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**LEARNER INVOLVEMENT IN DISCOURSE: A
CONTEXTUALISED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF
UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE DISCUSSIONS**

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in
Applied Language Studies

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Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

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University of Cape Town

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Abstract

This study analyzes the discourse from online discussions in a Language and Communication Economics course at the University of Cape Town. The study critiques claims made by several researchers in Computer Mediated Communication that CMC as mode of communication enhances interaction and produces hybrid discourse. These claims are shown to be somewhat technologically deterministic. Interviews with two facilitators of the course, and observations of classroom talk are also analyzed, to provide a richer description of the discussion. The study shows that the mode of CMC does not determine interaction patterns and the production of 'speech-like' discourse. Instead the discourse is influenced by a shifting and complex interrelationship of field, tenor and mode. Learners use 'speech-like' discourse in their social conversations where they interact among themselves. Their interaction with tutors resembles the traditional classroom question-response-evaluation mode of interaction. The implications for language teaching and academic literacy are that careful planning of tasks and learning sequences are crucial to optimize the educational affordances of the mode. The study also explores the role of 'offline' academic literacy practices, such as research practices, verbal interaction with tutors and verbal interaction among peers. Although it was not possible to draw clear conclusions about the contribution of the mode to the development of academic discourse in this study, it nonetheless became clear that contextual factors impact on its learning in an online learning activity. In the online forum learners can use their primary discourses to display their voices and identities, which challenges language teachers to harness the learners' non-academic knowledge and experiences for collaborative construction of knowledge. 'Offline', the online environment affords additional collaboration through a one-to-one verbal interaction between tutors and learners, also it enables other literacy practices, which might enhance the learning of this discourse. Nonetheless, the affordances of the mode for peer-peer collaboration remained largely unutilized in this study.

Chapter 1

1.0. Introduction

The introduction of computers in the writing and language classroom has opened doors to the use of social applications offered by the tool. Computers now facilitate electronic communication between learners and teachers. While the latest research in education promotes learner-centered approaches to learning (Nunan, 1987, Thornby, 1996), researchers in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) assure teachers that they can expect enhanced participation levels and the collaborative construction of knowledge when they use this medium in the classroom (Braine, 1997, Melzer, 1999). The autonomy that the computer forum provides to individual participants enables a marked increase in interaction, according to these researchers. In addition, these forums are characterized by discourse features mostly observed in spoken discourse (Werry, 1996, Troest, 1999). Language teachers have also approved the presence of discourse features in CMC 'that are deemed necessary for second language acquisition' (Sotillo, 2000).

This study attempts to investigate interaction patterns and discourse generated in the corpus of an online discussion forum of a Language and Communication Economics course, which aims to develop academic literacies. It finds that interaction patterns and discourse are strongly influenced by the interrelationship of field (the task participants are involved in), tenor (role relationships of participants) and mode (channel of communication) of discourse as opposed to the sole influence of the mode, as often reported in studies of CMC. The study also identifies the important role of offline academic literacy practices of students and their verbal interaction among themselves and with tutors, within the online discussion activities. I conclude that offline verbal interaction between tutors and learners in combination with academic literacy activities in the online environment might also contribute to the development of academic discourse. Informing my theoretical framework is a socio-cultural approach

to literacy developed in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1990, Street, 1984) which critiques technologically deterministic views of 'orality' and 'literacy'.

1.1. Statement of the problem

In South Africa, the transition of students from high school to University exerts enormous pressure on them as they adjust to the social and academic demands of the new environment. This change presents a greater challenge to students who speak English as a second (additional) language, since they have to grapple with adjusting to the predominantly English environment and acquiring a new form of writing, peculiar to the University. This institutionalized academic discourse has its own rules and behaviours, which academics follow unconsciously in their communication in the different academic disciplines (Angelil-Carter 1996), often without consciously informing learners about them. This academic discourse is not socially involving. Both the speaker and the audience are detached from it. As a result, learners cannot use their primary discourses where they express their voices and other literacy experiences. For that reason they feel distanced from it. Gee defines such discourse as secondary discourse because learners do not acquire it at birth. However its control is based on the ideologies of mainstream societies. Consequently, learners who speak English as a second language (ESL) and often lack knowledge of the ideologies of behaving, valuing, thinking and believing while reading and writing in the mainstream academic discourse are faced with an enormous challenge when learning how to control academic discourse.

Interviews conducted with first year students in a research project by the Department of Academic Development at the University of Cape Town (Igglesden, 1998) reveal diverse challenges among the so-called South African 'disadvantaged groups' with regard to the transition from high school to University. Lucia Thesen (1994) notes with concern the plight of the disadvantaged black South

African students, who experience a sudden change to a predominantly English instruction, and suppresses other literacy experiences outside the academic sphere which could assist in the acquisition of the new literacy. Reports from teachers of academic literacy development at U.C.T also attest to the presence of social and academic challenges faced by students from previously disadvantaged schools. (Angelil-Carter 1998). The objectives for this study are defined against this background.

1.2. Rationale

A discourse analysis of online transcripts in CMC has often ignored external influences in this learning context. They attribute the learning outcomes observed in this medium of learning to the mode of communication. Since literature on academic literacy reports that learners experience enormous challenges when learning academic discourse, I sought to explore the CMC learning environment for learner involvement in the construction of knowledge - an environment where learners can draw from their immediate situation while discussing with experts and among themselves.

1.3. Significance of the study

This study has used both online and offline data in the CMC learning environment. Therefore it contributes towards CMC studies in educational contexts through establishing the significance of offline activities in the CMC learning context. These activities have often been ignored, yet they play a significant role in this environment. This study has also applied the NLS theory to the field of CMC, which suggests that learners should be encouraged to draw on their prior literacies when engaging with experts and peers. My study also suggests that learning outcomes are determined by a complex of factors, including the goals of teachers and students' understanding of the social dynamics of the educational context rather than a simple one-to-one relationship of mode and learning outcomes.

1.4. Research Goals

Underpinning this research is an investigation of students' practices in computer-based discussions where the medium is used for the development of academic literacies. The study aims to address one major concern: whether computer-based discussions can offer an environment that promotes the involvement of learners in the construction of academic discourse, in a context where the detached discourse of lectures and academic essays can function to distance them further from acquiring it.

These are the objectives of the study:

1. To identify interaction patterns in the online discourse of a Language and Communication in Economics course.
2. To describe the discourse produced in these interactions in order to track indicators of involved discourse, which are resources learners bring from their primary discourses to the educational context.
3. To evaluate whether the discourse functions identified in the literature as necessary for promoting second language acquisition (SLA), are relevant in the South African higher education context.
4. To describe offline practices in the online discussion session and to analyse how they, together with the online interactions, impact on the development of academic discourse in an online discussion activity.

1.5. An outline of the study

The second part of this chapter discusses a theoretical framework and literature review, which draws on the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and studies of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in educational settings. This framework is not rigid, but has drawn from various ideas and findings in the literature. The framework is grounded in the socio-cultural view of literacy, which approaches literacy

in its political and social context (Street, 1984, Heath, 1983, Gee, 1990). In particular, I have drawn on James Gee's view of academic discourse as secondary discourse. In relation to teaching, Gee emphasizes that secondary discourses are acquired rather than learnt. Another key idea is Gee's challenge of a divide between speaking and writing, claiming that the features labeled as characteristics of speech and writing respectively are context-dependent rather than intrinsic to the mode. Those features are 'involved and fragmented' for speech and 'detached and integrated' for written language. Gee argues that the context rather than the mode determines the presence of each of the features. Of particular interest for this study is Gee's identification of the discourse features marking involvement.

Literature drawn from theories of computer-assisted learning, specifically from Computer Mediated Communication, provide a positive view of increased levels of involvement of learners in the construction of knowledge in this learning environment. Of particular interest to language teachers are the high levels of interaction among teachers and learners reported in this literature and the improved language productivity (Ortega 1997), which is believed to result from the reduced social cues of this mode, in comparison to face-to-face interaction. Interaction is important in this study since learners need a learning environment that promotes acquisition rather than one that distances them, such as a lecture. Learners also need to interact with academics in order to acquire control of this discourse. Language productivity is also crucial for this study, since the discourse that learners are guided to learning is specialized. It differs from everyday discourse and from the learners' primary discourse.

Conscious guidance of learners and acquisition in this mode of learning is thus another area from which literature has been drawn. This literature argues that teaching methods promoting unconscious acquisition of language in language learning do not offer adequate support for the learning of particular discourses. Janet Swaffar (1998) holds that graduate students, especially ESL learners, need prolonged

practice in the control of the academic discourse relevant to a particular discipline even if they are fluent in the foreign language. She questions whether immersion in a discussion group can fully provide this support. Similarly, Marie-Noelle Lamy and Robin Goodfellow (1999) argue that in order to promote reflective practice in language learning, 'developers of the virtual language classroom (need to) combine the processes of conscious reflection with those of spontaneous interaction' (p43). In other words, specific instruction as well as interaction in the target language is essential for effective learning. Although research into other learning activities within the virtual classroom is scanty, Rupert Wegerif and Peter Scrimshaw (1997) feel that verbal interaction in the Computer laboratory supports the learning process in this environment. Basing their argument on the Vygotskian and Neo-Vygotskian concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and 'scaffolding', they describe education as 'the process of being guided into the appropriate use of educated language and understanding itself ... as a discursive achievement primarily realized in and through the talk of learners' (p2). Given this framework, they explore the educational role of peer talk in the computer-assisted-language-learning environment. Among the different types of talk they identify, 'exploratory talk' appears to be a key discursive mode for developing understanding of concepts. However, they contend that teachers provide the actual education about appropriate discourse through close guidance and monitoring of peers.

Against this background (the socio-cultural approach to discourse and the promises of CMC literature in education) I have explored one particular CMC learning environment for the learning of academic discourse.

The second chapter discusses the methodology employed in this study and the research context. The site of the study was a 'Language and Communication Economics' course (ECO110H), which used

CMC in a computer laboratory. Course participants were first year students at the University of Cape Town. The study has used data collected through qualitative research methods which includes a discourse analysis of online discussion, classroom observations of a computer-networked classroom and semi-structured interviews with tutors from the course. A discourse analysis approach has been applied in analyzing data and a process of triangulation has facilitated interpretation of the data.

Chapter 3 explores discourse patterns in text produced in the different online tasks of the ECO110H course. I argue that patterns of interaction vary with field, tenor and mode of discourse. This is done in response to the general claims from the literature which links enhanced interaction patterns straightforwardly to the mode of communication (Braine, 1997, Melzer, 1999, Moran, 1998). However, their studies were done with small class sizes compared to that of this study. Goodfellow and Lamy (1999) provide a key framework for my exploration of interaction patterns in the online data. This analysis reveals that interaction patterns on the academic discussions resemble the traditional classroom patterns of discourse, where the teacher maintains an authoritative role. Learners frequently interact with each other on social tasks and they employ informal discourse in their social discussions.

