"Let's Keep it Informal, Guys"

A Study of the Effects of Teacher Communicative Strategies on Student Activity and Collaborative Learning in Internet-based English Courses

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Abstract

The paper explores the quantity and quality of communication produced by teachers in Internet courses of academic English, particularly during the initial stages of course activity. The courses are entirely conducted in virtual learning environments without physical meetings, and are part of the Bachelor programme (A–C level) of English at Mid Sweden University. The pedagogic design of the courses is based on collaborative learning, which presupposes a communicative environment with positive interdependence and interaction, where knowledge is shared by students questioning and challenging each other. Consequently, the teacher's role in setting communicative norms which encourage an environment of high acceptance, where students feel that they can express their opinions freely, is of utmost importance. The results suggest that there are two important factors that affect student activity in the initial stages of an online course: how much the teacher communicates with the class and the manner in which he or she does so.

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, higher education has experienced a radical shift of paradigm – a shift from 'instruction' to 'learning'. In response to the demands of the 'learning society', the idea of life-long learning and an increasingly digitalised global society, higher education has had to evolve from a system which merely transfers pre-packaged knowledge from lecturer to student to one which "creates environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves" (Barr & Tagg, 1995:15). These changes have in turn had a great impact on teaching practices in higher education, both in terms of the practical skills needed and how we define our roles as teachers.

Arguably, a forerunner of this development is e-learning. Learning environments created by means of modern information and communication technology have, in response to the shift in learning paradigm, rapidly changed from being places for downloading ready-made educational material to places that make learning with others in a social context possible (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Haythornwaite, 2002; Koschmann, 1996; Stephenson, 2001). The present paradigm, so called Computer Supported Collaborative Learning CSCL (Salmon, 2004), involves a shift from passive learning to active student-driven participation, collaboration and dialogue between learners, in turn resulting in a shift of power from teacher to student and a shift of emphasis from the individual to the collective.

As roles and power relationships change, the need for new patterns for communication emerges. The traditional situation, where teachers (with power) provide knowledge to students (without power), is becoming less and less valid. Knowledge is instead constructed in collaboration, "negotiated" through social processes where people must define their roles, build trust, and identify common goals and expectations (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). The tool used in all these processes is language and the

social signals transmitted through this medium arguably constitute the "oil" of the collaborative machinery.

In an e-learning environment, further challenges in this respect are represented by the mode of interaction; communication in the digital environment is often primarily dependent on asynchronous written text. This mode of interaction is lacking in such key elements as intonation, facial expressions, eye contact and body language – social elements of communication that we heavily rely upon (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Such non-referential meaning instead has to be embedded in the written text, leading to a situation that demands special language skills, both in relation to production and interpretation.[1]

This paper aims to look at some aspects of communicative strategies used by teachers in the initial stages of an Internet course, and explores the effects of these strategies on student activity in the course.

Theoretical framework

The learning theories relevant to this study are those associated with collaborative learning. Collaborative learning can be described as the active reconstruction of a learner's knowledge

and ideas through peer-to-peer dialogues, commenting, discussing, sharing, and reconceptualising (see O'Donnell, Hmelo-Silver & Erkens, 2006). Underpinning these methods are the assumptions that learning is socially mediated knowledge construction based on cooperation, and that learning results from interaction and negotiations between learners, instructors and content. The method is greatly influenced by the ideas of Vygotsky (1962, 1978).

The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. According to Vygotsky (1978:57), "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)." He goes on to say that all "higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals." (p. 57). A second aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the idea of zone of proximal development, defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978:86). In other words, development is attained when children (and indeed adults) engage in social behavior. Socio-cultural factors are obviously central to this idea, language arguably being the most important.

Lave and Wenger (1991), building on the ideas of Vygotsky, introduce the idea of situated learning. Here learning is placed in the context of social relationships – situations of co-participation. As Hanks (1991:14) puts it in his introduction to their book: "Rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place". Learning is seen as a process of participation in a *community of practice*. A community of practice refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations. The community as a whole and the social processes within it are thus seen as vital in the knowledge building process.

