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Learner E-tivities: Exploring Malaysian Learners' Roles in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract: *Active, interactive and quality interactions through Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (ACMC) require a radical shift in learner roles in an effort to produce autonomous lifelong learners. This paper explores new dimensions in learner roles experienced by adult learners in a local private university in Malaysia. The sample population comprised sixteen 3rd Year course respondents (n=16) pursuing their Bachelor in Education (TESL) degree program. The sample within the case comprised six (n=6) case respondents and one tutor (n=1). This descriptive case study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods in the data collection process. Findings divulged that in their quest towards achieving learning objectives, adult learners indulged in various e-tivities. In the process they also experienced changing and challenging roles. Some of these roles included: initiators-wrappers, task orienters, social discourse networkers, e-collaborators, e-mentors and transcended from information seekers to knowledge constructors. These findings augur well as ACMC is considered a viable ubiquitous tool in many local and foreign institutions of higher learning (IHLs). More importantly, this paper is a pioneer effort in showcasing the Malaysian experience in chartering new frontiers in expanding and exploring learner roles in ACMC as a means of sowing the seeds of learner autonomy.*

Key Words: *Learner Autonomy, Computer-mediated Communication, Threaded Online DiscussionsIinteractions, Virtual Learning System, Adult Learning*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, new frontiers are being chartered in computer conferencing in the computer-mediated communication (CMC) realm as a means to enrich learners' teaching-learning experiences. As a result, both learners and tutors face challenging and changing roles. In lieu with this, a number of studies have extensively explored the area of tutor roles (Coppola et al. 2001; Rowntree, 1999; Berge & Collins, 1995). However, the area of learner roles has yet to be fully explored. As a means of exploring this new dimension in computer-mediated communication (CMC), this paper attempts to explore this aspect with the aim to showcase the different roles that Malaysian adult learners in this study played through Asynchronous

Computer-Mediated Communication (ACMC) in an effort to accomplish their learning objectives and tasks.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, computer-mediated communication (CMC) continues to make great strides in introducing the latest teaching-learning methodologies in both local and foreign institutions of higher learning (IHLs). Hence, it is important to define the term CMC. According to Berge and Collins, CMC refers to *"the use of computer systems and networks for the transfer, storage and retrieval of information among humans and the computer/network system is primarily a mediator rather than a processor of the information"* (1995:11). In this context, Ally (2004) further elaborated and referred to this mode of learning as containing the following characteristics: utilises the Internet to access and retrieve learning materials; interacting with the content, instructor and other learners; obtaining support during the learning process to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning and to grow from the learning experience.

In differentiating the types of CMC commonly used in most IHLs, Palloff and Pratt (1999) explained that there were two popular modes of web based communication - synchronous communication (same time, real time) and asynchronous communication (delayed, anytime, any pace, any place). A number of researchers argue that compared to synchronous communication, asynchronous communication gives learners more time to reflect on their ideas, which in turn promotes critical thinking and encourage learner autonomy (Bonk, 2004; Swan, 2001; Harasim, 2000; Jonassen 2000; Gunawardena et al., 1998).

Not wanting to be left behind in these global developments many IHLs in Malaysia have jumped onto the CMC bandwagon in an effort to keep abreast with these latest trends. This is in line with believing that CMC is a potentially significant area of development. In fact, in an attempt to be on the competitive edge of global economy, the need for lifelong learners and e-knowledge workers has now become more urgent. Hence, many local institutions of tertiary and higher education have taken the necessary steps and are making headway to ensure that the current and future generations keep abreast with this latest mode of learning. This was highlighted by Ziguras when he said: *"….many Malaysian educationists see educational technologies as a means to encourage greater self-direction and creativity on the part of learners….the appeal of educational technologies is that they will require learners to be more pro-active and autonomous and these personality traits are increasingly important in the knowledge economy"* (2001: 6).

