

## **Korean EFL Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Peer Interaction in Online Discussion Forums\***

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### ABSTRACT

Online discussion forums are becoming more commonly used in blended learning classes to provide additional opportunities for EFL students to practice the language more outside of the classroom and to reinforce topics or concepts taught in the face-to-face class. It is important to learn more about students' perceptions of peer interaction on discussion forums to help create a more student-centered environment that focuses on the needs of students and promotes effective learning. This case study examines Korean EFL students' perceptions of the effectiveness of peer interaction in online discussion forums. Participants included 18 Korean university students. Data was collected from a focus group, semi-structured interviews, and an instructor reflection journal. Results of the study indicated that students were satisfied with peer interaction on the discussion forum. However, recommendations were provided that could be used to improve peer interaction on future discussion forums. This study also provides practical implications and recommendations for future research.

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## I. Introduction

Blended learning combines face-to-face and online classroom instruction and learning activities. Blended learning is becoming more popular in South Korea as universities strive to promote 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. Competencies that are considered imperative for educational advancement such as innovation, digital literacy, ingenuity, and collaboration can be achieved through blended learning (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). According to Klemsen and Seong (2013), who examined Korean English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions of blended learning, "A blended approach to learning offers the potential for greater student satisfaction, improved learning outcomes, higher rates of participation, and support for a more diverse community of learners" (p. 70). Blended learning can be an effective way to help facilitate active learning and reinforce concepts taught in the face-to-face classroom. Moreover, it can promote academic success, student achievement (Choi, Ko, & Baek, 2009; Yoon & C. H. Lee, 2010), enhance student satisfaction, and lead to increased participation in the classroom (Klemsen & Seong, 2012).

In an EFL context, blended learning has shown to improve spoken and written communication (Cha & H. Kim, 2011; C. H. Lee & Pyo, 2003). As the world becomes more globalized, it is also vital for EFL students to practice using English online to be able to digitally communicate with various people around the world. Although there are many benefits of blended learning, disadvantages have also been reported. Some students may have difficulties assimilating into the blended learning environment if they are unfamiliar with the course layout or are not technologically adept (Dzakiria, Mustafa, & Abu Bakar, 2006). Moreover, some students express feelings of anxiety and bewilderment when participating in blended learning courses (Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001). Even though there are some drawbacks to blended learning, if courses are designed properly and enough guidance and support are provided to students, it can have significant academic benefits (Thang et al., 2012). There are specific considerations that should be made when designing blended learning courses to improve student satisfaction. EFL students have discussed technological problems associated with blended learning, and some have indicated a preference for traditional, face-to-face classes (Klemsen & Seong, 2012). However, blended learning can promote academic development and increase students' satisfaction in EFL courses (Choi et al., 2009; Klemsen & Seong, 2012; S. H. Lee & J. H. Lee, 2007; Yoon & C. H. Lee, 2010).

A primary learning tool in the blended learning classroom is the asynchronous discussion forum or discussion board (the terms are used interchangeably) which provides students with the opportunity to participate in active dialog with classmates about topics or themes related to the course. Meaningful interaction is an important aspect

of optimal blended learning (Muirhead, 2000). Online discussion forums can help facilitate better understanding of the course curriculum and improve student engagement through peer interaction (Andresen, 2009; Hew & Cheung, 2013). By participating in online discussion forums, students are able to share ideas and interact with other students which can lead to the development of “collective knowledge” (Cho & Tobias, 2016, p. 124). In addition, online discussions can help create a better sense of connection to peers (So & Brush, 2008). Online discussions can also improve class satisfaction (Swan & Shih, 2005). Students believe online interaction with other students increases their understanding of class learning objectives (Richardson & Swan, 2003). In the EFL classroom, it is vital to give students various opportunities to participate in practical and meaningful activities outside of the classroom since face-to-face classes can only meet for a limited amount of time. Through asynchronous discussion forums, students can participate in written dialog with classmates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week as long as the entries are completed before the assigned due date.

It is critical to gain more insight into the perceived needs of students in the blended learning environment and more specifically how they view the effectiveness of peer interaction on the discussion forum. It is also important to examine students' perceptions of teaching methodologies and tools, especially as universities utilize new technological programs and resources (Klemsen & Seong, 2012). Technology can be incredibly beneficial in the classroom; however, instructors should not just incorporate technology into the classroom for the sake of using it. One of the most commonly used learning activities in the online component of the blended learning classroom is the discussion forum. Although discussion forums are often utilized in blended learning classes, it does not necessarily mean that students perceive them as useful or effective in improving their knowledge of the English language and ability to effectively communicate using the language.