Assuming that learning is something we do in cooperation with our peers also means reconsidering the professional mission and ultimately, the professional identity, of the teacher. The ter-

minology used in one area of education in particular, namely e-learning, illustrates this state of affairs. Online educators are referred to as *learning facilitators*, *online facilitators*, *e-moderators* and *e-tutors*, terms which reflect a very different teacher role than the traditional 'lecturer'. In her *five stage model*, Salmon (2004) describes the technical and the social processes that an online learning community goes through and the role of the online educator in these stages. It is clear that the educator has to be more than a mere source of information, a traditional lecturer, and Salmon places much emphasis on the importance of the e-moderator in the process of community building. Salmon's list of tasks that the e-moderator has to deal with includes many social aspects such as giving encouragement, dealing with insecurities, instilling confidence, building bridges for communication, giving guidance about online behaviour, encouraging the sharing of information etc., and all this in addition to the more traditional tasks of giving feed-back and evaluating work. Especially in the initial stages of a course, the educator's most important task is arguably to orchestrate the prerequisites for learning, to set the scene for a collaborative learning environment. It is thus reasonable to expect the efforts of the teacher, both in terms of quality and quantity, to be of decisive importance for the future success/

failure of a particular course. In an e-learning environment, these efforts are largely manifested linguistically, in the educators' everyday communication with the students.

Formality is one such linguistic aspect. Formality is generally associated with communicative situations where there is great power difference and/or social distance between the communicators (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Formal style is, however, very hard to define, even though most native speakers intuitively have a feeling for when something is formal or not. Many researchers, however, make a distinction between formal and informal based on the factor of 'involvement' (see Biber, 1988 and Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999, for example). According to Heylighen and Dewaele (1999:1) a formal style is "characterized by detachment, accuracy, rigidity and heaviness; and informal style is more flexible, direct, implicit, and involved, but less informative". There are also certain norms associated with formal vs. informal style, especially in written language. One such example is the absence of contractions, one linguistic detail looked at in this study.

Description of the courses

The Department of Humanities at Mid Sweden University has been distributing Internet courses

in English (as an academic discipline) on undergraduate level since 2004. The programme runs over three terms with full-time courses taught entirely over the Internet. The courses were built according to a collaborative model, and the aim has been to create active learning communities where the students actively participate in their own, and their peers' learning processes. The pedagogic design (the nature of the tasks, the communicative tools available, the communicative culture etc.) has taken the five key elements of collaborative learning identified by Johnson, Johnson, Stanne and Garabaldi (1990) as a starting point:

Positive interdependence: Students organize themselves by assuming roles which facilitate their collaboration.

Promote interaction: Students take responsibility for the group's learning by sharing knowledge as well as questioning and challenging each other.

Individual accountability: Each student is held responsible for taking an active part in the group's activities, completing his/her own designated tasks, and helping other students in their learning.

Social skills: Students use leadership skills, including making decisions, developing consensus, building trust, and managing conflicts.

Self-evaluation: Students assess individual and collective participation to ensure productive collaboration.

Courses are run in the online learning management system WebCt. In the course platform, the student can access objects such as voice commented PowerPoint lectures, study guides, compendia, diagnostic quizzes, course tasks and various web links related to the subject. It is also in this environment that most of the in-course communication takes place. Default communicative tools include discussion boards, e-mail and chat, but other communicative tools that allow for communication using real-time audio (Skype and Marratech) are linked into the platforms.

Most tasks on the course are designed to include an individual element, a group element (usually involving students reviewing and discussing each other's work), followed by an individual reflection where the student evaluates his/her own performance and the feed-back received from others. There are also other types of tasks

such as diagnostic quizzes, group tasks (students together producing PowerPoint presentations, for example), problem-based tasks and discussion seminars, where different issues are discussed using real time audio. In the initial courses (the objects of this investigation), however, most communication takes place using text-based, asynchronous discussion boards and e-mail. More sophisticated communication tools are introduced after one term.