In line with these latest developments, this paper is a pioneer effort on the part of the researchers to investigate the various e-tivities that Malaysian adult learners indulged in achieving their learning tasks for the *Listening and Speaking Course* (*LSC*). More importantly, this paper intends to look into the various roles experienced by learners through asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) via a learning management system called *Virtual Learning System* (*VLS*). The findings in this study will set precedents as it explores new dimensions in learner roles towards becoming autonomous lifelong learners thus paving the way for more such studies in other colleges and IHLs both locally and globally.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This descriptive case study employed a four-pronged data collection procedure which comprised quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was obtained by administering a survey questionnaire to all 16 adult part-time 3rd Year learners pursuing the Bachelor in Education (TESL) course at the Faculty of Education in a local private university in Malaysia. The open ended questions in the survey questionnaire enabled the researchers to investigate the different roles respondents' played in the asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) environment. The SPSS version 11.5 WIN software was used to analyse the quantitative data collected statistically. This method of analysis restricted to general statistical analysis. Therefore, frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation were obtained to report the research findings.

On the other hand, qualitative data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews with the 'sample within the case' (Merriam, 2002) group which consisted of six case respondents and one course tutor. These interviews enabled the respondents to divulge in-depth perspectives, understanding, feelings, views, information and clarifications regarding their roles whilst participating in ACMC. In addition, analysis of threaded online discussions between the tutor and learners as well as analyses of six case respondents' learning logs were also analysed to further trace learners' roles in this study. The qualitative data was analysed using the NVivo version 7 software. Finally, all qualitative data obtained from the interview schedule, analyses of learning logs and threaded ACMC were triangulated with learners' responses from the survey questionnaire to report the research findings.

3. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS IN THE STUDY

This study involved both course and case respondents. The total number of course respondents in the one intact class that formed the sample population for this study totalled 16 (n=16). All 16 course respondents were coincidentally females and pursued the course on a part-time basis. All course respondents had obtained their diplomas in teaching and were currently pursuing their degree program. The 'sample within the case' (Merriam, 2002) consisted of six case respondents (R1 to R6) and one tutor. The six case respondents (n=6) were all females. They were randomly selected from the sample population (n=16). All six case respondents were females and taught English language in primary schools. Their ages ranged from 32 to 45 years. In terms of ethnicity, one respondent was Indian (17%), two were Chinese (33%) and the rest were Malays (50%). The other respondent for this study was the course tutor, Lizzie (pseudo name) with whom an interview session was conducted.

5. FINDINGS

Gunawardena (1995) emphasised that in order to maximise interaction there is a need to design learner-centred systems which are based on dialogue and cooperation among learners. She further reinstated that such a move engendered a 'radical shift' in the structure of interactions among learners. In a similar vein, other researchers claim that learner-learner interactions were important as they created social presence that paved the way for meaningful learning (Swan, 2003; Anderson & Rourke 2001; Garrison et al., 1999). Threaded ACMC analysis in this study showed that learners' roles were related to the areas of obtaining information, accomplishing learning tasks, building collaborative learning communities, seeking help and guidance. In lieu with this, the roles that learners in this study played were categorised as initiators-wrappers, task orienters, social discourse networkers, e-collaborators, e-mentors and information seekers to knowledge constructors.

5.1 Initiators and Wrappers

Hara et al. (1998) and Feenberg (1987) opined that one way in which learners can take ownership of their learning is by defining roles for each learner in the CMC realm. Hara et al. described these roles as "starter-wrapper". Similarly, one important role played by respondents in this study related to being initiators of ACMC. Hara et al. in their study which analysed the content of online discussions in an applied educational psychology course stressed the importance of the role of "starter" and "wrapper". In their study, a "starter" referred to someone who initiated weekly discussions based on readings given for the course. On the other hand, a "wrapper" referred to someone who concluded and summarised weekly discussions. This study showed that learners were not designated any roles in the ACMC for their *LSC* by their tutor, Lizzie. However, some learners naturally took on the role of "initiator-wrapper". Findings showed that among sixteen course respondents', R2, R4 and R5 played the role of "initiators" and "wrappers" in the ACMC. The initiators were R2 and R4 while the wrappers were R4 and R5.

