of
Online Discussion Postings in a Thai EFL Writing Course**

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled 'Genre and Discourse in Online Discussions: A Study of Online Discussion Postings in a Thai EFL Writing Course' has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of the Candidate

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ABSTRACT

There have been a number of studies examining online discussions in both English language teaching (ELT) and non-ELT contexts. Studies which take a discourse perspective have analysed linguistic features such as speech acts (Chun, 1994), exchange structure (Bae Son, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2000) and turn taking (Bisenbach-Lucas, 2003). Within the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), there is a growing number of research publications which analyse the language used in computer mediated communication (CMC) such as email messages (Don, 2007), bulletin boards (Taboada, 2004) and online discussions (Coffin et al, 2005a,b; Coffin and Hewings, 2005; Hewings and Coffin, 2004; Hewings and Coffin, 2006; Painter et al, 2003). Don focuses mainly on the use of appraisal in email messages, and Taboada examines the genres which occur in individual bulletin board messages. Coffin and colleagues have investigated the language used in online discussions from a number of perspectives. The first focuses on impacts of tutorial activities on students' interaction (Painter et al, 2003), choices of engagement (Coffin and Hewings, 2005), and the degree of critical reflection when making arguments (Hewings and Coffin, 2006); the second on the use of grammar; and the third on patterns of debate and arguments (Coffin et al, 2005a,b). These studies present important findings and directions for the analysis of language used in online discussions. However they are based on non-ELT contexts. Further studies are still needed to investigate student language in online discussions in ELT contexts in different areas, such as common genres, and the way that cohesion and coherence are managed according to different demands of the tasks assigned.

The current study sets out to examine in particular the language of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in online discussion postings. The corpus comprises 274 online discussion postings, posted by a teacher and 26 students

participating in five online discussions across a semester. The study uses systemic functional linguistics (e.g. Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1992; Martin and Rose, 2003) as a framework, taking a genre-based perspective and also analysing cohesion and coherence.

The findings of the genre analysis show that online discussion postings are organised by students in a consistent pattern at a macro-structural level. That is to say, the structure of each online discussion posting is consistent with a potential macro-structure consisting of three macro-stages, namely, 'Opening Bonding', 'Responding' and 'Closing Bonding'. 'Bonding' macro-stages work to build relationships and to maintain a community in the online setting while 'Responding' macro-stages respond to the writing task as set by the teacher. Each macro-stage can be realised by stages from one or more elemental genres, and sometimes by a combination of genres and/or stages.

The combination of 'Bonding' and 'Responding' macro-stages in student online discussion postings is related to the social goals of the participants when communicating in this community. That is, online discussion postings are organised by students to maintain two social purposes (to respond to the classroom task assigned by the teacher, and to maintain social relationships with the readers who are their peers and their teacher). This represents a new form of social practice which is realised by the consistent, identifiable textual macro-structure discussed above. At the same time, the combination of elemental genres and stages, constituting individual macro-stages, allows for flexibility in keeping with the nature of the social interaction conducted in this social setting. This macro-genre does not represent any one particular combination of elemental genres and stages described in the various schools of genre studies (cf. Coffin et al, 2005a, b; Martin, 1992; Swales, 1990), but rather,

flexible combinations of them within a relatively stable 'higher-order' macro-structure (cf. Lemke, 2003).

To examine cohesion and coherence, the online discussion postings of two chosen students are analysed closely in terms of hyperTheme, thematic development, conjunction and reference. It was found that where their writing is focused on the writer and/or the reader, these students normally construct their discussion in a more spoken-like pattern. That is, first and second person pronouns ('I' and 'you') are predominant Themes developed in a linear pattern, with fewer conjunctives employed and a frequent use of pronominals to refer to the writer and reader.

However when the discourse changes to focus on addressing the discussion task as set by the teacher, the online discussion is organised in a more written-like manner. Themes are relevant to the content and are often built up from the Given information in the Rheme of the previous clause, and conjunctives and reference are used in a more varied way. Moreover, the findings show that the spoken-like features of language can also be found in 'Responding' macro-stages where the writer composes in order to foreground solidarity with the reader.

The findings in this area reflect two important issues. On the one hand, there is a systematic relationship between the demands of discourse and choices of cohesive resources employed. On the other hand, the online discussions contain combined features of both spoken and written language, representing a defining feature of language used in this kind of communication as commonly stated in the literature (cf. Baron, 1998; Coffin and Hewings, 2005; Hewings and Coffin, 2004; Murray, 2000; Tanskanen, 2006; Warschauer, 2001). But more than this, it is possible to identify consistent patterns within which the student writing is more 'written' and more 'spoken' at certain points, and also to relate this to their discursive purposes. This

finding can inform teachers in deciding which parts of the text to focus on when examining students' language in online discussions. For instance, if the purpose is to practice students' argumentative writing, feedback and assessment may be made in the parts discussing the content only while other parts which are organised to create solidarity may be treated as common features in online discussions.

The findings from this study have implications for both theoretical and pedagogical domains. Theoretically, the description of the macro-genre of online discussion postings provided here builds on the work done by Coffin, Hewings, and Painter (e.g. Coffin et al 2005a, 2005b) in identifying generic patterns in the extended text of online discussions.

The findings of this study are also significant pedagogically for teachers and learners, and for the setting and moderating of tasks in EFL writing courses. That is, they can be used to raise teachers' awareness of the unique features of communication when examining students' language in online discussions, and to raise students' awareness of CMC. Finally, the generic patterns which emerge in learners' language due to different task demands illustrate the importance of online discussions and curriculum working together. Online discussion tasks need to resonate with the classroom pedagogy, and with informed understandings of the nature of language, in order to help students better learn language in this new medium of communication.