In chapter 4, I explore the nature of the discourse produced in each online task students performed during the course. I identify indicators of spoken discourse using Werry's (1996) study as my framework. I argue that these features appear mainly in social conversations. Therefore the field and tenor of discourse, rather than the CMC mode, influence their production. I further argue, following Gee, that the speech/writing dichotomy proposed by Chafe (in Gee 1990) is a false dichotomy, since features that mark involved discourse occur prominently in the written social conversations of the course. I also identify a range of discourses produced by learners in their first academic task using Biber's (1988) involved and informational schema as my framework. As the CMC literature predicts,

this is in a 'hybrid' mode - highly involved, yet in a written mode. The mode is not the only influence on the discourse, as later sessions generated very different data. Rather learners use their primary discourse skills to express their voices and social experiences depending on their perception of the social context. A range of responses made by tutors to the submissions and an analysis of a learner's draft follows this. The study finds that although some learners employ some informal features of language in their social conversations and in their first submission of an academic task, their assignment drafts employ the detached discourse used in academic writing. This detached discourse cannot be conclusively attributed to participation online since real collaboration online was rare. In addition, the presence of both involved and detached discourse in the sessions is not a sign of 'hybrid' discourse. Rather it is two different sessions with different discourse profiles. In addition, it clearly indicates that the CMC mode does not solely determine discourse production.

In chapter 5 I argue that the discourse functions deemed essential for second language acquisition, although present in this data, do not develop academic discourse. Sotillo (2000) provides a framework for analyzing the discourse functions in this data. While the mode does indeed 'afford' the production of a full range of discourse, the functions need to be evaluated against the goals of the academic literacy class. In this case, the problem in the literature appears to be an over-simplistic generalization about 'ESL' learners. I found that learners do not automatically engage in academic discussions with tutors or peers where such development of academic literacy could be realized. Consequently there is no evidence to prove that Sotillo's discourse functions developed academic discourse in this study. However, I argue that learners express their voices and identity, and reflect shared authority and responsibility in the forum. Language teachers can harness these practices to promote collaborative construction of knowledge among participants in this mode.

In chapter 6 I argue that, although academic discussions or 'dialogues' between tutors and learners did not occur online, collaboration probably occurred offline in the computer laboratory. I explore offline 'talk' and literacy practices within the online learning environment. I use Wegerif and Scrimshaw's (1997) framework to explore the influence of offline verbal interaction within the online environment. Their study provides information on the importance of talk offline and it explores the importance of peer-peer talk. Interaction between individual learners and tutors occurred frequently online and offline in this study, while peer-peer interactions were generally unsatisfactory. I conclude that the shift in mode and task did not fundamentally change the tenor or social relations between tutors and students. Responses from interviews also confirm my findings about offline activities. This observation clearly shows that online texts cannot be read in isolation from the whole social fabric of the learning context.

Chapter 7 provides a summary and conclusions. The main conclusion, reached through the analysis of the online data and the offline activities within the online sessions, is that the CMC mode as a tool does not intrinsically promote the learning of academic discourse. However the study has inconclusive evidence of the development of academic discourse, since learners rarely engaged in academic discussions and offline data is insufficient to truly track its development in the verbal mode. Nonetheless, the online forum made submissions by learners and responses from tutors accessible to every learner, and one-to-one verbal interaction between tutors and learners in the computer laboratory prevailed. From the limited data available, it seems that both the online forum and offline 'talk' are essential for the development of academic discourse.

1.6. Theoretical framework and literature review

The study has drawn on literature from two areas; that is, literacy studies and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). In the area of literacy studies, I have focused on the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which adopts a social approach towards a definition of literacy. In the area of CMC, studies of both synchronous (messages exchanged simultaneously) and asynchronous (the delayed exchange of messages) communication in language teaching and the teaching of writing have informed this research.

My use of the word 'theory' should not be understood as being 'restricted to a systematically stated and testable set of propositions about the empirical world', as in quantitative research (Bogdan 1992: 33). Since this is a qualitative research project in a relatively new field, my theoretical framework is informed by assumptions and research findings by various writers in my literature review. In other words, the theoretical paradigms for this research are drawn from literacy studies and theories of language learning and technology in CMC.

1.6.1. From high school to The University of Cape Town

The shift in academic discourse that students experience as they leave high school is a challenge for staff who focus on academic development. These staff also need to facilitate learning for students of diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. Such challenges necessitate a review of teaching methods to find approaches that will enhance learning and which are equitable for all.

Aiming to enhance learning in such an environment, many researchers in this field have turned to the 'new' notions of literacy developed by James Gee (1990) and Brian Street (1984). These ideas have relevance to the rapid socio-political change in the new South Africa, which also affects higher learning

institutions. This is particularly so because most of the South African institutions of higher learning enroll learners from different cultural and educational backgrounds. It is therefore crucial that any instructional process takes into account the learners' diversity. Rob Moore, Moragh Paxton, Ian Scott and Lucia Thesen reflect on the ever-growing challenge facing the Language Development (LD) group at U.C.T. as they attempt to accommodate this diversity (1998: 9). In this context the usefulness of the New Literacy studies approach has led to some important insights. According to this view, although all learners are guided towards learning a new discourse, their different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds and different prior literacies can impact on their learning of a new discourse. While some literacies may be transferable, others may not. In the South African context, in particular, some learners, especially working class ESL learners, experience an impoverished educational background and are highly alienated from mainstream academic discourse.

1.6.2. The 'New' Literacy Studies

The New Literacy Studies (NLS), a recent body of theory developed in the field of literacy, views literacy from a different perspective, compared to the traditional approach. It has a strong anthropologic and social approach. It defines literacy in a socio-cultural context. Traditional approaches (termed the 'autonomous' model of literacy by Brian Street) define literacy as the ability to read and write, a definition strongly refuted by the NLS. Gee feels that this definition seems to be 'innocent' and 'obvious', yet it overlooks contextual factors (1990: 27). An example of the 'autonomous' model of literacy is the argument by Angela Hildyard and David Olson where they argue that 'there are functions of language that are significantly affected by the mastery of a writing system, particularly its logical functions' (In Street 1984: 20). As a result, they feel written forms enable literate people to master these functions, which they would not have access to otherwise. Street also cites Patricia Greenfield who contends that oral language relies more heavily on the context of

communication than written language, and consequently it does not develop the abstract thinking cultivated by written discourse. She feels that written language allows abstract thought processes because it is detached from its context of production. Street opposes these definitions of literacy claiming that Greenfield, Hildyard and Olson derive them from their 'own work practice and belief system and serve to reinforce it in relation to other groups and cultures' (p 39).

In the NLS, Gee (1990), and Street (1984) have developed an 'ideological' theory of many literacies, which are all embedded in a specific social context. In the academic context, this approach sees a variety of communicative practices as literacies which learners bring into the academic curriculum. For this reason Gee expounds on what he calls Discourses (with a capital D) of participants in a particular social context. His definition of literacy goes beyond the ability to read and write, and it incorporates social practices peculiar to a certain social setting. The writer or the reader has to understand a variety of linguistic practices and their associated values appropriate to a specific setting. Gee contends that one reads or writes 'something (a text of a certain type) in a certain way with certain values, while at least appearing to think and feel in certain ways' (1990: xviii). Underpinning this definition is the idea that everybody is socialized into a primary Discourse, which is acquired. We move beyond these, however, to participate in a number of secondary Discourses, which includes academic Discourse. Gee notes, however, that some aspects of Discourses may interfere with or be transferred to other Discourses where learning is concerned.

Of major concern to literacy teachers is Gee's contention that Discourses (as opposed to meta-knowledge) are acquired rather than learnt. He believes that acquisition is 'a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice with social groups, without formal teaching' (p146). This idea contrasts with a notion of learning where knowledge

is gained consciously through instruction. This is crucial for students whose primary Discourses are ideologically distant from mainstream academic Discourse, since there are beliefs, values and attitudes involved in the discourse practices of any language community.

Citing Ballard and Clanchy's (1988) anthropological conception of academic disciplines as cultures, Angelil- Carter (1996: 6) views academic discourse as expressing this culture. This culture has 'its own set of rules and behaviors' which are 'learnt best within the culture', thus academics employ these rules unconsciously. In a related way, different genres maintain academic discourse in different disciplines. Most genres in academic disciplines are unfamiliar to students who are new to mainstream discourses. For instance, the online component of ECO110H aimed to develop students' writing of a feature article for a newspaper or a journal, addressing global economic issues in the South African context. Besides having the general knowledge of the essay genre, as used in several disciplines, students must be able to produce features typical of a feature article.

Writing teachers need to socialize students into academic discourse through 'partial immersion', in other words, they should advocate exposure to a medium that encourages some form of acquisition while keeping the learning of meta-language at a minimal level. Students need to be involved in an exchange of academic ideas in a non-threatening environment, in order to generate the academic form of presenting ideas, rather than simply submitting to the instruction mode. This involvement will enable learners to expose their prior knowledge on which teachers can scaffold new knowledge. In the case of learning academic discourse, they will be guided into controlling detached and integrated discourse.

Gee further questions the issue of a divide between orality and literacy. He discusses some features of speech as presented by Wallace Chafe (1987). Chafe believes that spoken discourse and written

discourse possess features that are peculiar to each mode. These features are, on the one hand, involvement and fragmentation, and, on the other hand, detachment and integration. He holds that discourse produced in a speech act is fragmented and involved while written discourse is integrated and detached. For example, in face-to-face conversations interlocutors are socially involved in the discourse and utter phrases and sentences spontaneously - thus the discourse is fragmented. In written discourse, he claims that the writer has time to organize his/her ideas by applying complex lexical and syntactic structures, thus producing cohesive and detached text. However, as Gee has argued, the pragmatics of this production refutes Chafe's claim. Integration and detachment, which are labeled as features of writing, are present in some genres of speech, such as lectures, and absent in some writing genres, such as personal letters. In conclusion, the mode of transmission is not the key variable; rather, the context influences linguistic output (Gee). For this reason, the New Literacy Studies advocate a social view of literacy which focuses on the context of knowing rather than merely the technicalities of reading and writing. From this perspective literacy is defined as 'different ways of knowing in different social contexts' (Heath, 1983). For the academic literacy teacher, one question is whether the feature 'involvement' can be incorporated into the teaching of academic literacies to avoid the 'suppression of other literacy experiences' (Thesen 1994: 1), which are brought to the classroom by students. The social assumptions are that the different 'ways of knowing and doing' are still the greatest obstacles in harnessing the literacies and experiences of learners.