In this article, teacher communication with students in the very first course unit they come into contact with is looked at. The course module, Grammar, 7.5 ECTS credits, takes up the basics of grammar in terms of terminology and structure, and runs over a five-week period, finishing off with a written exam. Students are graded on their performance during the course (various tasks), combined with the result of their written exam. During this particular course, the students do three main types of tasks: individual online quizzes (mainly diagnostic), free discussion tasks where the entire class contributes to discussions of a more general nature (such as discussing the pros and cons of formal, explicit grammar teaching in relation to language learning), and finally, five graded tasks based on the model described above (individual effort, peer reviews followed by individual reflection).

Since all the students in this study were novices to the environment and did not know the other members of the group at the start of the course unit, the teacher had a very important role in guiding students in the workings of the learning management system and in explaining the organisation of the course. Looking at the group processes with reference to Salmon's (2004) five stage model, we would argue from experience that participants in this particular course unit primarily go through the first three stages of the proposed five stage model, namely the *Access and Motivation* stage (the participants engage in trying to access the system); the *Online Socialisation* stage (the participants familiarise themselves with each other and their learning environment) and the *Information Exchange* stage (participants begin to explore the range of information available to them and the interaction at this stage concerns the content and the sharing of information). Although there is some *Knowledge Construction* (the fourth stage), where participants start to become involved in active interaction and knowledge construction, responding and reacting to each other's input, this activity is orchestrated by the design of the tasks rather than a natural development. The final *Development* stage, where learners become more responsible for their own learning and need less support

from the e-moderator, is probably not achieved this early in the course programme.

The number of participants per class is limited to 40, and since the programme normally attracts around 80 students per term, two parallel courses with exactly the same content (but different teachers) are normally set up. The average class represented in the study thus consists of a maximum of 40 students and one teacher. Demographically, the student groups are quite heterogeneous. The majority (roughly 70 per cent) are female, and a typical term the proportion of mature:younger students is roughly 50:50. Several of the students (roughly 15–20 per cent) study the courses from other countries than Sweden, and many participants are native speakers of other languages than Swedish. Since the focus of the present study is on teacher behaviour, however, detailed accounts of the student demography will not be presented here.

Aims

The aim of the present study is to explore how the quantity of communication produced by teachers during the initial stages of a course affects the activity of the students and how this in turn affects pass rates. In addition, we also examine the style of communication of two of the teachers in terms of formality and the resultant effect in terms of signalling distance or involvement.

Methods and material

Teacher communication in the initial course unit, Grammar, 7.5 ECTS credits, of the English Internet course programme was observed over six terms, from autumn 2004 until spring 2007. This comprises twelve separate class groups in all. The learning environment, course content and methods of examination were identical on all these occasions.

Five teachers are represented in the study, two males and three females. Details of these teachers are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Teachers included in study*

Teacher	Gender	Age	First language	Online teaching experience
Teacher 1 (taught one of the classes studied)	Female	30+	Native Swedish speaker with near-native proficiency in English	Limited: first course taught.
Teacher 2 (taught four of the classes studied)	Male	35–40	Native Swedish speaker with native proficiency in English	Medium: at least 4 terms of online teaching.
Teacher 3 (taught two of the classes studied)	Female	35–40	Native Swedish speaker with native proficiency in English	Some: two terms of online teaching.
Teacher 4 (taught four of the classes studied)	Male	40+	Bilingual Swedish and English	Extensive: 5 years of teaching online courses and has designed and built online courses.
Teacher 5 (taught one of the classes studied)	Female	30+	Bilingual Swedish and English	Limited: first course, but has studied extensively on Internet courses.

The communication collected consisted of e-mails, web-board discussion contributions and group announcements. The material was collected from the platforms and saved in text files for further analysis.