Research (M. Kim, 2015; H. Kim & S. Y. Lee, 2010; Klemsen & Seong, 2012; C. H. Lee & Pyo; 2003) has been conducted on Korean students' perceptions of blended learning as a whole and the effectiveness of blended learning in EFL classes, but there is a dearth of research on how Korean EFL learners perceive peer interaction on discussion forums in the blended learning course. Furthermore, more studies are needed in the English language, especially for native English speaking instructors in Korea who are not proficient in the Korean language. It is also beneficial to add more qualitative data to the body of research on students' perceptions of peer interaction in online discussion forums which can be valuable to instructors or course designers who are responsible for developing discussion forum guidelines and topics and want to ensure that students' learning needs are being met. To promote student centered learning, students should be given a voice in reaching their educational goals.

This study centered on addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Korean EFL students regarding the effectiveness of peer interaction in online discussion forums?
2. What recommendations do Korean EFL students have to improve the effectiveness of peer interaction in future online discussion forums?

## **II. Literature Review**

### **A. Discussion Forums in the Online Component of a Blended Learning Course**

Discussion forums (also referred to as discussion boards) provide students and instructors with an opportunity to interact outside of the face-to-face classroom. The online discussion forum can be a useful tool in engaging students who are more introverted or disinterested in face-to-face class discussions. Through discussion forums, students can share information, think of new ideas, discuss course content, and reflect on their posts (Warschauer, 1999). Students also have time to think more about their responses before submitting them (Dagger, O'Connor, Lawless, Walsh, & Wade, 2007). In addition, students who are hesitant to participate in the face-to-face classroom may be more engaged in the online discussion forum (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Students also may value the ability to complete discussion forums on their own time (Al-Salman, 2009; Gerbic, 2010). In the face-to-face classroom, some students may struggle with confidence which can reduce their interest in participating in communicative activities with peers (Nielson, 2013). Birch and Volkov (2007) found that English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL students benefit from interaction in the online discussion forum. Through online communication with peers, students gain practical experience using the English language and can share thoughts about various topics in the course to help improve critical thinking skills.

Although student interaction is critical in online discussion forums, it is also important for the instructor be involved (Xia, Fielder, & Siragusa, 2013). The instructor can model best practices in terms of communication and engagement on the discussion forum. The instructor also must carefully facilitate the discussions to ensure that students are on task and following the guidelines provided (Anderson, 2008; Lall & Lumb, 2010).

Without proper guidance and support, students may not achieve the desired learning goals of the discussion forums (Andresen, 2009; Salter & Conneely, 2015). Even though the instructor should be engaged in discussions, stress needs to be placed on student interaction (Xia et al., 2013), and students need to be aware of participation expectations and guidelines (Rovai, 2007). Communication plays a critical role in the online discussion forum; thus, it is important for the instructor to provide guidance to students and encourage meaningful peer interactions.

Although instructors and students may have varying perceptions of what constitutes effective learning in online discussion forums, general principles include the following: providing clear instructions to students, active student participation, instructor guidance, student motivation, and student understanding of the purpose of the discussion forum (Tibi, 2016). Providing clear instructions to students can include using a rubric so students know how they will be evaluated; the rubric should also assess learning outcomes (Dennen, 2000). In addition, effective learning should involve active student participation that is guided by the instructor who facilitates the discussion and motivates students (Ioannou, Demetriou & Mama, 2014; Lall & Lumb, 2010). Students should also understand why it is important for them to participate (Roper, 2007). For example, in an EFL context, students need to understand how their participation in online forums can benefit them by improving their understanding of the English language through peer interaction.

## **B. Peer Interaction in the Online Component of a Blended Learning Course**

Participation is vital in online discussion forums and has a positive impact on the quality of discussions (Davies & Graff, 2005; J. Kim, 2013). Participation also helps to foster a more effective learning environment (Bangert, 2004; Partlow & Gibbs, 2003). Moore (2010) defined three major types of interactions in the online classroom which include learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content interaction. This study examines peer interaction (learner-learner) in online discussion forums. Peer interaction involves students working and communicating with their peers (Hirumi, 2006). According to R.-A. Lee & Dashew (2011), "When the instructor moves the class interactions into an asynchronous online format there is often a significant increase- or at least an opportunity for an increase- in student-to-student interactions over what is typically found in face-to-face classroom" (p. 73). The online learning tools help to facilitate equal opportunities and interactions among students (R.-A. Lee & Dashew, 2011), since some students may dominate discussions in the face-to-face classroom.