The argument for a teaching/learning environment that encourages learner-involvement emanates from characteristics evident from two genres of academic discourse. The learner's exposure to the academic negotiation of meaning can be facilitated by teaching methods that encourage questioning and debate. Firstly, the academic genre of the lecture distances the learner from participating in the construction of meaning, while concepts are often presented in abstract forms. Greg Pastoll points out that, 'In lectures,

students are expected to absorb (by 'osmosis') the gist of the thinking processes used in their field of study' (1992: 53). This form of teaching 'is neither interactive nor adaptive; it does not encourage reflection by the student, and only the teacher is able to communicate their conception' (Diana Laurillard 1993: 107). Secondly, academic discourse in essay writing is highly detached from the writer. The NLS approach notes that the student's identity may be challenged in this form of discourse, which prescribes impersonal and passive forms in its construction (Street, 2000). The essay genre employs complex linguistic structures that are used to integrate the discourse into a coherent whole. The linguistic structure of the essay limits personal involvement to the shaping of the overall structure of the argument. These characteristics of academic discourse challenge learners who need to learn to produce it in essay writing if they are to gain access to the powerfully valued genres of the culture. These learners can feel alienated from such discourse if they are not socialized into the middle class literacy practices and ideologies. Angelil- Carter states that 'Writing is an integral part of the way in which the culture is expressed, developed and maintained' (1996: 6). She further points out that,

'In a post-apartheid South Africa, where an increasing proportion of our students come from poor educational backgrounds, and whose primary discourses may be very different from that of the school, and these discourses may be very different from that of the university, failure to make the transitions successfully is a real possibility' (1996: 7)

If writing is expressed in the culture, then apprentices need some enculturation into the genres of the disciplines through maximum exposure to discussions with experts in disciplines. Basing his argument on Gee's distinction between primary and secondary discourses, David Gough elaborates on common features of secondary discourses, including academic discourse (2000: 45). Gough holds that,

- *there is, in some sense, a remove between the sender of the discourse and its receiver, the latter in the role of an audience;*

- *some degree of specialization is required to participate in the discourse, whether one is a member of the audience or the sender;*
- *certain individuals have the capacity to undertake the roles of sender, which has involved a type of 'apprenticeship';*
- *those individuals by virtue of their competences are in the position of power (2000:45)*

Gough argues, however, that there is no absolute distinction between primary and secondary discourses. 'Interactions in language are situated along this continuum' (p45). His argument echoes Gee's proposition that there is often an overlap between the two sets of discourses. Of interest to this study is that this overlap is greatest for middle class students since the discourses of their first language is aligned to the detached discourse of academic writing, while ESL students need greater support in order to acquire this discourse. It is in relation to this hypothesis that the literature about CMC and language learning should be evaluated.

1.6.3. Computer Mediated Communication and Language Learning

'When computers were first introduced to writing classes, they were stand- alone versions and students sat in relative isolation using word processing programs. Although computers made revision easier, interaction with other students and with the teacher was minimal and feedback on student writing came mainly from the teacher'. (George Braine 1997)

Recent work in the field of computers in educational settings has focused on the nature of interaction and the language produced when computers stop being mere typewriters, and evolve into a mode of communication.

In reading studies of CMC, my interest was to explore previous findings about interaction patterns and participation in order to ascertain whether online discussions between learners and tutors could promote the learning of academic discourse, and in particular, whether the discourse produced in online discussions reflected the social involvement of learners in academic discussions. The implication of this would be that such discussions could facilitate their acquisition of academic discourse. In the next section I discuss these two areas of CMC research. I discuss the generalizations that are made about ESL learners in the CMC learning context. Some studies seem to ignore that ESL learners exist in different contexts. Others ignore variables such as class sizes, the nature of activities participants engage with and the role relationships of participants.

(a) Interaction in CMC

The degree of interaction in language classes is reported to have increased drastically with the introduction of networked computers (Ortega, 1997, Moran, 1998, Braine, 1997, Melzer, 1999). Many studies explain this as a result of the reduced constraints of the CMC mode in comparison to face-to-face interaction. These constraints include 'fear to interrupt or of being interrupted, need to manage the floor and the transfer of speakership and need for interlocutors to co-orient to the production of sequentially relevant discourse' (Ortega 1997: 4). Lourdes Ortega further mentions the issue of pronunciation among non- native speakers of English, which often requires high levels of monitoring in speech as a social constraint too. This condition can hinder the participation of such learners in verbal encounters. Furthermore, the social constraints that CMC can reduce include visual cues, such as race, gender and age. Braine believes that these cues privilege some learners over others in face-to-face discourse (1997: 45). However, the reduction of social cues presents both positive and negative outcomes for the language classroom. Negative outcomes include socially inappropriate behaviour and

topic shifts while positive outcomes are improved power relations and increased language productivity. Playfulness has also been observed, and can have either negative or positive results depending on the context. The next section discusses these outcomes.

Negative effects of reduced social cues online

Murray warns that CMC also has drawback resulting from the freedom that CMC offers. Firstly, notoriously rude behavior such as 'flaming' or the use of profane and obscene language that may be hurtful to others has often been noted in studies of CMC (Mabry 1998, Moran 2001). Some participants tend to adopt these behaviors, which they would otherwise shun in face-to-face exchange. Speas and Lea (quoted in Moran 2001) provide an alternative explanation by arguing that the presence of social constraints guards against the possibility of falling back on the 'cultural stereotypes' that are internalized by people. Hence people are more likely to adopt inappropriate behaviors where social cues are absent in CMC.

Secondly, diversion from the topic of discussion is a common feature in this medium. In group-discussions, this practice may result in what Murray calls 'multiple discourse threads'. This can be viewed either negatively as an unproductive use of time, for example, when students 'chat' off-task, or positively as a lack of domination of the topic. In educational contexts, there is need for strong leadership to provide focus for discussion and also to organize the multiple discourse threads which are very common in CMC (Moran, 2001). This is what Andrew Feenberg (1989:33) terms a 'strong moderator', who takes the role of a monitor to guard against unfruitful off-topic discussions which are. While the above writers strongly recommend tight monitoring, Margaret Daisely (1994) and Christopher Holcomb (1997) feel that 'playfulness' in this medium enhances experimentation with literacy skills, especially by students new to the medium.

Positive effects of reduced social cues online

CMC's lack of the constraints that usually govern face-to-face interaction may lead to socially destructive behaviors. However, positive effects of the absence of constraints have also been observed by some researchers (Melzer, 1999, Ortega, 1997). Firstly, their absence can result in a shifting of power relations. Learners are able to communicate freely with authority-figures, such as tutors, and with their peers. Kremers (1990) reports that learners feel less threatened and more freely able to exchange ideas with their teachers and peers in this mode. The active participation of learners from socially marginalized groups (such as women and 'minorities' in the U.S. context) has often been observed online. Researchers have observed that both the teacher and the student are afforded a more equal status in terms of information sharing.

Ortega (1997) further notes an increase in production of ideas due to reduced social cues. This can be highly evident among a group of participants with diverse learning backgrounds and experiences. Many teachers use computer-based discussions to promote the collaborative construction of knowledge, and to allow debate between a range of points of view. The aim is also to give more prominence to student voices in classroom discourse.

An application of the NLS theory to the field of CMC would suggest that learners might be more able to draw on their prior literacies when engaging with experts and peers in a socially less threatening atmosphere. Consequently, their learning would evolve from their own situated knowledge and they would have first-hand experience of the academic construction of knowledge. Research into CMC in educational context has not adopted this theoretical approach.

Worthy of note, however, are comments by some critics of this point of view, as cited in Gruber (1995: 61). These critiques contend that 'computers do not necessarily facilitate equal participation; instead, hierarchical structures, gender prejudices, and racial stereotypes remain intact; domination, miscommunication and voicelessness overshadow the positive features'. Other critics of the commonly reported enhanced participation levels in the use of CMC note that these studies are conducted on a small number of participants, ranging between 6 and 15 (Michele Knobel, Colin Lankshear, Eileen Honan and Jane Crawford, 1998). They believe that findings from such small research groups cannot be generalized. They further cite Chun's (1994) findings from a study of students' participation online which contradict the commonly reported equality of participation in this mode. In response to these interesting discrepancies, my study investigated the nature of participation in a particular context.

Since this study explores the development of a specific discourse, it is crucial that I discuss findings of other CMC researchers as regards the discourse produced in this mode of communication.

(b) Discourse in CMC

Several studies attribute the nature of the discourse produced in this mode to technology (Troest, 1999, Werry, 1996, Sotillo, 2000). They hold that the speed with which messages are exchanged drives interlocutors to produce discourse that emulates speech. As a result, the language is of a hybrid nature, closely resembling spoken discourse.

Research into the nature of online discourse has focused on syntactic structures and the discourse functions of messages. Sotillo (2000) contends that discourse functions observed in this mode correlate closely with those produced in spoken discourse. These include greetings, closing moves, topic initiation, adversarial- moves, off-topic comments, reprimands, information requests, and others.

Thus she believes that this mode of communication can promote second language acquisition since practice in the full range of spoken discourse functions is deemed essential for acquiring another language. Syntactically, Werry (1996) found that CMC includes constructions that occur frequently in spoken discourse. These constructions include, among others, informal expressions such as slang words, code-switching, deletions, abbreviations and representations of paralanguage. Furthermore, this syntax bears close resemblance with 'spontaneous genres such as interviews, spontaneous speeches, and personal letters' (Biber in Herring 1996). As such, the discourse of CMC supports high levels of speaker involvement despite the fact that it is produced in the written mode. Chafe holds that written discourse 'is integrated and detached, while speech is fragmented and involved' (quoted in Gee, 1990). As mentioned above, Gee strongly challenges this idea, arguing that social practices in certain contexts influence the relative presence or absence of the features marking involvement and detachment.

Although all the above researchers attribute the production of involved discourse to the CMC technology, with regard to second language learning, Sotillo further contends that facilitators need to apply skilled teaching to this mode in order to obtain optimal results. Johanyak (1997) consents to instances of a hybrid language with a further argument. He argues that 'individual cognitive, social and contextual factors in the production of the electronic text' must be considered. He maintains that 'CMC users work together as individuals to negotiate and, thus, to establish a new genre or genre repertoire for the unfamiliar medium. Citing Orlikowski and Yates (1994), he feels that some participants may enact genres used previously in other language communities. In his assertion he further cites Murray (1991), contending that, 'some members may choose speech-oriented genres while others may choose writing oriented genres with each choice dependent upon what users consider appropriate rhetorically for the conversation'. Although Johanyak's contention differs

slightly from observations made in this study, it does support the view that there are contextual factors influencing the production of language in the electronic medium, not the medium per se.

This study has focused on the expression of personal involvement of learners in discourse, given that the acquisition of academic discourse is in part facilitated by such involvement. Such involvement is often not present in the lecture mode since it is detached and integrated, despite its spoken form (Laurillard 1993: 107). Some institutions of higher learning set-up tutorials to enable discussions between tutors and learners and among learners. However, tutorials may have limitations too, depending on how they are facilitated. In some instances they tend to become mini-lectures (Pastoll 1992). In these tutorials, face-to-face social constraints might also hinder individual participation in the discourse (Braine, 1997, Ortega 1997). In CMC, however, it is hypothesized that learners can be immersed into a mode that allows a combination of social involvement and the typically academic stance.