Four sub-studies were made:

Sub-study 1 is a correlation study between quantity of teacher communication and student activity. 'Quantity of teacher communi- cation' was here defined as e-mail and discussion board contributions made by the teacher, standardised to take the number of students in the course into account (i.e. average contributions to each student). Note that many of the communicative events were group mails and group announcements in bulletin boards. Student activity was studied by looking at the number of student to student contributions in the discussion boards and was standardised to the average number of contributions made per

student. Since the discussion bulletin boards are where the students are instructed to discuss their peer review tasks etc., it is assumed to be a reasonable indication of student activity, at least for comparative purposes.[2]

Sub-study 2 is a correlation study between teacher activity and student pass rate. Pass rate was calculated on the performance the term the course was given. Students who passed the course at a later date were not included in the data.

Sub-study 3 is a longitudinal study of the communication in the classes of Teacher 2. Teacher communication was observed over four course occasions and correlated to student activity.

Sub-study 4 is a qualitative study of the linguistic behaviour of Teachers 1 and 5 with special reference to the level of formality and involved vs. distancing style. Formality indicators studied included contractions, opening phrases and closing phrases. Involved or distancing style were analysed by looking at aspects such as the signalling of support, sympathy, encouragement, praise, accessibility and interest. Teachers 1 and 5 were chosen because their classes displayed the greatest difference in student activity. Both teachers also taught one class only. In addition, the teachers are comparable in that they are both inexperienced online educators, they are of similar age and both are women in their 30s. The profiles of the two teachers differ, however, in two important respects: Teacher 1 has a somewhat weaker command of English and Teacher 5 actually has extensive experience of online learning but in the role of student; she attended the Internet English programme at Mid Sweden University herself.

Results

Sub-study 1: A correlation study between quantity of teacher communication and student activity

The most active teacher of the teachers observed was Teacher 5. On average each student in her class received a total of 106 messages in the form of e-mail messages or discussion bulletin board messages. The least active teacher was Teacher 1, whose students received 17 messages during the course on average. Interesting to note at this stage is the difference in communicative tools the different teachers chose to use. Teacher 5, for example, favoured the more public tool of discussion bulletin board notices, whereas Teachers 1, 2 and 3, for example, showed a preference for the more "private tool" of e-mail messages. Figure 1 below summarises the teacher activity in the courses.
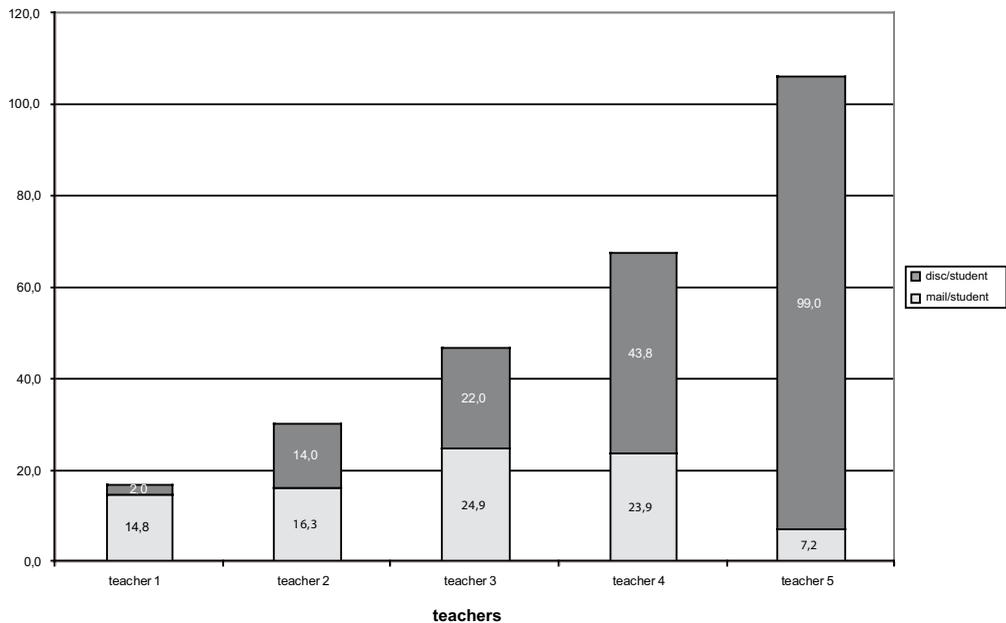
Figure 1. *Teacher activity – average number of e-mails and discussion contributions sent by the teacher to each student in the classes*