For example, when Lizzie asked the learners to look up the www.turnitin website to obtain information on plagiarism, R1 was the first learner to get into action. She heeded Lizzie's advice and made the first attempt with the hope of learning something new. An analysis of threaded ACMC showed that the first ACMC was posted by R4. In short, she displayed the qualities of an initiator. She was the first respondent to initiate the ACMC for this course and also contributed the most number of online postings i.e. 27 postings. In addition, she displayed a high level of initiative and was responsible in spearheading the ACMC. For example, she not only initiated downloading the Internet article for their assignment, but also aided her course mates in discussing how to answer the assignment question. Furthermore, she was also responsible in initiating and conducting tutorial discussions, looking up new references as well as sending attachments and related links on listening and speaking. This finding corroborated with Kelly's (2007) finding which indicated the important role of a starter or initiator in aiding ACMC to become more interactive. In terms of "wrappers", findings showed that both R4 and R5 summarised some aspects of the course content. On the whole, R4 took ownership of most of the ACMC. Table 1 shows some sample excerpts from threaded ACMC where R4 played the role of initiator in discussing the assignment and as a result, encouraged other peers to become active and interactive.

Table 1 Range of discussions by R4 as course initiator.

Sample threaded ACMC
This is the article that mentioned in the assignment question. [R4_ACMC/Para63].
1. Introduction:
Listening is an active process that involves attending, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding---5 stages of listening-------discuss briefly
Effective listening is essential to competent communication--------WHY?
2. ANSWER THE QUESTIONS ACCORDINGLY (as required)
3. Read and Understand the article: LISTEN
4. Then, IDENTIFY to which area of listening does the article 'LISTEN' best respond to? Is it listening for information, critical listening, emphatic listening or listening for enjoyment? Also discuss the 4 areas of listening in detail. For further reading, you can 'key in words' like emphatic listening (websites). NOW correlate the 4 areas with LISTEN, Identify which area best fits LISTEN. You must JUSTIFY (GIVE REASONS). If you feel, LISTEN overlaps with other areas as well, DISCUSS about it. Identify AREAS which are NOT related to LISTEN. Then, discuss why they are NOT related. If LISTEN RESPONDS to all the 4 AREAS, discuss WHY AND HOW? If LISTEN does not respond to certain areas, discuss WHY?
5. Do you agree with 'LISTEN" If Yes, Why? If No, Why? Do you think LISTEN would help you to be a better listener in CERTAIN CONTEXTS? DISCUSS the CONTEXTS
6. Which of the 6 areas of LISTEN provides the BEST suggestions? JUSTIFY. Which of the 6 areas of LISTEN has the WEAKEST Suggestions? JUSTIFY [R4_ACMC/Para71-83].

5.2 Task Orienters

Analysis of threaded ACMC and learning log entries showed that most course respondents' discussions centred on accomplishing their learning tasks. This included discussions on assignment, monitoring tutorial discussions, giving reminders and note taking. In line with achieving this aim, some course respondents portrayed the role of task orienters. The main aim of task orienters was to ensure that they discussed and

completed all learning tasks at the stipulated time. The first task on hand entailed having to complete and hand-in their assignment. Since the assignment carried 20 marks, initial ACMC seemed to focus on discussing the assignment. In this case, task orienters discussed and interacted to aid each others understanding of the assignment which was based on an Internet article titled 'LISTEN'. Apart from assignments, another important aspect of evaluation entailed answering quizzes. Learners were required to participate in two quizzes which carried ten marks and fifteen marks respectively. Therefore, task orienters made sure that they successfully completed and obtained good grades in these assessments. Table 2 shows extracts from learning logs and ACMC on how task orienters in this study participated and thereafter fared in this aspect.

Table 2 Task orienters' learning log entries and threaded discussions on monitoring learning and answering quizzes

Task orienters' sample interactions
Arghhh! The moment we dreaded most… Quiz 2. We were all given 20 minutes to answer. Thank God! I could answer all the question on time and they were basically straight forward. I think I did well as I had prepared myself before hand by planning to study all the topics before coming to class. I hope I can get an A once more for my quiz [R2_Log3/Para46].
Quiz 2. I had to answer 4 questions. Anyway this time I feel more confident as some of the questions asked we did discuss in our online discussions, luckily. I hope I can get an A for it [R3_Log3/Para23].
I will have to start reading up the topics and be ready for Quiz 1. I hope I can do well in it. I will try my best [R6_Log1/Para20].
Hi Tutor, Trying very hard to work on it. So far so good [R1_ACMC/Para71].
I was not sure whether I answer the questions correctly [R3-Log2/Para21].