(a) Guided learning and acquisition

On the same note, Janet Swaffar (1998) warns against the assumption held by language-learning instructors that verbal discussions such as tutorials can facilitate the acquisition of academic discourse. This oversight is particularly significant in the case of second language speakers of the language of learning:

Graduate students may be articulate in a foreign language, but most still need to learn how to talk about a problem in a literary or linguistic analysis in terms of particular theoretical discourses within their discipline, whether that subfield is, for example, text-immanent interpretation or Universal Grammar. Additionally, many graduate students need to hone their

foreign language skills in these specialized areas and will benefit from a demanding level of writing practice'. (Swaffar1998: 185)

In the South African context, learners face similar problems, especially ESL learners. Here it is important to note the unique features of 'ESL' in the South African context. The challenges such learners confront are of a higher magnitude than those discussed by Swaffar, since they often result from a system of subtractive bilingualism in their high school learning, and minimal literacy in the first language (Heugh, 1995 and de Klerk, 1995). 'It is widely argued that language-in-education policies, like all education policies, are framed and driven by political ideologies and economic interests rather than education theory and practice.' (Nick Taylor and Penny Vinjevoold, 1999: 206) This practice was made evident in the education system of the multiracial population of South Africa. Heugh and de Klerk note that South Africa's multilingualism (with more than eleven languages) was not used as a resource for every citizen in education during the post- apartheid era. As a result, disadvantaged black South Africans were made to go through an education system that would limit them access to the 'social and economic goods' of the ruling class. An example of this is shown in a report by Macdonald who writes,

According to a scrutiny of the 1987 Annual Report of the Department of Education and Training, which deals with figures from 1981 to 1987, it seems that there are three crisis point dropouts in the school system, i.e. after Grade 1, Standard 3 and Standard 6. A salient cause of the dropout in Standard 3 would seem to ... be the difficulties engendered by the 'deep end' language medium change in standard 3: by 'deep end' we mean that children make a total change-over from their mother- tongue to English, taking on a total of ten subjects in English' (1990: 16).

This sudden change from mother tongue education has been shown to have a negative effect on the ESL learners' cognitive development, particularly because their first languages were totally removed

from the system as languages of learning at this stage, thus resulting in 'subtractive bilingualism'.

When subtractive bilingualism is practiced 'speakers of usually low-status languages are expected to become proficient in a second language which is usually a dominant language of high status, such as English and French in Africa. During the process of acquiring the second language, the home language is either abruptly or gradually replaced as a language of learning in the school' (Heugh, Siegruhn and Pluddemann, 1995: viii). This practice ignores the linguistically accepted view that children need to develop advanced skills in their first language before they can perform academically in their second language (Gerda de Klerk in Heugh et al 1995: 56). The second language should be added to the primary language of the learner, which is maintained throughout the learning period. This recommended approach is referred to as 'additive bilingualism'. In contrast, subtractive bilingualism, which ESL learners in South Africa experience, has negative effects on learning. For example, Macdonald found that 'black children spent most of their time in class listening to the lesson rather than eliciting more challenging responses. Classroom tasks in general were oriented towards the acquisition of information rather than higher cognitive skills' (in Taylor and Vinjevold 1999: 134). This schooling influences the learning of these students even at tertiary level. For this reason in particular, it is not possible to generalize from studies of 'ESL students' in other contexts to all South African ESL students.

Swaffar (1990) contends that practice in controlling an argument is essential for graduate students. She feels that teaching methods that merely promote the unconscious acquisition of language in language learning do not offer adequate support for the learning of academic discourse among ESL learners. They need to be socialized into controlling an argument in academic discourse as opposed to mere fluency in social discussions using the foreign language. She, therefore, believes that explicit teaching of learners is also important in this mode of learning.

Similarly, Marie-Noelle Lamy and Robin Goodfellow (1999) argue that in order to promote reflective practice in language learning, 'developers of the virtual language classroom (need to) combine the processes of conscious reflection with those of spontaneous interaction'. In other words, explicit instruction as well as interaction in the target language is essential for effective learning.

Most usefully for this study, however, they provide an interesting model for online discourse analysis, which focuses on the nature of the subject of interaction. Their model classifies the discourse into conversations (interactions on a social subject), dialogues (interactions on academic topics) and monologues (lengthy submissions that invite no exchange). Their aim in developing this model is to identify reflective practices in an exchange among geographically distant learners of language in the CMC mode. They point out that dialogues are most productive. 'Unlike what happens in the social conversation ... reflectiveness and form focus are clearly central to (dialogues). But so, too is contingency in the sense that the ... participants engage each other in social behaviours that arise directly out of the 'situation' in which they find themselves, and to which they have some personal commitment' (p52). Monologues are also not productive since they do not require responses, thus no interaction is involved.

Most research into CMC has not focused on learning activities beyond the computer interface. In an important exception to this rule, Rupert Wegerif and Peter Scrimshaw (1997) have studied how verbal interaction in the computer laboratory is a key ingredient of the learning process in this environment. In fact, in their socio-cultural approach, talk is a key locus of learning. Computers aid the verbal talk between teachers and learners. Basing their argument on the Vygotskian and Neo-Vygotskian concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and 'scaffolding', they describe education as 'the process

of being guided into the appropriate use of educated language and understanding itself as a discursive achievement primarily realized in and through the talk of learners' (p2). For this reason, they have explored the educational role of peer talk in the computer-assisted-language-learning environment.

Four types of talk were discovered; namely, disputational, cumulative, exploratory, and tutorial talks. Among these different talks, 'exploratory talk' appeared to be a key discursive mode for developing an understanding of concepts. In 'cumulative talk', although participants share their views, they agree with others without any challenges. In 'disputational talk' the challenges do not lead participants to common knowledge. Disputes are left unresolved and decisions are individualized rather than reached in groups. 'Tutorial talk' is not challenging either, since one student in the group is assumed to 'know it all'. 'Exploratory talk', therefore, appears to be valuable since the participants' views and opinions are positively challenged by other members while the goal is to reach common knowledge. Through this talk, meaning is negotiated and learning becomes collaborative. However, they contend that an expert, the teacher, essentially provides the actual education about the appropriate discourse through close guidance.

A concluding remark can be drawn from Sybil Gruber (1995) who holds that learning through CMC should be determined by the goals of the institution and the major participants, the teacher and the students; otherwise it may be a futile exercise. The major findings of this study reinforce Gruber's view. These findings indicate that social dynamics within the context of learning are key variables in the learning process.

In the literature, however, many of these advantages are attributed to technology, or the mode of discourse, while neglecting the aspects of context, as identified by Halliday. This is the report Braine gives about his study;

'Networked computers clearly provide the supportive anxiety free environments that successful language learning requires. In addition, they provide many opportunities to practice language in truly communicative situations, such as during class discussions centering on a topic or a reading, and during peer reviews of papers. On the other hand, in traditional writing classes, discussion is often stilted, information flowing mainly one way-from the teacher to students. Questions, mostly posed by the teacher, may seek only pseudo-information that has no real communicative value' (1997: 53)

Braine's conclusion seems to be based on the differences between communicating through the CMC mode and communicating verbally in a traditional classroom setting. He provides no discussion of the social context for learning, and ignores the influence of the tasks in which learners were engaged. His conclusions, therefore, seem to be technologically deterministic.

Concerning discourse production in CMC, Troest holds that,

'Few people would dispute the important differences between oral and written language.... Thus, the acceptance of the notion that the language of the IRC has assumed its form due to the particular communicative possibilities this medium provides must induce the further question whether the taxonomy of the media through which we communicate do not always influence the modes in which we communicate; including our primary communicative means: speech.' (1999: no page numbers.)

Troest's argument is directly aligned to the mode of production as the key variable in the production of discourse. He ignores contextual influences on the production of discourse in CMC.

Gee's critique of technological determinism is highly relevant in the context of CMC literature. He argues that social practices in different contexts produce different discourses. This contrasts with more simplistic models of 'orality' and 'literacy', which attribute agency to the mode of discourse alone. Gee argues that detachment and integration are not peculiar to written discourse much as fragmentation and involvement are not exclusive to spoken delivery. Gee's argument for the role of socio-contextual factors is central to this discussion of the development of academic discourse.

It is essential to explore a particular context of learning to ascertain the effectiveness of chosen methods and modes of teaching. According to Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1989) any text produced is directly linked to the context of production. They contend that various factors can influence the discourse produced in a setting. Halliday has proposed a conceptual framework which identifies the determinants of context in which the text is produced. This framework looks at three aspects of the situation, which are (1) the field of discourse, (2) the tenor of discourse and lastly (3) the mode of discourse. These aspects of context are considered explicitly in my study. I document the effect of each of these aspects of context on the learning of academic discourse through CMC in a South African Language in Economics course.

1.7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature under discussion has shown the enormous challenge faced by the South African academic literacy teacher when assisting learners in the acquisition of academic discourse, given that academic discourse is a secondary and institutionalized discourse in which rules and practices alien to many learners guide and maintain its control. For this reason, and because of the language-related inadequacies of South African schooling, its acquisition is a significant challenge for

many South African learners. Since an anthropological approach views literacy as embedded in a particular culture, one would assume that immersion into the academic culture is required to enable the development of secondary academic discourses. Practitioners in the field of academic discourse maintain that practice in these skills is the key determinant of success in academic discourse.

In the context of the acquisition of academic discourse, CMC seems a promising environment for learning. Many studies report enhanced levels of interaction between students and the production of language that is a hybrid of spoken and written language. The fact that the affordances of this mode seem to support involvement suggests that this mode will promote second language acquisition. Nonetheless, much as CMC has been applauded for high levels of interaction between participants, my study has found that the other two determinants of the 'context of situation' (Halliday, 1989) should not be neglected as determinants of the participation of interlocutors in the CMC mode of learning. It is against this background that the Language and Communication Economics course conducted through a computer conferencing program has been explored for the learning of academic discourse.

The next chapter discusses the methodology followed in pursuing this study.

Chapter 2

Research design and methodology

2.0. Introduction

'The term methodology refers to the way we approach problems and seek answers ... our assumptions, interests and purposes shape which methodology we choose' (BogdanTaylor 1984: 1)

The following discussion presents a detailed account of how this study was conducted. The problem that this study addresses has been presented in Chapter 1. It discusses the challenge faced by academic literacy teachers at the University of Cape Town as they assist South African students, coming from diverse educational backgrounds with adjusting to the academic discourse of the University. This discourse is alien to many learners, particularly to learners who speak English as an additional language. This is because the ideologies of their first languages are less related to the detached style of writing practiced in academic discourse. However, the literature on CMC in educational contexts promises greater participation levels by learners using this mode. For this reason, the study sought to explore a learning environment that could involve both learners and teachers in the construction of knowledge rather than an environment that distances the learners from the construction of meaning.

The study therefore addresses the following questions:

1. What are the interaction patterns of tutors and learners in the online texts of the ECO110H course?
2. What are the indicators of involvement in the discourse produced in these interactions?
3. Do learners acquire academic discourse through these interactions?

4. What contribution is made by the offline practices of learners and tutors in this learning environment towards developing academic discourse?