The student activity, measured by looking at the average number of discussion board submissions per student in the classes, showed that there was a very strong positive correlation (0.9) between teacher activity and student activity. Students in the class of Teacher 5, for example, were roughly four to fives times more active than the students in the class of Teacher 1. This can arguably be compared to the activity of these two teachers – Teacher 5 submitted roughly five times more e-mails and discussion board messages per student than Teacher 1. The results are summarised in Figure 2 below.
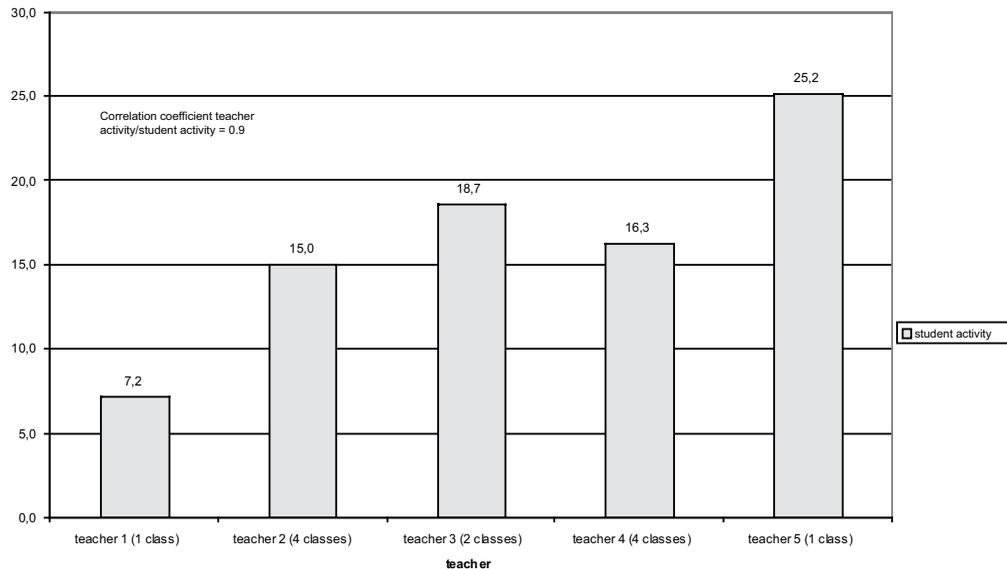
Figure 2. *Student activity in the different classes*