The next task on hand entailed participating in tutorial discussions through ACMC. Analysis of threaded ACMC and learning logs showed that by communicating in online discussions learners were able to discuss, monitor their performance and learning, clarify and evaluate each others' ideas thus fostering the development of critical thinking. The excerpts in Table 3 show in-depth tutorial discussions among R1, R2, R3 and R5. Through these discussions other respondents were able to benefit and accomplish their learning tasks.

Table 3 Range of discussions by case respondents regarding tutorial discussions

Sample tutorial discussions
This type of listening requires one to be sensitive to changes in the speaker's volume, force, pitch and emphasis. However there are 3 important things to consider about this type of listening: 1. Hearing ability 2. Awareness of sound structure. 3. Integration of non-verbal cues [R1_ACMC/Para42].
What is Active listening?
Defining Active listening: Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. It is made up of three components;
1. Hearing
2. Interpreting
[R3_ACMC/Para48-51]

This finding corroborated with learning log entries made by case respondents. In fact, through such revelations, task orienters were able to indulge in deeper cognitive processing of course materials (Kelly, 2007). For example, R2 and R3 in their third learning log entry wrote:

> *Next, we worked in pairs and answered a Test question on two types of negotiating skills and were asked to give two examples. My friend and I decided to make a mind map which seemed the most relevant*….[R2_Log3/Para37].

> *This is helpful at least when we discuss this type of question I know how to answer some test question and we can practice it in class. Actually I like it if we can have more of such discussion sessions. This way I can test my understanding and also see how to answer questions in the exam* [R3_Log3/Para20-21].

Another important aspect that task orienters indulged related to giving reminders to course mates. By doing so, course respondents in this study were able to check and inform each other regarding the latest information and important datelines. Some researchers have highlighted that such social interactions aid in the development of learning communities (Swan 2001; Russell & Daugherty 2001; Poole 2000; Rheingold 1993). Likewise in this study through such discourses, case respondents were able to move forward and give support as a learning community. Table 4 shows some examples of threaded ACMC on the different types of reminders given by task orienters in this course.

Table 4 Sample ACMC on giving reminders

Respondents giving reminders through ACMC
Finish your assignments first! [R1_ACMC/Para77]
Thanks Tutor for reminding me [R2_ACMC/Para41].
Hope that all of you have noticed the error [R2_ACMC/Para26].
Hi everyone, Juz to inform that the exam timetable is out. Our subjects are on the 22 and 27 July [R1_ACMC/Para77].
Download the timetable already…thank you for the reminder. Others, please note too ok. [R4_ACMC/Para314].

Another finding regarding the role of task orienters entailed note taking. Findings indicated that more than half of the course respondents faced the challenge of having to memorise a lot of facts and information from the course module that was provided for the *LSC*. Hence, one way in which task orienters addressed this problem was by note taking. Analysis of learning logs further revealed some ways employed by case respondents to take down notes. Some of these techniques included note taking, listing, summarising and mind maps. Below are some sample extracts from their learning logs.

> *Anyway for me when she teaches I just note down the important and key points by highlighting it in my module maybe because I know she is just picking the important things in each topic. If that is important for her then it is also important for me. That is how I manage my studies also. I follow her guide* [R4_Log1/Para31].

> *I guess since exam was just round the corner and this being the last class, my tutor gave us some study tips such as to make mind maps, summarizing and listing into categories to help us remember the many facts from the first to the last topic. However, for me I have been compiling my short notes since my first tutorial* [R4_Log3/Para41].

In short, by employing such techniques task orienters were able to understand their course materials better. In further emphasising this R5 claimed: "*This way I'm actually able to help myself and this has enabled me to increase my confidence because I can achieve my learning tasks easily and have become better in managing my learning* " [R5_Log2/Para18 and 23].

5.3 Social Discourse Networkers

In an effort to create a sense of belonging and camaraderie, learners played the role of social discourse networkers. Findings showed that in an effort to build a close knit social community, course respondents used social cues in their messages. According to Henri (1992), social cues refer to a statement or part of a statement that does not relate to any formal content or subject matter. Studies conducted by Rourke et al. (1999) and Stacey (2002) proved that social cues lead to more intense and immediate interaction between learners and tutors. Findings in this divulged that in order to create social presence, course respondents used social cues such as conveying greetings, apologies, reciprocating, encouraging, showing appreciation and sense of humour. By using social cues, learners built a discourse learning community among themselves. This finding corroborated with other studies which found that learners' perception of how much they learned related to the level of social presence that was created within the discourse community (Cornelius & Higgison, 2007; Thomas et al. 2004; Richardson & Swan 2003; Jiang & Ting 2000).