There are many benefits of peer interaction on the discussion forum including giving introverted students more opportunities to participate (Moore, 2010). In the face-to-face classroom, some students may be more hesitant to speak because of a lack of confidence or a tendency to be less outgoing. Students are generally more at ease in communicating with their classmates online (R.-A. Lee & Dashew, 2011). The online discussion forum provides students with additional opportunities to communicate with classmates outside of the face-to-face classroom (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Learners have also discussed the feeling of comfort that they have in being able to communicate with classmates in the online setting (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Online interactions can result in a meaningful learning experience for students as they discuss topics related to the course and improve their knowledge of the language.

Peer interactions are critical in the online classroom, especially in an EFL context in which students need to actively practice using the language. The learners' engagement with other students can help foster a positive learning environment through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Students need to engage with classmates in order to improve their English language proficiency and have enough opportunities to practice outside of the classroom. Peer interactions can also help improve critical thinking skills since students must evaluate and synthesize other students' posts and reply to them (Kolloff, 2001). Critical thinking is essential for students who may need to interact with businesses, organizations, or individuals around the world once they graduate and enter the job market. Students also need to be able to effectively express their thoughts through the English language since English is the lingua franca of business and is commonly spoken globally as a first or second language. Peer interactions can also foster a more encouraging learning experience (R.-A. Lee & Dashew, 2011) in which students have a desire to want to write posts and discuss topics with their peers. Student satisfaction is also connected to meaningful interactions in the online classroom (Richardson & Swan, 2003), which includes peer interactions (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The online discussion forum can be a valuable supplementary tool to help improve students' communicative skills and provide additional opportunities for students to practice English outside of the face-to-face classroom.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **A. Study Design**

This research uses a qualitative case study design. According to Eisenhardt (2002), a case study is “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (p. 104). This design is appropriate for this study since the research is limited to one university and two classes that cover the same curriculum. In addition, case studies have been used in English language learning studies for over 30 years (Duff, 2008). The most important component of qualitative research is the “expressed commitment to viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people being studied” (Bryman, 1988, p. 61). This case study focuses on the students’ experiences using the online discussion forum and strives to give them a voice to express their thoughts about the learning platform. Case studies can use various types of data and focus on in-depth analysis of key themes that emerge (Patton, 2002). Common types of data used in a case study include but are not limited to documents, records, interviews, and observations to build a deeper understanding of the complete case (Creswell, 2007).

#### **B. Participants & Setting**

Purposeful and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007) were used to obtain participants based on their enrollment in the English communication classes. Students participated in a semester long English communication course during the fall semester of 2016. The course focused on speaking, writing, listening, and reading improvement. The instructor had previously taught most of the students in another English communication course during the spring semester of 2016. She had sought feedback from students about the first semester course, and most students indicated that they wanted deeper topics to discuss in the following semester since the topics were light (such as everyday activities). Most of the students in the classes were freshman. There were also several sophomores and juniors in the class. There were 28 students (male=15, female=13), in one class, and 17 students (male=8, female=9) in the other class (total, n=45). Eighteen students participated in interviews, and 6 participated in a focus group (these students had also participated in the interviews). The participants in the study were in their late teens and early twenties. Participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identities. Table 1 includes more details about the participants. The instructor, who is also the researcher, is

an American citizen and first started teaching in South Korea in 2006. In South Korea, she has taught in the traditional, brick and mortar classroom and has also developed blended learning courses. In addition, she has experience teaching fully online courses using the Canvas LMS (Learning Management System) in the United States. This was the platform used for this particular course.

<Table 1> Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym/Gender	Major	Year/University	Canvas Pg. Views	Disc. Score
Jungmin* (M)	English	1	163	16.65/20
Sangho* (M)	English	1	491	18.95/20
Sangjae* (M)	English	1	216	18.4/20
Jina* (F)	English	1	187	19/20
Haneul* (M)	English	1	331	18.8/20
Goeun* (F)	English	1	380	18.9/20
Jihee (F)	English	1	267	19.95/20
Dohee (F)	English	1	273	19.15/20
Jaeseop (M)	English	1	114	18.95/20
Minjeong (F)	English	1	225	18.9/20
Boram (F)	English	1	213	18.6/20
Miran (F)	English	1	113	18.9/20
Cheolsun (M)	English	1	275	17.1/20
Chiwon (M)	English	1	253	18.95/20
Yohan (M)	English	1	400	18.85/20
Donggun (M)	English	1	2	1.5/20
Subin (F)	English	3	248	19.45/20
Kyeongtaek (M)	English	1	134	18.15/20

Note 1: \*Participated in the focus group as well as the telephone interviews

Note 2: Canvas page views refers to the number of times that the student accessed pages on the Canvas LMS. It does not necessarily mean that the student was actively participating at this time though.