The above questions aim to address the broad question of whether online discussions can promote the learning of academic discourse.

2.1. Methodology

The research method employed had to allow for the interpretation of human interaction since the research focused on interaction among learners and their teachers in two observable media - speech and writing. It could not follow a positivist approach, which searches for the 'truth' through statistical analysis (Taylor 1984: 2) since this approach limits flexibility in interpreting actions of participants in the learning environment. Interaction patterns online and discourse produced in online exchanges and offline practices in the computer laboratory all potentially contribute to learning in an online learning environment. In order to record and interpret these interactions, the research had to be qualitative and employ qualitative methods of collecting and analyzing data¹. Taylor holds that in qualitative research no action is taken for granted. For that reason qualitative researchers follow a flexible research design. Since most of literature developed in CMC studies focuses on learning in the Western countries, this approach proved relevant. This study could interpret the data in relation to the South African context of learning. A positivist approach could not have permitted such flexibility. This study applies a socio-cultural approach to interaction and discourse in accordance to Gee's (1990) critique of technological determinism. It is also partly critical in that it follows neither the instrumental (viewing technology as neutral) nor the substantive approach (which views technology as having innate influence on human

¹ A detailed discussion of these is in the same chapter

action) (Feenberg cited in Sullivan and Porter 1997: 104) to technology; instead it situates technology in a particular context.

2.2. Research context

Research was conducted at the University of Cape Town in the context of an extended first year Economics course (ECO110H), which ran from August to October 2000. This study focused on the online discussion sessions of the course, which took place between August and September.

2.2.1. The course

The site of the study was a Language and Communication Economics course (ECO110H) offered to first year students who are deemed under- prepared for University study. It aimed to assist learners with understanding the ‘real world’ of economics and the business sector, which is often quoted by lecturers when explaining economic concepts in lectures. Among other objectives, the course was geared towards facilitating students’ writing. The online discussion component of the course aimed to assist learners in writing a feature article for a newspaper or a journal. Learners were divided into groups of about 7 and they researched specific topics in three South African industries, namely, the gold mining industry, the oil and petrol industry and the clothing and textile industry. Each learner submitted an individual assignment at the end of the course and presented his/her research orally in a group presentation.

2.2.2. The course schedule

Four online sessions featured in the course. A two-week break divided the first two and the last two online sessions. The following table shows the schedule of these sessions. Other activities scheduled for these sessions are included in the table.

Figure 1

Week	Learning task/Activity	Other activity
1	Online introduction (Task 1) (learners introduced themselves, their area of research in the course, and anything interesting they wished to share) Newspaper article opening paragraph (Task 2) (learners had to post opening paragraphs of newspaper articles and comment on each other's articles)	Results of excel- based exercises (learners revised an exercise done in a previous session) Share-trading game (learners played a game of buying share values in the gold industry)
2	Questions for experts (Task 3) (learners had to formulate questions they had concerning the research in their groups and post them for expert advice)	Filling of an evaluation form (learners evaluated the previous exercise) Share-trading game (learners checked their share values based on the previous game)
3		Face- to face tutorial
4	(mid- term break)	(mid- term break)
5	Posting of drafts for discussion (Task 4) (learners posted their assignment drafts for editing² by peers and tutors)	
6	Posting of drafts for discussion (Task 4) (posting of drafts for editing by peers and tutors continued)	

2.2.3. The online discussion forum

These discussions were conducted on the Internet on a computer conferencing program provided by the 'Web- crossing' Internet discussion and chat application server.

The Web- crossing conferencing program

According to Web-Crossing's information site, online communities often use this program for group discussions (<http://www.webcrossing.com/40/html/forum.html>). Features of this software are customizable to suit the preferences of a particular discussion. In the ECO110H forum, posted messages could be threaded in a linear discussion on the web page and sequenced according to the time of posting³. Unlike on the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) program, the probability of losing track of a discourse thread is very unlikely on this software, provided users are familiar with the interface. Every participant can view messages posted by each user, thus facilitating the review of previous comments. In these sessions the discussion site was also displayed through a data projector connected to the facilitator's computer terminal. Since the program is available through the world wide web, users could log in and post their messages outside scheduled class-times, therefore discussions could be both synchronous (messages exchanged simultaneously) and asynchronous (the delayed exchange of messages-much like e- mail). Synchronous exchange was the most prevalent mode.

2.2.4. Subjects

There were two sets of subjects in this study; one is a subgroup of the other. The larger group consisted of the entire ECO110H class of 130 – 160 learners (the number decreased towards the end of the course). It comprised both male and female first and second language speakers of English from the Humanities, Commerce and only 5 students from Engineering faculties. This group produced online discussion data used in this study. Speakers of English as an Additional Language largely dominated the subgroup. My observations in the Computer laboratory focused on this subgroup. I closely observed four learners; three females and one male. These observations were meant to document individual

² This meant commenting on each other's drafts. However peer comments were rare.

³ A message could be linked to another to form a linear thread of discourse.

practices in the computer laboratory, although I did not have sufficient access to the subjects to allow for detailed case studies.

2.3. Research tools

2.3.1. Online texts

Online texts produced by all the learners of the course and their tutors in the four discussion sessions formed a larger amount of data for this study. My choice for this course was based on access to observing the sessions by the course lecturers. I needed a record of both online and offline activities of participants in this learning environment in order to merge the two modes of interaction in interpreting my data. These online texts provided data for addressing the first three questions of the study; namely, to identify interaction patterns of learners and tutors online, to show the nature of the discourse produced in these interactions and to reflect whether learners developed academic discourse online.

2.3.2. Classroom observations

Simpson & Tuson (1995) note that observations allow for direct access to social interaction, which includes gestures that are hidden in the written mode. I chose this method in order to address the question of whether offline activities impact on the learning of academic discourse in the CMC environment.

I observed and collected field notes from four online discussion sessions, which lasted for about 100 minutes (a double period) per session. Since the course had a large number of learners, the group was split to fit the number of computers in the laboratory. The group I observed consisted of about 40 learners and five facilitators/tutors in every session. The groups held their sessions on different days of the week. My group held its sessions on Mondays from 10:00 a. m. to 11:50 a. m. I chose this group because it included a majority of learners who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL)

compared to the others. Literature on studies into the learning of this group (Thesen, 1994, Igglesden, 1998) reported that they experience greater challenges when learning academic discourse, and this was my major interest in the study. Although my observations focused on this group, I observed them in the context of the class as a whole. After the first session I dispensed with my restricted observation tool, and in order to record most activities I switched to writing field notes.

Although this method allowed a record of every activity, my access to the ECO110H group was limited. Other research projects were being conducted simultaneously within the same group of students. The lecturer was uncomfortable with such intensive surveillance of her students. As a result it was not possible to prepare audio recordings of participant 'talk' as they completed the online discussion tasks. Therefore, my field notes document participant activities and the topics of their collaboration.

2.3.3. Semi-structured interviews

I tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with two of the course tutors after the conclusion of the online sessions. I needed those interviews to help me explain why texts produced online in this course differed substantially from those reported in the literature on CMC in the classroom. These interviews helped me interpret the interactions of both tutors and learners in the online environment. Their discourse patterns online, as well as offline practices of both tutors and learners in the CMC environment were discussed. I relied primarily on the lecturers to establish whether offline practices contributed to the learning of academic discourse. For the same reason I also continued this discussion via e-mail while in the process of analyzing data. As Bogdan and Taylor (1984: 129) observe, some researchers maintain casual contact with their informants throughout data analysis and even after the data have been analyzed. The choice of semi-structured interviews was based on my sense that a

structured approach could miss useful insights and individual feelings. As a research tool it allowed for 'flexible and dynamic' (p77) responses, which expanded my data.

2.4. Analysis of data

A discourse analysis approach was applied to this data. According to Michael McCarthy (1993: 5), 'discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used'. For that reason the focus of analysis in this approach encompasses the structural forms of language at a syntactical level, the organization of these structures in longer stretches (such as in essays) and the forms of interaction produced in the organization of the interactional discourse (e.g. dialogues). This approach of analyzing language is therefore applied to both spoken and written language in all sectors of language contact. However, I did not analyze spoken texts since I was unable to record it. This is an important gap in this study, which needs to be filled by future studies.

A process of triangulation was adopted in interpreting the data of this study. According, to Robinson (1994: 41), triangulation ensures that the meaning conveyed by an informant is understood in the same frame of reference by the researcher. After observing the sessions, and while in the process of analyzing the online data, I interviewed the lecturers of the course as a way of triangulating my data. Online data, interview responses and observation notes were all analyzed through discourse analysis frameworks developed in CMC studies and also those geared for computer based corpora (although computer-based quantitative methods were not used). I also drew from literature on studies about interaction in the conventional classroom-learning context. This is because findings of this study reflected traditional classroom patterns of interactions frequently occurring online rather than the high levels of interaction reported in CMC literature. However, I did not adhere strictly to these frameworks. Some interpretations were self-generated. This approach to analyzing data allowed the interpretation of

learning academic discourse in a Computer networked environment in the context of the ECO110H students, in South Africa.

Key frameworks for analyzing data used in this study include a framework for analyzing discourse patterns in CMC developed in an asynchronous study of language learning through the mode of CMC (Goodfellow and Lamy, 1999). Discourse patterns are important in this study since it explores the CMC medium for an environment that can involve learners in constructing knowledge. Goodfellow and Lamy's model was developed in order to analyse the presence of guided reflection and spontaneous interaction in CMC. In the present study, learners were assisted to write academic essays through guided instruction and acquisition. Therefore Goodfellow and Lamy's model helped me define the interaction patterns of learners and tutors in the online environment.

I also drew information from studies on CMC discourse (Werry 1996, Biber 1988). Werry's study focused on Internet Relay Chat communication, another form of CMC. It reports on discourse that resembles face-to-face production, a socially involved discourse, and it attributes this production to the CMC mode. This information was needed to document the nature and significance of the discourse produced in the interactions of the participants in this course. Biber's study presents indicators of involved and detached discourse. These indicators helped identify the range of discourses produced by learners in their first drafts, some of which were unacceptable in academic discourse.

In order to explore whether the learners could acquire academic discourse in the forum, I applied Sotillo's (2000) framework. In this framework there are discourse functions deemed essential for second language learning. Sotillo identifies all these features in a study of synchronous and asynchronous CMC discourse. I wanted to explore whether these discourse functions in the context of

the ECO110H discussions contributed to developing the skills required in commanding academic discourse. Sotillo's study helped me identify common social discourse functions. It also showed the difference between South Africa and other ESL contexts. In the South African context learners do not necessarily need emphasis on the social practice. It has shown that 'ESL students differ with contexts.

I also analyzed offline practices within online activity, which included verbal interactions between tutors and learners and among learners, and academic literacy practises. I used a model that looks at 'talk' in the language learning computer laboratory founded by the Spoken Language and New Technology (SLANT) project (Wegerif & Scrimshaw 1997). Although this model focuses on 'peer talk' in this environment, and my data did not extend to transcripts of 'peer talk', it nonetheless provided information on the importance of talk in educational settings. It informed the study about the significance of the 'learner-tutor' talk that prevailed offline in these activities. In this context offline interactions played a significant role in the learning of academic discourse. Although various literature informed an understanding of the data, these were the key frameworks for data analysis.