Data analysis of threaded ACMC showed examples of social cues that were used by learners in this study to create social presence. The first example refers to conveying apologies to fellow learners when a mistake or error was made in order to sustain a virtual community.

Sorry R2 and friends….4 the failure. I'm attaching the picture again [R4_ACMC/Para56-57].

In further exploring social cues, data depicted a wide range of social cues used by course respondents in their ACMC. When introducing or beginning an interaction session, postings from course respondents started with a salutation or greeting. When ending and closing the interaction session, closures were used. In order to maintain discourse in a learning community, respondents reciprocated by asking for more information, feedback and further explanation. The range of social cues used ranged from informal to formal. In fact, some were written in the English language whereas others saw a mixture of English and Malay language. On the whole, respondents used informal language when they interacted with each other. However, when they communicated with their tutor they tended to use formal language. Below are some examples of social cues used by respondents in this study whilst interacting through ACMC.

Table 5 Sample social cues used by respondents in the study

Sample social cues
Salutation/Introduction
Hi everyone, How are things getting on with you guys?[R2_ACMC/Para65-66].
Assalamualaikum (*greeting in Malay language*), Nice to meet you again this semester [R4_ACMC/Para6-7].
Formal language used when interacting with tutor
Good evening to Tutor and friends [R3_ACMC/Para 83].
Dear friends and Tutor, [R4_ACMC/Para 50].
Greetings in both languages - Malay and English
Hello puan (*refers to madam in the Malay language*) and friends, [R4_ACMC/Para103].
Closures
Thank you. [R3_ACMC/Para58, 63]
Good night and sweet dreams to all of you. Just me [R2_ACMC/Para70-71].

In this study learners were not able to meet face-to-face. Therefore, to compensate this shortcoming, social discourse networkers had to rely on social presence to provide support, encouragement, motivation and appreciation to each other in the online milieu. Table 6 presents some of the findings in this aspect.

Table 6 Sample social cues of encouragement, motivation and appreciation

Sample social cues
Giving encouragement
Hope that this will help us to understand better [R2_ACMC/ Para10].
All the BEST! [R2_ACMC/ Para 68-69].
Hope you'll enjoy your reading [R5_ACMC/Para 89].
Giving motivation
Don't worry lots of time to prepare. [R1_ACMC/Para77].
Hope this will help you to understand what listening means [R2_ACMC/Para10].
Showing appreciation
Thank you friends for sharing with me the ideas [R3_ACMC/Para42].
Hi R4,
Thank you very much for your attachment [R1_ACMC/Para30].

Henri (1992) and Hara et al. (2002) mentioned that social cues may also include jokes and the use of symbolic icons. Data in this study did not find any evidence of these social cues. However, there was one feeble attempt by R4 to inject some humour which entailed:

"Hehehe….I hope all of you get the joke!" [R4_ACMC/Para58].

5.4 e-Collaborators

Jonassen (2000) stressed that dialogues and conversations aid in the development of collaborative learning communities. In short, threaded ACMC that are generally rich in dialogues and interactions are able to encourage collaboration because it provides a medium through which learners support each other, learn from one another, socialise and collaborate. From the socio-constructivist point of view, all these functions are inter–related because when learners interact with the learning content, tutor(s) and peers they construct their own meaning and knowledge from the information that is available from that CMC environment (Hong et al., 2003).

More importantly, such collaborations have been found to reduce the transactional distance between learners whilst promoting collaborative learning processes (Moore & Kearsley, 2004; Chou, 2002). Findings revealed that since course respondents were members of a virtual community, in order to sustain a collaborative learning community they took on the role of e-collaborators. Analysis of threaded ACMC provided evidence on how e-collaborators worked towards building a collaborative learning community. Data from interviews further corroborated this aspect and showed that respondents felt "*they should participate actively and also answer a few questions and also anything regarding questions that are posted in the VLS should be answered by the learners*" [R3_Interview/Para252].