Sub-study 2: A correlation study between teacher activity and student pass rate

Student pass rate was calculated as the percentage of students of the class who had passed the course by the end of the term it started. Note that the figures are misleading in that very few students who completed the course actually failed. Pass rates less than 100 per cent are rather an indication of the number of students that failed to finish assignments and/or never actually took the exam. Again there was a strong positive correlation between teacher activity and student pass rate (0.68). The results are summarised in Figure 3 below.
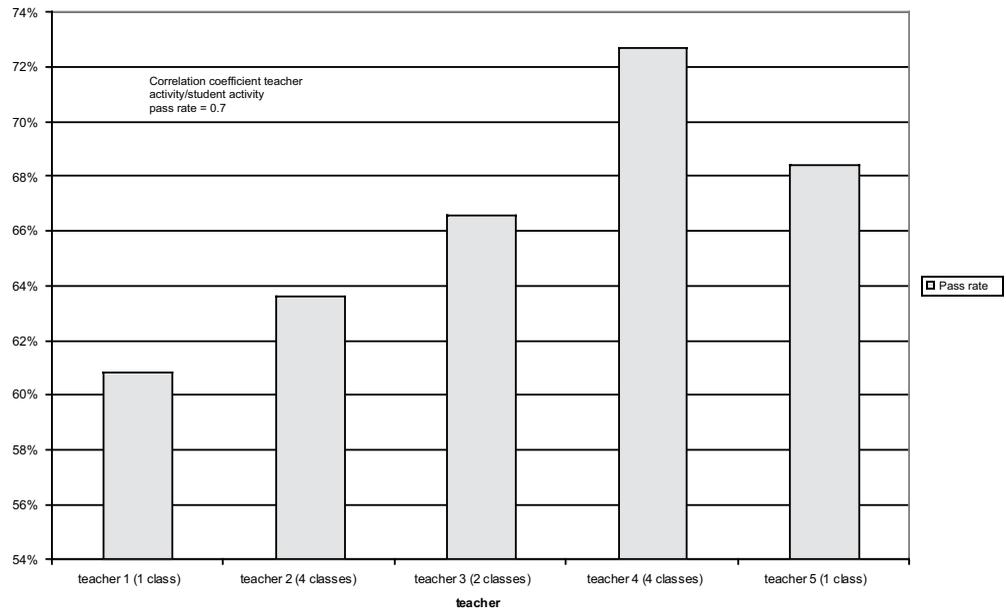
Figure 3. *Average pass rates of the classes of teachers 1–5*

Sub-study 3: A longitudinal study of the communication in the classes of Teacher 2

In this particular sub-study, we wanted to look more closely at the professional development of one particular teacher, and the effects this had on student activity in the course. The teacher chosen was Teacher 2, a 35–40-year-old native Swedish male with near-native proficiency in English. The teacher in question was a novice online educator when he joined Mid Sweden University, and it is interesting to follow his development during four terms of teaching the same course. It is apparent from the results that as Teacher 2 gains more experience, his input in terms of the number of communicative events with students increases. Initially, Teacher 2 can be classed as a comparatively sparse communicator, the average student receiving roughly

20 e-mails and discussion board contributions from him per course. By course occasion 4, however, Teacher 2 has more than doubled this input. There is a very strong positive correlation (0.94) between the quantity of communication and student activity; the student activity on the last course occasion is more than double that of the first course occasion. The results are summarised in Figure 4 below.
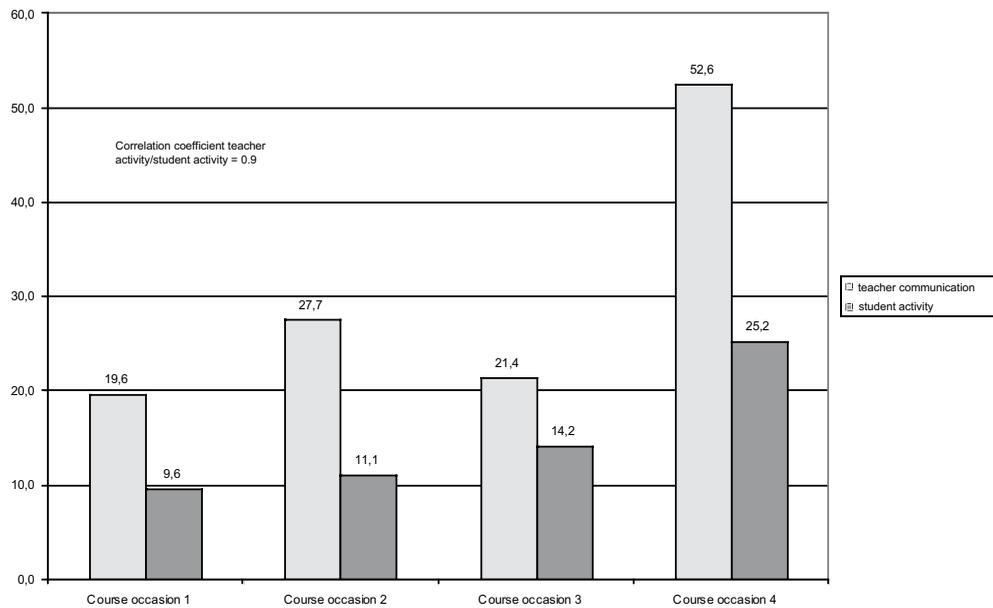