2.5. A general description of the online discussion activities

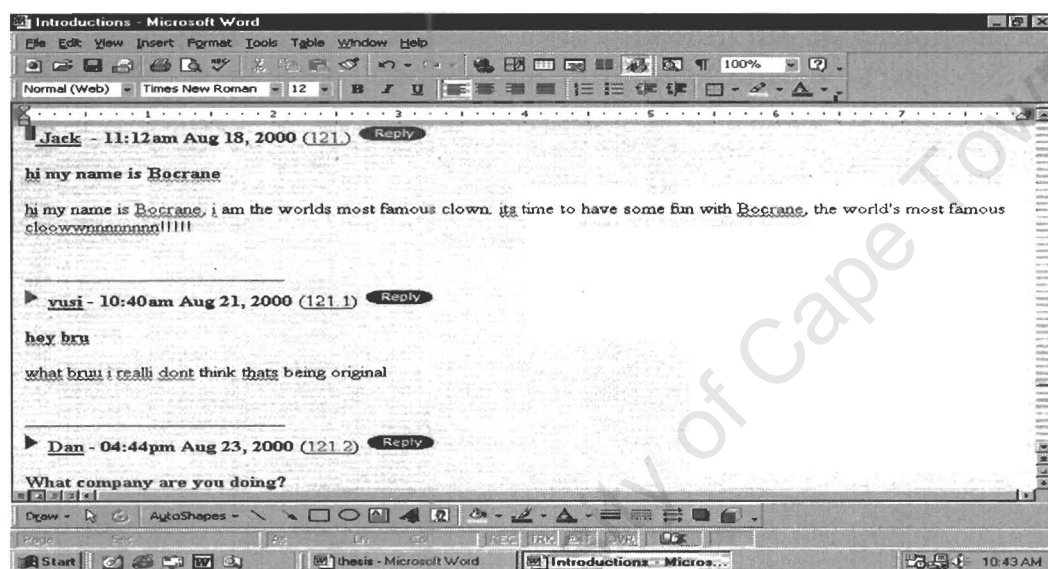
The first online discussion session featured two discussion tasks; namely, the introduction of participants (Task 1) and the writing of an opening paragraph of a newspaper article (Task 2). This was followed by a session where students questioned experts in the field of Economics on the relevance of facts obtained from their readings (Task 3). Some guiding questions, however, were based on learners' daily experiences of the issues under discussion. In the concluding sessions, learners posted drafts of their research articles for both peer and tutor review (Task 4). Most of these drafts had been handwritten prior to being typed in the online textbox. Others had been saved on stiffy discs. Only three online discussion sessions had been planned originally. A fourth session duplicating the third one

was arranged because of technical problems. In each of the forums, the website elaborated the day's task or topic of discussion which would be reiterated by one of the facilitators whenever a task was due to commence (even though some learners proceeded even before being instructed).

2.5.1. The format of extracts from data

Below is an example of how the web browser displayed submissions made in the Web Crossing forum.

Figure 2. Web Crossing forum



In the above example, the box next to Jack indicates a composed posting which is not a 'thread' linked to another submission as a response to the first turn. The arrows next to Yusi and Dan show that these are turns in a conversation or a dialogue, linked to the first turn (by Jack). These form a discourse 'thread' in the forum. To enable ease of discussion in this study, extracts from the discussion will not be presented in this actual format. The modified structure will take the following format;

2.5.2. Presentation of data

- pseudonyms followed by a colon precede submissions made by participants in the online discussions, to protect the identity of participants. (the same has been done in the above example)

- the same pseudonym will be used throughout the discussion.
- The title of a submission is indicated by boldface.
- all submissions will be in *italics* to facilitate clarity in the presentation of this discussion.
- no grammatical or spelling changes have been made to the submissions.
- different discourse threads will be divided by a horizontal line.

The next example shows the format of a single discourse thread.

*Jack: **hi** my name is Bocrane
 hi my name is Bocrane I am the world's most famous clown its time to
 have some fun with Bocrane the world' most famous clowwnnnnnnn!!!!!!!
 Vusi: **hey** bru
 what bruu i realli dont think that's being original
 Dan: **What** company are you doing*

Below is the format used to present two separate discourse threads.

*Jack: hi my name is Bocrane
 : hi my name is Bocrane I am the world's most famous clown its time to
 have some fun with Bocrane the world' most famous clowwnnnnnnn!!!!!!!
 Vusi: hey bru
 what bruu i realli dont think that's being original
 Dan: What company are you doing*

*Jerry: My name is Jerry. I am in the language and communication group
 called 'DEEPER UNDERGROUND'! We are studying the oil industry,
 hence the name.
 Johny: Hi Jerry, that is a very clever name we are studying the oil industry
 to. I think that the oil price is very bad and I am battling to keep my car
 running. What do you think*

2.6. Conclusion

The chapter has discussed the methodology followed in the investigation of this study. It has described the research context, which is a Language and Communication course offered on a web based conferencing programme to first year Economics students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. It has also discussed how data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and the analysis of online texts. The discourse analysis approach and the frameworks used to analyze this data have been explained.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 3

Interaction and online discourse

3.0. Introduction

In chapter 1, the literature on interaction among participants in CMC reported an increase in participation levels online compared to face-to-face discussions (see Braine, 1997, Ortega, 1997, Melzer, 1999), reporting that participation of both teachers and peers was enhanced. These findings are generally explained by the reduced constraints governing CMC interactions. Given that many researchers explain this phenomena in terms of the use of CMC technology one would expect to obtain consistent levels of participation.

In contrast to such findings, my study found shifting interrelationships in the interaction patterns of the ECO110H course participants as evident in their online texts. My brief overview of these patterns of exchange is followed by my application of Halliday's (1989) model, which outlines the factors that influence discourse production. I argue that in contrast to the technological determinism that dominates this field, each of these factors played a role in influencing the discourse patterns of the texts. The task that participants engage in, (which, in Halliday's terms is the 'field of discourse') influences their choice of who to interact with, which is in turn influenced by the general social relationships between participants, or the 'tenor of discourse'. These discourse patterns are analyzed using a framework developed by Goodfellow and Lamy (1999) when exploring reflective learning in asynchronous communication among distance learners of a language course. I therefore present Goodfellow and Lamy's framework and apply it to the data of this study. When applying this framework to the ECO110H data, patterns of interaction emerge which do not follow the participation levels reported in CMC literature to be enhanced by using the technology. Instead, they appear to be strongly influenced

by factors around the context of the learning. Finally, I interpret these influences and patterns in relation to a theoretical framework provided by Gee (1990). Gee's critique of technological determinism can be applied to the CMC context where the results are not influenced by CMC technology in isolation. In this chapter I use the terms interaction patterns and discourse patterns interchangeably.

3.1. An overview of interaction patterns in ECO110H

The discourse produced in a series of online discussions of the ECO110H group reflects inconsistent interaction patterns, with respect to the activities of the sessions. That is to say, patterns of interaction between the learners and facilitators varied with each session's task. My data indicates that frequent interactions of more than two turns takes place between learners primarily on topics of a non-academic nature. Such interactions are couched in an informal register, which closely resembles face-to-face conversations. However, the frequency of interaction among learners decreases when the topic shifts to academic issues. Most learners tend to ignore the contributions of peers on such topics. Instead, the frequency of interaction with facilitators rises. Interestingly though, most of the learner-facilitator interactions have only two turns; the first turn being a student's submission followed by the facilitators' response(s) to the submission. Given that the tutor's 'prompt' frames the entire discussion, this particular form of online discourse therefore resembles the question-and-answer form of discourse often observed in conventional classrooms (Malamah-Thomas, 1991). It seems that discourse patterns and production are strongly influenced by the power dynamics of the social context, the topic of discussion and the assigned task rather than responding only to the mode of communication or the identity of the participants involved in the forum. A clearer framework for analyzing these three components of a discussion can be drawn from Halliday's (1989) framework for what he terms 'the context of situation'.

3.2. Halliday's 'Context of situation' and ECO110H

Halliday contends that any text is directly linked to its context of production. He proposes a conceptual framework which identifies the determinants of context in which the text is produced. This framework looks at three aspects of the situation, which are (1) the field of discourse, (2) the tenor of discourse and, lastly, (3) the mode of discourse.

By 'field of discourse' he refers to 'the nature of the social action that is taking place'; in other words, this is the situation of activity in which the participants are engaged, which requires the production of language. For example, in this study, the field of discourse is the study of South African oil, gold and clothing industries in a Language and Communication component of an Economics course (ECO110H), which is itself part of the academic discipline of Economics. Within this field each session was structured by a different activity or task where all participants were expected to contribute collaboratively to discussions about their assigned industry. The final product would be an individually written assignment and an oral group presentation reporting the research project.

Halliday's second category, 'the tenor of discourse', is influenced by the identity of the participants and their roles and relationships, whether permanent or temporary. Participants in the ECO110H's online discussions were first year Economics students, and their tutors. These students were deemed under-prepared for University study. In this context, the tutors are expected to act as facilitators in the learning process rather than as teachers. This is intended to ease the weight of their otherwise authoritative role, in order to promote participation by learners. Since the participants converged at the computer laboratory for the course session, their relationship was the temporary one of fellow students. However online social discussions and interactions within the computer laboratory reveal that some learners had previously established relationships. For instance, a group of learners consistently held

social discussions and they used certain opening formulas and registers, which are not used by the rest of the participants.

Lastly, Halliday identifies the role played by language in the communicative context and by the medium of transmission used (whether verbal or written), which he calls 'the mode of discourse'. Participants in this study communicated through the medium of computers, in a written mode using a web-based computer conferencing program. They also communicated verbally or 'offline'. In every session, each of them logged onto a computer terminal. One of the computers, often used by the facilitators, was connected to a data projector, enabling the projection of the web page, which could be viewed by the entire class. The screen also facilitated a demonstration of the forum at the beginning of every session and whenever verbal explanations or clarifications were required. Language, in this forum, served as a tool for enabling collaborative learning through the sharing of ideas and findings on the research project. It also enabled the editing of students' drafts of a newspaper article, whether by tutors or by peers, with the aim of developing a more formal, detached, and academic style of writing. The presence of the web forum enabled participants to log on and make submissions outside session times.

The ECO110H discussion forum reveals shifting levels of participation and participant interrelationships. This contradicts reports that high levels of participation and interaction are straightforwardly determined by the mode. Braine holds the view that, 'The degree of student interaction increased dramatically with the introduction of networked computers to writing classes, especially because networks permit real-time conferencing.... The lack of the usual turn-taking allows all participants to pick up and comment on any topic mentioned in the discussion' (1997: 45). Echoing the same view Melzer writes, 'Although it was not a shock to find out that these online writing classes

would be student-centered, what I did not expect was the amount of discussion between the teacher and students and among the students themselves. In fact, most of the teachers I interviewed felt the amount of discussion and quality of discussion improved when they began teaching their courses online' (1999: 1). According to these writers, participation levels are consistently high in CMC. They do not consider the influence of the 'field or tenor of discourse' on the online interactions.