The first instance showed that e-collaborators negotiated meaning making to forge their understanding of course content. For example, R4 and R5 in their threaded ACMC sought to clarify the difference between listening and hearing. Table 7 provides an example of e-collaborators in action.

Table 7 E-collaborators negotiating meaning making through ACMC

Sample ACMC of e-collaborators
R5: It's almost true that most of us tend to hear rather than listen. Well, the problem is because we tend to take listening for granted. It happens because we seem to accomplish our listening tasks unconsciously. We only become aware of what remarkable feats of listening we achieve when we are in an unfamiliar listening environment, such as listening to a language in which we have limited proficiency. [R5_ACMC/Para41]
R4: Uncritical listening means a listener is not listening so as to maximize his or her accurate understanding of what the speaker is saying because he/she has not developed a range of intellectual skills and abilities to reason well. Therefore, 'avoid uncritical listening when evaluations and judgments are called for' can be considered as a guideline to improve critical listening skills. [R4_ACMC/Para255]

In other instances, as e-collaborators case respondents not only gave their opinion on a variety of topics but also sought their peers' opinion and confirmation on certain areas of study. Table 8 shows some of these examples.

Table 8 More examples of e-collaborators seeking and giving opinion

e-collaboration through ACMC
If I am not wrong, "Speaking and writing are productive skills".[R2_ACMC/Para25].
Hope that I'm right. Do correct me if I'm wrong [R2_ACMC/Para58].
WHAT YOU THINK MY FRIENDS? [R6_ACMC/Para31]. PLEASE GIVE YOU OPINION!!!!!!!!!!!!!!![R6_ACMC/Para177].
I think we can apply that to our assignment too, [R1_ACMC/Para53].
As for me, I think the answer is both. Monologues is more useful in developing transactional and critical listening and dialogue is better at developing interaction and listening. [R2_ACMC/Para144].

5.5 e-Mentors

Since the *Virtual Learning System* (*VLS*) provided a learner-centred environment, learners had to take on the role of e-mentors. This indirectly, urged learners to take on more responsibility and to be independent (Hara et al., 1998). In line with being e-mentors, findings showed that course respondents not only managed their own learning but also responded to their peers' queries and responses. One aspect in which respondents played the role of e-mentors related to pointing out errors in the module to their peers. Analysis of threaded ACMC showed that as e-mentors, respondents highlighted some errors that occurred in the course module with the hope of helping, guiding and alerting their peers. In this study R1 and R2 were two respondents who showed this ability. For example, R1 wrote in her second learning log that there were some errors in the course module [R1_Log2/Para17]. This was corroborated in the threaded ACMC where her posting read:

> *Just want to point out to all of you the error found in Topic 6 as stated above. On p.105, 2nd paragraph, 1st sentence which was written "Speaking and writing are receptive skills* [R2_ACMC/Para24].

As e-mentors, respondents also portrayed their ability in checking and encouraging each others' progress with the assignment. One such example was depicted by R2 in the threaded ACMC and is cited below:

> *How's assignment going on? Should be ok, right?* [R2_ACMC/Para119]

5.6 Transcended from information seekers to knowledge constructors

Berge & Collins state that in the computer conferencing realm, learners roles changed from "*passive receptacles of knowledge to active constructors of their own knowledge*" (1995: 6). It is in this context that the socio-constructivist view of asynchronous computer-mediated communication makes its impact. Vygotsky (1978) pointed out that when learners interact with each other and their tutor through social interactions mediated by language they negotiated meaning making which leads to knowledge construction. In this study too, data analysis divulged that another role learners played to accomplish their learning tasks was that of information seekers and how this eventually culminated into knowledge construction.

Before learners could construct knowledge they first sought relevant information. In this aspect, data showed that with regards to the role of information seekers, learners employed various means of accomplishing this task such as sharing information, providing new information, summarising information, explaining and affirming information. Below are some examples of how learners transcended their role from information seekers to knowledge constructors in line with becoming autonomous learners (Nunan, 1997). Data analysis showed that learners used various sources of information in their attempt to share information in an effort to make meaning and construct knowledge for their learning tasks. Some of these examples included providing pictures, articles, definitions, tables of information and compiling notes. Table 9 provides some examples.