Note 3: The students' total discussion forum score out of a maximum of 20% of the final grade is included.

Note 4: One junior participated in the study because of her interest in sharing ideas about the course.

The Canvas LMS was used to carry out the online components of the course. The Canvas LMS was used in the past semester and students expressed their satisfaction with it. Like any technological tool or LMS, Canvas has pros and cons. Overall, it was very beneficial though and easy for the students to use. The primary purpose of the online component of the course was for students to participate in graded online discussion forum homework, but students also completed three written (essay style) assignments that they submitted directly to the instructor without getting peer feedback. The instructor also posted



helpful announcements about the course in the LMS. The announcements pertained to grading, course content, ways to improve English proficiency, and English related activities outside of the classroom that the students may have been interested in. For the online component of the course, students were graded on 5 online discussion forums (4% each) and three online written assignments (5% each). The discussion forum activities will be described in more depth in the proceeding section. During the face-to-face class, the instructor provided more details regarding the importance of online homework. She also provided guidance about how to use the Canvas LMS and complete assignments. Based on student feedback from the first semester course, the instructor decided that it was best to not base online assignments on topics covered in the face-to-face classroom since the students expressed dissatisfaction with the repetitiveness of topics.

### **C. Discussion Forum Overview**

The objective of the discussion forum assignments was to provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful communication related to course lessons with peers outside of the face-to-face classroom. Discussion forum homework consisted of five topics pertaining to themes that the students expressed interest in discussing during the first semester course. The following topics were assigned: controversial issues, human rights violations, using cell phone apps to study English, a summary and analysis of a story in the news, and an English song and music analysis. Additional instructions and questions were provided in the discussion forum instructions.

Discussion forums were assigned every 2 to 3 weeks. Students were required to write a primary post that was at least 150 words and reply (50 words or more for each reply) to at least three classmates (replies to the instructor were also counted) in the following week. In the first discussion assignment, all students (n=45) participated on the same forum. For the second discussion forum, students were divided into six groups through a function in Canvas that randomly assigns students to a group. In the final three discussion forums, students were divided into five groups. After consulting several students, the instructor decided that dividing the class into five groups would be best. The students would not be overwhelmed by a large number of posts, but there would also be enough posts to have variety and greater exposure to more diverse perspectives. Some students complained that it was difficult to sort through all of the posts when the whole class participated on the same forum. The instructor also participated in the discussion forum and responded to each student's primary post as well as some of the replies. The instructor also provided substantive written feedback to students about their primary posts and replies to classmates. The instructor created a rubric in Canvas that included comment boxes for written feedback and individual score boxes for the main post (2.5


points total) and three replies to classmates (0.5 points each). Grading was based on depth and clarity of content (50%) and grammar (50%). Points were deducted if students did not meet the word count requirement. Figure 1 shows discussion forum instructions for the first assigned discussion forum. Figure 2 is a sample student's response on discussion forum 1, and Figure 3 includes two students' responses to the student's post shown in Figure 2.

**Part 1:**

Write about **one or two** of the topics (150 words or more) discussed in the video or choose a question from the list below to discuss. Your response can focus on Korea or other countries. Originally I stated that you only should write about one but since this is your first post, I am going to be more flexible.

**Main Post Due: September 21st by 11:59 pm**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwGyR7jEwTM>



If you do not want to discuss an issue from the video, you may write on one of these topics.

- Should military service be compulsory? Why or why not?
- Should high stakes testing (such as the SAT or Korean SAT) be abolished?
- Are video games too violent? Explain your answer.
- Should same sex marriage be legalized? Why or why not?
- Should companies be allowed to sell information in their customer records?
- Should the Internet be censored?




Figure 1. Sample Discussion Forum Instructions, Discussion Forum 1

**Topic : Should military service be compulsory? Why or Why not?**

In my opinion, the military service should not be compulsory. Nowadays, there are many voluntary soldiers. So, I think that country don't have to force the military service.

First, the military service is very unfair for men. For example, we have learned somethings in the same way from an early age. The women and men are all same human. But, in Korea, the men should go to the army by force. I think it is a violation of human rights.