Figure 4. *Teacher 2's communication on four course occasions*

Sub-study 4: A qualitative study of the linguistic behaviour of Teachers 1 and 5 with special reference to the level of formality and involved vs. distancing style

In this part of the study, we looked more specifically at the language used by two teachers, namely Teacher 1 and Teacher 5. Of special interest is the use of formal and informal style and how the language used signals power relations, social distance and the teacher role.

The communication produced by Teacher 1 contained far fewer contractions (3.2 contractions per 1000 words written) than that of Teacher 5 (28.2 contractions per 1000 words written). The result of avoiding contractions is that many messages, especially those containing negations coupled with directives, become rather blunt, at times taking on the tone of direct orders. The effect is illustrated in the following examples produced by Teacher 1:

(1) If your information is correct, DO not CONTACT X.
(2) You have not attached your answers to your mail in the discussion forum.
(3) I have still not received a confirmation that your exam has reached X at the embassy in Rome.

(4) You will just send in your contributions to the Discussion notice-board.
(5) You must not communicate with anyone on the course about the exam before the official exam time.
(6) You are not supposed to have a simultaneous discussion with your group members.
(7) We will remove this function as soon as possible in order to avoid confusion.

Teacher 1 uses a very limited repertoire of openings and set politeness formulae in her correspondence: all of her letters are addressed as "Dear …". In contrast Teacher 5 varies her style more, using "Dear" extensively in the beginning of the course, but then gradually introducing openings such as "Hi", "Hello all", and even "Hiya".

There is a similar pattern in the repertoire of closing phrases used by the two teachers: Teacher 1 generally uses variations of *Regards* such as "Kind regards" (17), "Best regards" (3) and "Regards" (5) as well as some instances of the phrase "Best wishes" (7). Teacher 5 uses less set phrases to close her correspondence, but instead signals aspects such as praise, invitations to contact, well wishings etc. Examples of closing phrases include: "All the best" (39), "Please contact me if …" (3), "Take care" (4),

"Any problems let me know" (9), "Glad you enjoyed it" (1), "Well done" (33), "Good luck" (10) and "Yours" (4).

The use of formal vs. informal style signalling distance vis-à-vis involvement in the correspondence of Teacher 1 and Teacher 5 is also illustrated in the following examples of apologies delivered to students on the course:

(8) Dear X,
    In order to get your message on the Discussion notice-board, you have to submit it. I know that it says that you do not have to submit your answer, but you actually have to do this if you want your contribution to end up in the right place. We will remove this function as soon as possible in order to avoid confusion. I apologize for the mistake that has been made, and hope that you are satisfied with these new arrangements.
    Kind regards,
    "Teacher 1"

The use of pronouns such as *we*, the use of the passive form – "the mistake that has been made", the use of formal Latinized vocabulary – "apologize", "in order to avoid confusion", "arrangements" etc., and the lack of contractions – "we will …", all give the impression that Teacher 1

distances herself from the event and the student. Compare this to Example 9 below, an apology delivered by Teacher 5.

(9) Dear X, I'm so, so sorry!
    Totally my mistake. I do remember our discussion, but when I sat down to mark all of your essays I totally forgot. What can I say... more than sorry. I'll sort it out asap. Won't have time to do it before the weekend, I'm afraid, since I'm teaching all week, but you do not have to worry, I WILL sort it this time around!!! I do apologize! Bad XXXX! Slap on the fingers to me!
    All the best,
    "Teacher 5"

The jokes, contractions, deletions, abbreviations, and the personal references used by Teacher 5 all contribute to a familiar tone signalling less distance and power difference.