Table 9 Examples of sharing information in order to construct knowledge

Respondents sharing information in ACMC
Hi R4, You want to share an interesting picture? I think attachment failed to be attached [R1_ACMC/ Para18].
I think I can dig some past notes and maybe will post some examples in the online discussion too [R1_Log1/Para16].
I found a table on poor and good listening habits and have posted in the online general discussion [R3_Log/Para21].

Analysis of respondents threaded ACMC further showed that another aspect to the role of information seekers related to taking the initiative to provide new information. Kelly (2007) stressed that through interpersonal interactions, learners foster the development of a learning community. Nunan (1997) and Sheerin (1997) further elaborated that when learners provide new information sources they not only shared information but indirectly aided learners to indulge in self-management skills and abilities which would eventually pave the way towards managing their own learning and becoming autonomous learners. Data showed that respondents provided new information from a variety of sources such as friends, books, web sites and other reading materials in their ACMC. Some of these examples are provided in Table 10.

Table 10 Examples of providing new information to construct knowledge

Sample ACMC of providing new information
Hi everyone, Besides the factors stated in the module, listening can be affected by personal bias, environmental factors, a short attention span or daydreaming. Thanks [R1_ACMC/Para7-8].
According to Littlewood (1981), a listener must be prepared to cope with a wide range of situational and performance factors which are outside his control. Therefore, i) he will need to understand speech in situations where communication is made difficult by physical factors such as background noise, distance or unclear sound reproduction (e.g. over loudspeakers at airports or stations); and ii) he must become accustomed to speech which is not perfectly planned, but contains the false starts, hesitations and so on which characterise most everyday speech [R2_ACMC/Para16-17].
Dear R4, I would like to give the definition of transactional communication. According to Brown and Yule (1983), transactional communication seeks to present, receive or exchange information and listening is focused on giving or receiving information [R2_ACMC/Para103-105].

Apart from providing new information, data analysis showed that respondents employed other learning strategies such as summarising information as a means to construct knowledge that would help them accomplish their learning tasks. In further supporting this, Kelly (2007) pointed that learners learn from their peers and discussions forced learners to think through issues and by thinking and working them in their minds, learners would understand better. Similarly, analysis of threaded ACMC among course respondents showed evidence that summarising information fostered knowledge construction. Table 11 show types of information summarised by respondents through ACMC.

Table 11 Types of information summarised by case respondents in the study

Sample ACMC depicting information summaries
R2 posted summaries on topics that related to "listening." She summarised listening by highlighting two views i.e. top-down processing and bottom-up processing. She explained both briefly [R2_ACMC/Para34-36].
R3 posted a message that related to recognising words. She summarised them according to the following categories and provided more examples than those provided in the course module. Recognising words 1. Homophones-words that have the same sound but different spelling. Ex: sea-see 2. Homonyms - words that have the same spelling but different meanings. Ex: bank(of a river) - bank (place of business) 3. Polysemy - The use of a word which has several related meanings. Ex: run can refer several actions related to the basic meaning of moving quickly, clocks run, trains run and so on [R3_ACMC/Para7-13].
In response to R3's query on turn taking, R4 posted some information on recognising words and summarised the 5 skills involved in this activity. She explained that turn-taking involved 5 Skills and provided some examples 1. Knowing how to signal. E.g. agreeing in some way with the speaker 2. Recognising the right moment to get a turn. E.g. when speaker pauses to catch his/her breath. 3. Knowing how to use appropriate turn structure. 4. Recognising another speakers signal to speak. 5. Knowing how to let someone else have a turn. [R4_ACMC/ Para291-298] R4 also summarised information interestingly by using an acronym such as F > Feelings I > Interesting topics

F > Friendly surrounding

A > Able to pay attention.....

[R4_ACMC/Para281-285]

This finding was corroborated by R4 in the interview, when she said that the strategies she and her friends used in ACMC was as a means of aiding learners to construct meaning from text as well as a means of monitoring their reading to ensure that they understood what they read [R4_Interview/Para199-200].

Another aspect that related to information was explaining and making elaborations. Data analysis indicated that not all case respondents in this study made an effort or had the skill in explaining information. Findings revealed that only R2 and R4 made attempts to explain information. Perhaps this would have some indication on their level of learner autonomy? Table 12 shows some examples of postings where respondents elaborated and explained information.