Second, the men lag behind the women because of the military service. For example, a man and a woman enter university at the same time. Soon, the man should go to the army. And the woman gets one's promotion to the third grade. But, the man is still in the first grade. The military service take a long time to finish. So, I think that it wastes precious time.

As the result, the military service should accept applications. The country should leave them full independence.

Figure 2. Sample Student's Main Post

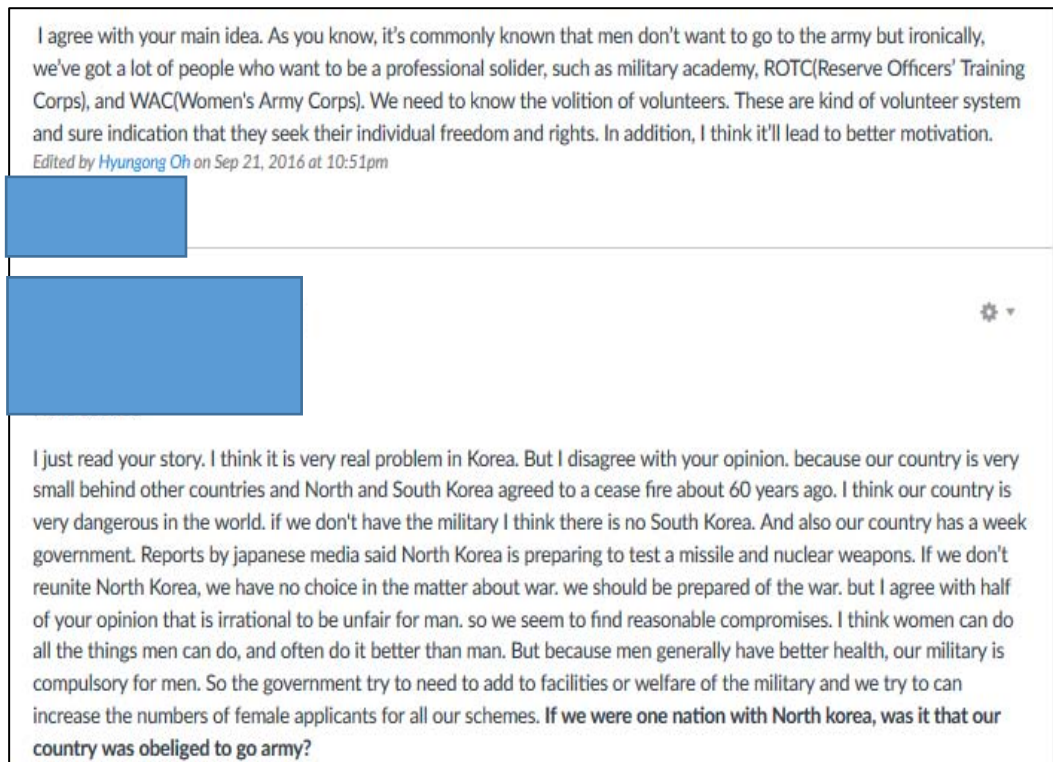


Figure 3. Two Sample Students' Replies to the Main Post in Figure 2 Identifying information has been marked out.

## D. Data Collection

Data was collected from a focus group, semi-structured interviews, and an instructor reflection journal. The focus group had 6 students and was conducted in week 13 of the class. The focus group lasted 40 minutes, and through the discussion the instructor developed more specific questions to be asked in the interviews. Focus groups can be beneficial to qualitative studies since “interactions among the participants stimulate them to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 238). The focus group included questions 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11 (see the interview questions below). The instructor asked a lot of follow-up questions during the focus group to gain more insight into the students' perceptions. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted in week 14 of the 16 week semester. Semi-structured interviewing “involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply using open-form questions to obtain additional information” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 24). Telephone interviewing can be convenient when it is difficult to arrange

individual interviews with participants (Gall et al., 2003). Eighteen students participated in the interviews. The average interview was 20 minutes. Detailed notes were taken in both the focus group and interviews.

The interview questions included:

1. What do you think about the discussion forum assignments in class?
2. How would you describe your interactions with classmates on the discussion forum?
3. What do you think effective learning is?
4. Do you think online discussion forums are an effective way to learn English? Why or why not?
5. Do you think “talking to your classmates” on the discussion forum was an effective way to improve your English language skills? Why or why not?
6. What did you like most about interacting with your classmates on the discussion forum?
7. Are there any other things that you liked about interacting with your classmates on the discussion forum?
8. What did you like least about interacting with your classmates on the discussion forum?
9. Are there any other things that you disliked about interacting with your classmates on the discussion forum?
10. What recommendations do you have to improve interactions with classmates on future discussion forums?
11. Do you have any other feedback or ideas?