The two teachers also differ in the way that they give response to students. Consider the following two examples:

(10) Dear X,
    Thanks for your answers! You have corrected the mistakes and given some explanations. Well done! You will find the

answer key in lecture 8.
Kind regards,
"Teacher 1"

(11) Hi X,
Finally one person who has got some good experiences of grammar learning! Thank you!!! I'm convinced that a good teacher is more than necessary in learning grammar. I also believe that some people find grammar much easier to apprehend than others, just as some find playing football or creating music easier than others. Interesting thoughts!
"Teacher 5"

In Example 10, Teacher 1 makes no reference to the actual work produced. In contrast, Teacher 5 does so and also uses her response to introduce her personal views on the topic. The result signals engagement and involvement both in the student's work and the topic.

Finally, similar tendencies can be seen in the two teachers' use of questions in their correspondence. Teacher 1 uses questions strictly for information purposes as in the example below:

(12) Dear X,
Which quizzes do you have problems with? Can you be more specific? I have looked through the different settings, and everything looks ok, so please try again. If the problems are still there, let me know. And yes, the quizzes are obligatory.
Regards
"Teacher 1"

In contrast, Teacher 5 tends to use questions (especially tag questions) to get the students involved in the topics being discussed:

(13) Isn't it sad how the wsord [sic!] 'grammar' has got such a negative 'reputation'?
(14) It's often when you start thinking about grammatical rules that you get insecure, don't you think?
(15) Good thinking, X! There is also a different [sic!] in spoken and written language, isn't there?

In summary, it can thus be noted that the communicative styles of Teacher 1 and Teacher 5 differ greatly. Teacher 1 is more formal and distant, signalling her position clearly while Teacher 5 is more involved with her students and on more equal terms.

Discussion

The results suggest that there are two important factors that affect the level of student activity in the initial stages of an online course: how much the teacher communicates with the class and the manner in which he or she does so. The optimal prerequisites for an active class seem to be a teacher who communicates frequently with the students and shows involvement through his/her language use. There are, however, several other factors which could have affected the results. Note, however, that these do not include differences in course design – all the courses were identical in this respect. The make-up of the student groups, however, is one factor that may well have affected the results, a factor that has not been investigated in detail here.

It could well be argued that interested students make teachers more engaged, and that such a group is also likely to be more active and consequently also more likely to complete a course. In the courses studied, however, there are no systematic differences in the student group profiles. And even the most ambitious student group would have to be guided and invited to communicate initially in order for the group dynamics to start operating. In an e-learning environment this responsibility initially lies entirely in the hands of the teacher and this role should not be underestimated.

There may, however, be a conflict of roles here. The role of being a social facilitator, a "nice guy", does not always go hand in hand with the traditional role of the university teacher as an expert and examiner. The former arguably requires that you communicate on less formal terms while the latter is easier when you distance yourself and signal your authority clearly.

One could postulate new models for roles of educators in e-learning contexts; the examiner does not have to be involved with the course on an everyday basis, but is needed for input of academic content, and to evaluate academic production. The social facilitator, the engine in the group processes, needs different skills, socio-psychological skills. These two roles do not, and perhaps should not, have to be played by the same person. One interesting result from the study above illustrates this: the person most successful at encouraging student activity was not the experienced university lecturer, but a novice, a former student, who had herself studied the courses. We would argue that the insight into what it is like to be an online learner and the subsequent involvement with the students which Teacher 5 dis-

plays through her language may well be key factors to her success.

The results of this study are hardly revolutionary. Research, as well as common sense, tells us that social factors play a key role in learning. What is surprising, however, is the fact that the social role of the educator and the skills needed for this role are so very rarely stated explicitly in formal contexts such as recruitment.

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Footnotes

[1] Synchronous audio communication is increasingly finding its way into e-learning. In our courses, however, we introduce these tools later, the second term, as learners become more confident with the technology involved.

[2] There may well have been more communication between students outside this forum (through private emails and telephone conversations, for example) but this data was not available.