Table 12 Examples of explaining information

Sample ACMC depicting providing explanations
I would like to elaborate on your points. 1) To maintain good social relations - The communication here is listener-oriented and not message-oriented. 2) For entertainment - The outcome of such listening is not usually measured in terms of how useful it was but in terms of personal satisfaction. 3) To obtain information - People listen to announcement at the airport, train terminal, news broadcast to enable them to get information necessary for day-to-day living. 4) For academic purposes - Listening is a central part of all learning. People listen to lectures, seminars and talks as a way of extending their knowledge and skills. A student who cannot understand what the teacher is saying in a class is seriously hampered in his learning. Hope I'm right in my explanation [R2_ACMC/Para76-81].
R4 explaining the difference between receptive and productive skills. Listening and reading are called receptive skills as input is received via these skills while input is produced through speaking and writing. Hence, speaking and writing are known as productive skills [R4_ACMC/Para38]. Recreational listening is more to entertainment where it is listening for pleasure and also for appreciating an event. Usually we do this in our pre-listening example listening to music, songs and etc. It does not focus on information context, relationship maintenance or input evaluation [R4_ACMC/Para116-120].

Studies have shown that in CMC environments learners seek approval, consent and guidance from their tutor(s) and peers. Hara et al. (1998) in their study discovered that learners feel comfortable working together when they succeed in building a common ground. One way of building this common ground was

by affirming information. Findings showed that when peers affirmed posted information it indicated a strong sense of belonging, increased motivation and learners perception of learning was more positive (Richardson & Swan 2003; Picciano 2002; Swan 2001; Gunawardena & Zittle 1997). Hence, in this study too, respondents sought assurance by providing affirmation to each other as a means to support their course mates through ACMC. Table 13 shows some examples of how respondents affirmed information through ACMC.

Table 13 Examples of threaded ACMC extracts on affirming information

Respondents affirming information through ACMC
Dear R1, I truly agree with you that listening is also affected by the factors stated above [R2_ACMC/Para15-16].
Dear R6, You're right. Those are the component skills in the process of listening [R2_ACMC/Para110-111].
Yes. I agree that noise distorts the message [R3_ACMC/Para101].

Another important quality of transcending from information seekers to knowledge constructors entailed a willingness to seek help and guidance from course mates and tutor(s) when faced with difficulties to accomplish their learning tasks. Kelly (2007) stressed that apart from learners learning from each other, learners also needed guidance from tutor(s) as they had relevant past experience from which they could learn. Data analysis showed that some respondents sought help and guidance in their quest to obtain new information. Below are some sample extracts that prove this point:

> *Looks like there isn't anything we can do because we need a password and ID number. Can anyone help?* [R1_ACMC/Para64]

> *Hope that I am right. Do give your opinion [R2_ACMC/Para145].*
>
> *Good afternoon Tutor. Can I explain in detail about the areas of listening?* [R3_ACMC/Para37]

> *Am I correct Tutor?* [R4_ACMC/Para85]

> *Tutor, Pls guide* [R4_ACMC/Para305].

CONCLUSION

Although not many studies have investigated learners' roles in the ACMC realm, this pioneer effort on the part of the researchers has shown that learners' roles are just as important as tutor roles. Some of the roles that learners played were categorised as initiators-wrappers, task orienters, social discourse networkers, e-collaborators, e-mentors and transcending from information seekers to knowledge constructors. All these roles were geared towards aiding social presence among learners. In short, they were meant for learners to become active and interactive to accomplish their learning objectives and tasks. In addition, as learners indulged in the various e-tivities, socialised, worked, helped, guided and collaborated with each through social cues, learners reduced the transactional distance but increased meaning making by seeking information which eventually led to knowledge construction. By participating in the ACMC they began to build collaborative learning communities that would foster the development of autonomous learners. Although the findings of this study are not generalisable, it bodes well as ACMC is considered a viable tool in many local and foreign institutions of higher learning (IHLs). More importantly, this paper has succeeded in exploring learner roles in ACMC as a means to sow the seeds of autonomous learners (Ranjit & Mohamed Amin, 2007).

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