Note: Rather than using the term “peer” which was unfamiliar to some students in the focus group, the term “classmates” was used. The instructor also explained the word “interactions” to some students.

Throughout the semester, the instructor noted any problems or suggestions that the students had about the online component of the blended learning course and specifically included comments about peer interaction on the discussion forum in an instructor reflection journal. Drawing on Klemsen and Seong’s (2012) study on students’ perceptions of blended learning, the researcher thought it would be practical to record “students’ frustrations, likes, dislikes, and general comments” (pp. 75-76). Even though this study focuses on students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of peer interaction on the discussion forum, it was important for the instructor to document comments and observations that could be useful in developing discussion forums in future classes to be

more student-centered. The journal was of course used for data collection, but ideas that emerged were also taken into account to potentially make changes to future discussion forum activities. Sometimes students made comments about the discussion forum activities during class time, in emails, or by telephone that were not formal parts of data collection.

## **E. Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis procedures were used to identify quotes and topics related to peer interaction on the discussion forum. Data analysis centered on creating a holistic description of the case (Creswell, 2007). The researcher created files for each type of data collected and started developing initial codes as she took notes (Creswell, 2007). The researcher focused on examining patterns that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2007). The researcher then highlighted common responses among the participants especially in relation to research questions 1 and 2. A focus was placed on examining responses and developing key themes based on common responses. The researcher included a wider range of the participants' recommendations for future peer feedback (research question 2) since the recommendations, even if not commonly discussed, should still be considered. The objective of analysis was to create a deeper understanding of the case (Creswell, 2007) by focusing on students' perceptions highlighted by quotes. The themes that emerged aim to provide a clearer understanding of the case as a whole. Final coding themes are provided in Table 2.

## **IV. Results**

The results section highlights the primary research questions which focus on Korean EFL students' perceptions of the effectiveness of peer interaction on the discussion forums as well as students' recommendations for peer interaction in future online discussion forums. Some grammar mistakes in students' original responses were fixed to help with clarity. Sample responses are included to highlight predominant themes that emerged from the research.

### **A. Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Peer Interaction**

Students were generally pleased overall with peer interaction on the discussion forum. They thought it was a practical way to use English more outside of the classroom.

Students first defined what effective learning on the discussion forum is. Most students described it as active involvement on the discussion forum and improvement in English communication. An example is, “Effective learning is when students participate fully on the discussion forum. They also shouldn’t just post the minimum or write simple things without thinking about the topics deeply. They have to think more about the topics to improve” (Jina, female freshman). Another example is, “(Effective learning is...) When I get better at English and don’t have to spend so much time thinking about what I want to write. I think my English is getting better, but it is still difficult at times to write exactly what I want to say” (Haneul, male freshman).

An emphasis was placed on active involvement on the discussion forum as well. Students mentioned that it is important to read various posts and not just do the minimum requirement. To get better at English, they highlighted the importance of looking at different views and also using outside resources to support their answers, especially about deeper topics such as controversial issues. Students indicated that the discussion forums were effective and aided them in improving knowledge of the course as well as gaining practical experience in developing their English writing skills. An example that encapsulates the essence of the students’ responses is, “I think it was very effective. I think my writing is getting a lot better by practicing more. Although it takes a lot of time, I think it is effective” (Minjeong, female freshman). None of the students said that the discussion forums were ineffective. Most students also expressed interest in continuing discussion forums in the future; however, a common recommendation was to decrease the number of required discussion forums and replies to peers.

The following three themes were highlighted the most among students: extra English practice with other students, practical for students who are shy or not alert in class, and deeper responses.

### **1. Extra English Practice with Other Students**

Most students stated that the discussion forums provided them with an opportunity to practice English much more outside of the classroom. This was often discussed by students. Jina (female freshman) said,

It can be hard to have enough chances to speak English. I am glad that I can get more practice. I know that I am an English major and need to spend more time studying English and practicing if I want to get better. I know my writing is really getting better, but I also want more chances to practice speaking.

Students also mentioned that it can be a little strange to just practice English outside of

class unless they are involved in an English club, so it is a good idea to be required to do English activities on the discussion forum. Another student, Jungmin (male freshman) stated, "There are not many chances to use English outside of class. Although I don't like doing homework and I'm very busy, I think this practice is helpful." Similar examples were provided by other students. They emphasized because they are English majors they need more chances to practice outside of class but it is not always convenient or economical to take extra classes, have a tutor, or join an English club. Subin (female junior) stated, "I have the chance to talk with other students on the discussion forum. It is a good way to improve my English. I can also get to know my classmates more." Students highlighted the importance of having extra practice outside of the face-to-face classroom to help improve their English proficiency.