'Field and tenor of discourse' are important; this study reveals higher participation levels of learners in an activity of a social nature as compared to academic tasks. This goes to show that the 'field of discourse' interacts with the 'tenor of discourse' online. In this social activity learners interact among themselves similarly to their face-to-face social interactions. Learners have their own subculture and there is a level of social commonality between these participants prior to being members of the same academic group. Epstein holds that 'when the responses of a group are distinctly at odds in both content and structure with both the hegemonic culture and the parent culture, and when these responses are taken up by that group as a way of life, then we have what is called a subculture' (1998: 10). Although in a learning context the subculture may not have such marked distinctiveness, learners display some practices that contrast with the culture of their authorities. Such practices are evident in the discourse they produce in their peer-peer exchanges in the social task (see chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of discourse).

In contrast, when completing academic tasks, they rarely interact among themselves. Instead they interact with their tutors in a pattern similar to the traditional classroom question-response-evaluation mode of communication. This observed behaviour challenges the view that 'the traditional figure of the teacher as authority source and expert is subverted in that the role of the teacher during the electronic discussion is that of a mere participant' (Kern, 1995 and Warschauer, 1997 in Ortega, 1997). Although

in the case of the ECO110H course the authoritative role of the teacher may not have been as marked as in a conventional classroom setting (e.g. where teachers control the course of discussion by nominating the next speaker), the patterns of discourse in the text do not reflect teacher-student interactions which break with the question-response-evaluation pattern.

The next section analyzes the discourse patterns of the ECO110H course participants. This analysis is based on a framework drawn from a study of reflective learning in asynchronous language learning online. Prior to the analysis, a discussion of this framework is necessary.

3.3. 'Conversations', 'dialogues' and 'monologues'

Goodfellow and Lamy (1999) identified three categories of messages in a study of asynchronous CMC discourse. Since their study focused on reflective learning, they define their terms in relation to an educational corpus. This framework has been useful in the macro analysis of this research.

Goodfellow and Lamy's definition of a '**conversation**' excludes discussions on academic topics, they view a conversation as an 'exchange of a social nature'. An exchange that largely focuses on academic content rather than social topics is classified as a 'dialogue'. In their study, a discussion where interlocutors exchanged views about language as the subject of the course, was referred to as 'reflective dialogue'. In this study the term '**dialogue**', without a qualifying word, will refer to a discussion about the 'Economics industry research topic', since each of the learners was assigned a research topic in Economics to explore. It will also include discussions about the newspaper genre as a final product of their research project. Goodfellow and Lamy use the word '**monologue**' in reference to 'a text containing no invitation to interaction', which Goodfellow and Lamy identified in a session where learners reported on their findings after researching a topic on the World Wide Web. Since these

categories have also been identified in this study, the three terms will be used with the above-mentioned adjustment to ‘dialogue’.

3.4. Discourse patterns

Goodfellow and Lamy’s study resembles the present one in that they explored an online educational setting for language learning (1999). They investigated online language learning in order to document reflective practices. In the present study, learners were involved in an online discussion project which aimed to assist learners to apply the theories of ‘supply and demand’ in Economics to the actual performance of local industries. In the discussions they were to be exposed to a range of reflective practices as they interacted with their tutors and among themselves. In the ECO110H course, patterns of discourse in the four successive online sessions shifted from the initial social ‘conversations’ to shorter academic threads of ‘dialogue’ and finally to ‘monologues’, where students’ reports were published. These reports or assignment drafts are ‘monologues’ in the sense that they were not produced spontaneously in the discussion. Students wrote them beforehand and simply typed them onto the online textbox during sessions. Those who had them typed and saved in stiffy discs pasted them onto the textbox. Also, they are ‘monologues’ in that they conform to the question-response-evaluation pattern. The students simply responded to the tutors’ prompt that they had to submit their drafts online (see example 10 in the same chapter). The ECO110H online texts reveal all three categories of interaction. The next table shows the number of occurrences of ‘conversations’, ‘dialogues’ and ‘monologues’ in the ECO110H online discussions.

Figure 3

	Task1 Introductions	Task 2 Newspaper article opening paragraph	Task 3 Questions for experts	Task 4 Discussion of Assignment drafts
Conversations	13	5		
Dialogues		52	41	
Monologues				139

Number of learners = 130-160 (the number of learners dropped in due course)
Number of tutors = 7

Figure 3 indicates that academic discussions occurred from the second task. The first task recorded 13 discussions on social issues, and these involved learners exclusively. Only 5 social discussions featured in the second task and they still involved learners. Among the 52 academic discussions in the second task, 5 involved both learners and tutors and 47 of them took the form of a question-response-evaluation pattern of communication between learners and tutors. This pattern persisted in the forum on 'questions for experts', which recorded 41, and in the discussion of drafts which recorded 139. Each of these patterns of interaction is discussed in the section that follows

3.4.1. Social conversations

'Conversations' dominated the first session. This task was essentially a social activity where members of the group introduced themselves. The task was described as follows on the course website:

(1)

<i>Please introduce yourself to your classmates and tutors by telling us the name of your group, the industry which you are researching and something else you want to share about yourself. Scroll down the page to enter your message.</i>
--

Although the task may seem to require a single submission, many participants held conversations with their peers about non-academic issues. Since the task was social, topics of discussion were non-academic even though most learners mentioned their topics of research. A discussion in this sense refers to an exchange of messages in a discourse thread as opposed to a single independent submission, which is not linked to another message. The following is an example of 'conversations':

(2)

<i>Jane : I belong to the group called oilleys. We are doing research on the oil industry.</i>	
<i>gordon :jane the facilitator</i>	
<i>think we should get rid of grant as the facilitator and elect jane</i>	
<i>Addy :why are you doing your project on OIL??</i>	

Jane's introduction reminds Gordon, who had introduced himself earlier on, that they need to discuss an administrative issue in their group, a protest against the leader Grant. A non-member of the group, Addy responds and blames Gordon for making the wrong choice of a research topic. This might be a sarcastic comment, as might be the protest against Grant's leadership. Such sarcasm is often expressed by students in their introductions and is common in the students' subculture. In summary, however, this discussion is non-academic, even though it is related to the accomplishment of the project.

In some interchanges, the subject of discussion is not accessible to all, owing to the language used by the interlocutors. One such example is the one that follows,

(3)

<i>Crane: Ali G</i>
<i>ReSpeCt....dis one goes out ta all me homies.</i>
<i>Dan: AliG no respect</i>
<i>Word up my brother!</i>
<i>peace</i>
<i>Sam: word bro wassup in da hoodz</i>

The message communicated in this conversation could be hard to be understood by non- Americans who have never encountered this version of Ebonics-a language spoken in the ghettos of America. After several attempts to get the message of the text, I was given the following meaning by an African-American. I was

told Ali G is an Indian comedian from England who imitates African-Americans in his movies. Possibly Crane, Dan and Sam in (3) are his fans and express this by mimicking his language. Crane's message 'ReSpeCt... dis one goes out to all me homies' is a dedication to all his homeboys. 'Respect' is a word used as a greeting or salutation when the homeboys meet. Dan asks, 'Word up my brother' (meaning 'what is happening with you?') and then he salutes again with 'Peace'. In the last turn Sam asks for an update by saying 'word bro wassup in da hoodz'. His question could refer to social events or the Language and Communication course. These learners are either imitating Ebonics (the name of the language) or are genuine speakers of this dialect.

Undoubtedly, participants in this discussion had previously established relationships and probably used one pre-existing code of social interaction in this social task. Since the activity in this forum was to introduce oneself, this form of exchange was their way of greeting one another as fellow members of a student subculture.

The dominance of social subjects in the discourse threads of the 'Introductions' forum clearly points to the influence of the socially oriented task. Interlocutors creatively used a range of informal discourses. Although the mode of discourse was writing rather than verbal interaction, the online text emulates the verbal mode in several ways, namely the use of greetings, mimicking, spontaneity and the use of involved discourse. Whilst the interlocutors are actively involved in the discussions and draw on their primary discourses and identities, the discussions do not contribute to learning about the Economic industry. Nonetheless, the task was primarily intended to build group cohesion. However, in the context of the ECO110H course, it simply enabled social discussions and participants were unlikely to transfer their discursive skills to academic discussions.

3.4.2. Academic discussions

'Dialogues' or academically focused exchanges have been identified in texts produced in the forum on 'Opening paragraphs of newspaper articles' (second online task) and 'Questions for experts' (third online task). Unlike the 'introductions' task discussed above, both activities are more academically focused. While the forum on writing an opening paragraph featured some 'conversations' (or socially oriented exchanges), in the forum on questions for experts no 'conversations' took place. It is interesting to note that a majority of the dialogues between learners and facilitators in the online discourse have a pattern which resembles conventional classroom discourse. The general prompt which students were responding to in this forum was the following,

(4)

Write a newspaper headline and opening paragraph. Use your own words to communicate something interesting that you have learnt about the industry (Gold Mining Industry or the Oil industry or Clothing industry) or to describe how a company of your choice has responded to a change such as the depressed dollar price of gold or the falling exchange rate of the Rand. What is your opinion?

Some tutors' comments directly invited responses such as the following,

(5)

Daniel: PETROL PRICES RISES CONSTANTLY

In the last two months petrol has been rising rapidly. At the start of this month (August) the petrol increased by 13 cents. There are many reasons for this, one is that the rand / dollar exchange rate is very weak. The rise in petrol prices affects everyone, it causes taxi fares to rise and generally affects standard of living.

TutorKim: Petrol prices rise constantly

Daniel. Why do you think it is that when the petrol price does decrease, the price of other products do not decrease as well, for example food products? These are always one of the first things to increase in price whenever the oil price rises.

In the above example tutor Kim poses a direct challenge to Daniel, which is intended to elicit another turn by Daniel, but none is shown in this discourse thread. A similar example is shown in the following discourse thread,

(6)

Sue: Gold dates back

Gold dates back to the 1800's. Gold is seen since then as a very valuable metal used in the production of many things. The gold price increases and decreases rapidly all the time. The share price and the rand price is connected .so, if the one decreases the other will also decrease

Tutor Pat: Gold dates back

Sue, think even further back. Humans have been using gold for ornaments and money for thousands of years. You say that the share price and the rand price of gold are connected, What does this mean? Does a change in one cause a change in the other? Can you say something more about this?

Again, in the above extract, tutor Pat poses a challenge to Sue which could prompt her to make another turn in response to the tutor's questions but Sue makes no further turn.

In the two examples (example 5 and 6) the learners simply responded to the instruction that they had to submit opening paragraphs of newspaper articles. They did not engage in a discussion about their articles.