## **2. Practical for Shy Students/Students who are not Alert**

Many students mentioned that the discussion forum is a practical way to talk about class topics for students who may not be as outgoing. One student mentioned,

I really like to talk to my classmates on the discussion forum. I don't always like talking in class. I like that I can talk to my classmates anytime. I prefer studying at night, so it is convenient for writing posts. I'm getting better at talking in class, but I still prefer online conversations (Jihee, female freshman).

Another student, Dohee (female freshman) said, "I sometimes sit near people that I don't know well, and it can be a little uncomfortable talking to them. I'm a little shy too." Some students stated that sometimes they are also tired in class because they have a lot of classes that day or did not get enough sleep and may not be as quick to think in English. Sangjae (male freshman) stated, "Sometimes I am tired because I have class all day, and it's hard to think in English during class. I like that I can do the discussions anytime." Donggun (male freshman) did not actively participate on the discussion forum. He openly mentioned that he was just lazy and did not push himself; however, he said that one of the benefits of the discussion forum is being able to do the work at his convenience. He also said that sometimes he is tired in class. Through discussion forums, the students can practice English on their own time which may be when they are more alert. The instructor also noted in the observation journal that several students who were more introverted in class, tended to be more engaged in the online discussion.

### 3. Deeper Responses

Many of the students were pleased with the topics because they were helpful in developing their English on a deeper level. Although this does not directly relate to peer interaction, the students obviously had to share their ideas about these topics with each other. One student remarked,

I really like the topics that we had. With our classmates, we could discuss topics in detail, especially compared to last semester when we talked about really light and easy topics. Sometimes though it was difficult to talk about these topics because they were difficult or controversial like gay marriage and political things. Still it was good to discuss these deep topics. (Sangho, male freshman)

Most of the students had taken a first semester course with the instructor that also had required discussion forums. However, the discussion forums in that class had light topics about daily life that did not require deep analysis and critical thinking. Another student, Subin (female junior) said,

It was a good chance to talk to my classmates outside of the regular classroom. Sometimes it is difficult to talk to my classmates though about complex topics like human rights issues though since they are so deep, but it was helpful for improving my English.

Students emphasized the importance of communicating about deeper topics that required critical thinking, and they also mentioned that it helped improve their vocabulary. The instructor also noted in the reflection journal, that students had used more complex vocabulary and seemed to be more challenged in the discussions in comparison to the previous semester.

### B. Recommendations

Students had diverse suggestions regarding peer interaction on future discussion forums. Although the researcher focused on the topic of peer interaction, some students wanted to discuss other recommendations for future discussion forums that were not related to peer interaction directly. The researcher made note of these recommendations, but for this research only recommendations related to peer interaction were included. The following recommendations were provided:



- Although the practice with classmates was good, it took too much time compared to homework in other classes, even English classes.
- Discussions are basically just writing assignments. Although we are discussing, we are not actually talking. I hope we can find more ways to talk with classmates in English through Canvas.
- Have an open topic forum in which students can discuss anything that they want.
- Keep using smaller discussion groups rather than the whole class.
- Do group projects and students can report their ideas to other groups.
- Some students just post the minimum for the word count requirement. They also do not check their grammar and do their posts very late. Maybe they should have a partner who can check their work before submitting it.
- Although we have a lot of chances to practice English, there are too many discussion forums which can make English feel a little stressful.
- Students can decide discussion topics in the face-to-face class or online with a group instead of the instructor deciding.
- These topics were better than last semester's class when we had very basic topics, but some of these topics were too deep and were a little difficult to discuss with our peers. Sometimes it was a little uncomfortable.
- I am afraid to talk about some issues that might bother or upset other students. For example, we talked about gay marriage and some students are for it and others against it. This was a little hard to talk about. It was helpful, but it was hard.

## **V. Discussion**

This study examined students' perceptions of peer interaction which involves students communicating and engaging with one another (Hirumi, 2006) through online discussion forums. Discussion forums can enhance the quality of EFL classes by providing students with opportunities to participate in meaningful dialogue outside of the face-to-face classroom. Students seemed to be pleased overall with the effectiveness of peer interaction on the discussion forum. Most students mentioned that a major advantage of peer interaction on the discussion forum is that they have more opportunities to use English outside of the face-to-face classroom which aligns with Moore and Kearsley's (2005) research. Students also indicated that if they are shy or even a little tired in class,

they can participate better in the online discussion forums. Shy students may feel uncomfortable to openly discuss their views in the face-to-face classroom. Moore (2010) discussed the benefits of peer interaction on the discussion forum for students who may be more timid. In addition, some students may lack confidence to fully participate in activities in the face-to-face classroom (Nielson, 2013).

Some students had classes all day or may not have gotten adequate sleep and therefore were a little tired and had trouble focusing and participating in the face-to-face classroom. The discussion forums gave them the opportunity to complete assignments on their own time and when they felt more alert or interested in studying. Students also mentioned that the online discussion forums helped them to improve their English by focusing on deeper topics. Kolloff (2001) discussed the value of peer interaction in improving critical thinking skills since students have to analyze and respond to other students' posts. Students could learn new vocabulary and improve critical thinking skills by discussing complex issues and topics.

Students' perceptions of effective learning coincided with some of the principles of described by Tibi (2016). Students mentioned active participation and involvement on the discussion forum as examples of effective learning. Although the students seemed pleased overall with peer interaction in the online discussion forum, there were also some shortfalls and recommendations that the instructor should consider in future classes. Not all of the recommendations may be practical, and instructors must ultimately determine what is best for their students, but the students' ideas should at least be considered. Students should have a voice in their learning, and instructors should strive to create a student-centered classroom both online and offline that focuses on the needs of the students.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Discussion forums provide a meaningful and engaging way for students to practice English outside of the face-to-face classroom. Students indicated that they were pleased with the extra English practice that they received outside of the face-to-face classroom. They also discussed the practicality of online discussions for students who are shy or are not alert in class. In addition, they expanded on how they benefitted from being able to discuss deeper topics. Students clearly discussed the effectiveness of online discussion forums and how these assignments aided them in improving their English. However, they also discussed shortcomings that should be taken into consideration in future classes. Instead of asking students if there is anything that they did not benefit from while completing the discussion forum activities, it may be more beneficial to ask them what

recommendations they have for future discussion forums. Students may be hesitant to state negative views about class activities directly to the instructor. Asking for recommendations from students may be perceived more positively and could result in more balanced and honest opinions. Based on student recommendations, the instructor made changes to her more recent classes in the spring semester of 2017. Some of the students who had taken the previous classes (the classes researched in this study) expressed their appreciation for the changes that were made. The instructor made slight reductions to the amount of homework and also sought student feedback on the first day of class regarding assignments. Furthermore, the instructor periodically requested input from students regarding assignments throughout the semester.

It is important to focus on quality peer interaction in online discussion forums. Meaningful peer interaction on the discussion forum should be promoted, and instructors should strive to increase practical language interactions since students may not have ample opportunities to communicate in the face-to-face classroom. In addition, students should be given a voice in creating course curriculum to help promote a more student-centered learning environment. Students should be able to give input in terms of which topics should be discussed on the discussion forum. The instructors can also be more flexible with the quantity of the discussions and due dates based on student preferences. It is also critical for instructors to consider that they play a critical role in promoting student engagement on the discussion forum. Moreover, instructors need to provide substantive feedback to students so that they can evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and improve their English communication skills. When designing discussion forum activities and guidelines, Mokoena (2013) recommends providing clear guidance and quality feedback. Additionally, it is critical to ensure that expectations are set early on and that discussions are well organized. The instructor also has a pivotal role in fostering engagement and increasing motivation. Finally, it is highly beneficial for the instructor to give significant thought to the types of questions that will be asked on a discussion forum to help improve student participation.

This study can be beneficial for educators and course designers. It is important to gain insight from students when developing blended learning programs to better suit their learning needs. Peer interaction can aid students tremendously on discussion forums, especially in an EFL context when students may have limited opportunities to practice English outside of the classroom. Furthermore, peer interaction is connected to student satisfaction in the online learning classroom. A primary limitation of the study is that the instructor was researching her own students. Even though students were encouraged to discuss their thoughts freely and openly without criticism from the instructor, some may not have honestly shared their views. The instructor also examined students' feedback from the university student course evaluations at the end of the semester which may have

had more negative feedback about the discussion forums; however, no negative comments about the discussion forums were included. These questions in the course evaluation only examined the course in general though and did not expand on the discussion forum since the blended learning format is not a requirement university-wide. Future research should include quantitative analysis to get input from a larger number of students. In addition, it would be beneficial to get more detailed feedback about peer interactions based on instructors' observations.

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