A rare incident of a learner's response can be seen in this example,

(7)

Nelile: Will S.A keep the gold?

I think one would be justified in saying that gold has played a major part in South Africa's economy, but the question that is in the minds of most South African's is "what will come of South Africa when the gold is finished".We are justified in feeling this, with the closing

down of so many mines and dissatisfaction among the labourers, one has to worry about the future of South Africa as far as gold in concerned.

Tutor Pat: Will S.A keep the gold?

Unathi, if the gold price declines in the long term we will have no difficulty keeping most of our gold thousands of metres underground...

Nelile: The revenue that gold will or won't bring

My concern is not that there won't be any more gold in S.A but rather the fact that the revenue it brings to the country will decrease in a huge way and alongside the number of people that employed in the gold industry and thus raising S.A's unemployment rate. That is my main concern as far as gold in S.A goes.

In example (7) tutor Pat responds to Nelile's article by posing a statement about the likely effects of a decline in the gold price. This prompts Nelile to respond and elaborate her argument. Examples such as this can be seen as encouraging the development of negotiated meaning among online participants. However, in the ECO110H data there were less than 5 discourse threads of this nature in academic discussions, generated by 130-160 learners (the number of learners started at 160 and dropped to 130).

Prominent in the ECO110H academic discussions were dialogues of two major types;

- (a) Some dialogues consisted of two turns. Malamah-Thomas(1991: 6) describes such talk as an 'action and reaction' type of talk. The following example has such a pattern,

(8)

James: Give gold a chance or give back

Gold promise a secure outlook in volatile conditions. This is the only industry with a prosperous future, as South Africa holds the greatest supply internationally. Harmony Gold and other hoe firms are the leaders in this industry. If financial conditions change for the better. The demand for the already scarce mineral will produce exponential returns, thus providing a solid foundation for the meak future.

Tutor Pat: Reply to James

Would you say then that the gold industry is being strategic in their anticipation of turn overs in the long- term once the economic climate

in S.A changes and Rand- Dollar exchange rates undergo transformation? What would they need to bae this kin of planning on (e.g factors to consider, and solutions posed, or strategies employed to ensure turnabout)?

In the above dialogue the subject is academic. James is a learner and the tutor makes the next turn. James makes no further turn. Malamah- Thomas (1987) believes such an exchange cannot be described as interaction. This is because participants in the turns do not act and react on each other's responses. An interaction, in her definition, involves acting upon each other's action, such that one is modified by the other. However, notice the probing questions posed by the tutor. They guide the learner into finding solid evidence to develop an argument, considering that learners were being assisted with writing their assignments.

It cannot be ascertained from this exchange whether the tutor's response improved James's discourse. The missing response is a common feature of the dialogues in ECO110H. It would appear that learners did not feel the need to extend the exchange or did not feel comfortable online. Consequently, a majority of the patterns of discourse on academic subjects resemble the above conventional classroom exchange.

- (b) In rare instances, both learners and facilitators were involved in a dialogue. It must be noted, however, that in this kind of dialogue each participant makes a single turn. Even the learner whose article is commented on makes no further turn. This can be seen in the following example,

(9)

Mandisa: back to the history

When researching I have found that gold was discovered centuries ago

.however it is still the best industry in Soth Africa. Through gold mines the country is earning a lot by sellingit to foreign Countries. I'm still busy searching for the history and origins of gold.

Sbusiso: *I don't think gold is the best industry*

Hi girl I think you are wrong when saying gold is the industry in South Africa because its value keep on decreasing everyday

Tutor Pat: *Back to the history*

Mandisa, for insight concerning the history of the goldmining industry in South Africa you could look for a good general economic history of South Africa. Ask for help in the library. The chamber of Mines website tends to ignore inconvenient issues such as the migrant labour system

Tutor Kate: *Response to Mandisa*

Mandisa it is an interesting message but it's an email message to your friends and not a newspaper article! Nice to get an update on what you're doing, but you need to use the appropriate language for a newspaper article- you wouldn't use 'I', for a start

The above discourse thread involves two learners, Mandisa and Sbusiso and two tutors, tutor Pat and tutor Kate. However, the other three turns after Mandisa's are all responses to her message. Despite the inactive participation of learners in academic subjects, the learner Sbusiso poses a challenge to his peer. His comment is intended to challenge Mandisa to research further in order to critically develop her argument and support the view she presents. This kind of comment from a learner shows involvement in the construction of knowledge about the Gold industry. Although he uses an informal register, 'Hi girl', his comment reflects an understanding of how points of view are debated in academic discourse. Interestingly, Mandisa also added comments to his posted newspaper paragraph. This practice seems to suggest a possible extension of previously established social relations into academic discussions. The two tutors provide sources of information and guidelines for the proper format of the newspaper genre. However there is no indication of whether Mandisa comprehends their comments.

This discourse thread reflects the potential of the forum to facilitate collaborative construction of knowledge with both learners and tutors while developing student skill in academic discourse.

Unfortunately, however, there were fewer than 10 discourse threads of this type in the ECO110H forum.

4.3. Discussions of assignment drafts

Although instruction in the last session indicated that drafts would be posted for peer and tutor review, only tutors commented on the learners' drafts. This is how the web page stated the task for the day,

(10)

<i>This folder is for drafts of your articles you can send me an article to post for you (e-mail address) or you can post into the relevant discussion by theme e.g drafts on the history of all the three industries will appear together in the same folder. Use the opportunity to get feedback on your drafts from your colleagues and your tutors.</i>

Submissions in this task were of the 'monologue' type. My use of this terminology differs slightly from Goodfellow and Lamy's definition. They use it in reference to lengthy messages that invite no response, such as reports on research. In this study it refers to submissions of assignment drafts. Although these essays are lengthy (often exceeding 500 words), they are not really reports on research. All comments on the essays are from tutors. Consequently, the pattern of discourse resembles that in example 6.

This practice resembles assessment practice where a learner submits a printed assignment script for assessment and receives feedback on performance from the tutor as assessor. In this context the missing component is allocation of marks, otherwise interaction pattern online resembles assessment practice

offline. It is also another variation of the question-response-evaluation mode practiced in traditional classroom discourse.

3. 5. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed interaction patterns in the online discourse of the ECO110H course. The close interrelationship between field, tenor, and mode has been noted in the discourse patterns of the texts. The field and tenor of discourse determines the nature of the task. It also affects the tenor of the exchange, or who one chooses to interact with. Finally, language use and the choice of mode of discourse relate to both field and tenor. Because of this interrelationship, social relations and traditional classroom patterns of exchange are reflected rather than being radically reshaped online. It is evident that the level of interaction is not determined by the mode of communication in isolation, instead, both the topic of discussion and the relationships between discussants affect the participation level of interlocutors. The next section explores the discourse employed in these social and academic discussions in the different tasks of the ECO110H course. It argues that the 'field of discourse' influences the nature of discourse rather than the technology in isolation.

Chapter 4

Discourse and Online Discussions

4.0. Introduction

Chapter three discussed discourse patterns in the online discourse of the ECO110H group. Shifting interrelationships of field, tenor and mode of discourse influence these discourse patterns. As a result, participation levels vary according to context. This interrelationship further affects the discourse generated in each of the activities. As many researchers have pointed out, the discourse of online discussions is of a hybrid nature, closely resembling spoken discourse in a written mode (Werry 1996, Troest 1999). Christopher Werry and Orbeson Troest claim that this production results from the nature of the CMC technology. They believe the speed with which messages are exchanged approximates face-to-face exchange, and that interlocutors are driven to emulate spoken discourse in this medium. They note that features commonly associated with spoken discourse occur frequently in the written medium - paralinguistic cues, features observed in informal genres of writing such as personal letters including features that characterize involved discourse.

My study of the discourse produced in these activities reveals that a complex interrelationship of field, tenor and mode influences the production rather than merely the affordances of the mode. As chapter 3 noted, these dynamics regulate discourse patterns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the register employed in these interactions also varied with task and participants. Socially oriented discussions employed an informal register (which closely resembles spoken discourse), while academic discussions of the students' first drafts used both formal and informal discourse. Although there is an overlap between the discourse produced during the second and third tasks, the final activities, which feature more academic tasks, produce 'monologues' of an altogether more formal tone.

In this section I argue that the discourse generated in an online discussion is not determined by the mode of communication, or the technology exclusively. Instead I explore how the nature of the task and the relationship of participants all influence the nature of the discourse.

I begin by exploring the ECO110H data for features that are associated with spoken discourse as presented by Werry. The presence of these features in a written medium is interesting since Chafe (cited in Gee 1990) believes that spoken and written discourse have different discourse features, caused by the mode of production. Following Gee's critique of the speech-writing dichotomy, I then analyze the range of discourse in the ECO110H academic submissions, using Biber's (1988) framework of involved discourse. This shows the resources learners brought into their first draft of a newspaper article. Finally I discuss the discourse of monologues and argue that the discourse indicates a shift to the detached academic discourse, yet learners hardly engaged in academic discussions online.

4.1. Informal discourse and online discussions

The informal discourse in the ECO110H text is largely fragmented and indicates some representations of paralinguage, a feature in writing that partly compensates for the absence of non-verbal communication usually present in speech. The next section looks into this prominent feature in the 'conversations' identified in Chapter 3.

4.1.1. Paralinguistic features in an online discussion

Edmondson (1981: 34) defines paralinguage as

...purposeful, directed and adoptive(controllable) behavior which may accompany or substitute for linguistic communication, and may therefore contribute to the development of a conversation. (Abercrombie 1968)

In speech, features of paralinguistics are exhibited through intonation and gestures. Intonation should be understood as referring to a variation in voice production as a distinctive feature of a speech act. However, Werry (1996: 56) contends that electronic discourse has employed 'a complex set of orthographic strategies designed to compensate for the lack of intonation and paralinguistic cues that interactive written discourse imposes on its users'. He further argues that in CMC, especially in Internet Relay Chat, interlocutors strive to simulate spoken language because of the speed with which messages are exchanged. For that reason, CMC conventions have emerged. Gestures can accompany utterances or stand as independent speech acts. For instance, one can use gestures while speaking about something; i.e. for emphasis one might clench a fist. As an independent act, one might frown or smile at something, thus sending a non-verbal message to the next person. Gestures, like intonation, are recognizable in face-to-face interactions. In his elaboration, Werry maintains that a '... set of linguistic devices ... functions to create the effects of voice, gesture and tone through the creative use of capitalization, spelling and punctuation'. Interlocutors in this mode aim to produce 'auditory and visual effects in writing ... to make written words simulate speech' (p 58).

Werry identifies these linguistic strategies in an Internet Relay Chat program, which is synchronous. The corpus of this study demonstrates many of these features, although discussions were conducted in a different Conferencing software application.

Capitalization

In most formal genres of writing, upper case letters often assume certain positions in a sentence. They are often placed at sentence initial position or word initial to mark a proper noun or important words in a sentence, (e.g a title). However, in these online texts, their function in the discourse differs when applied throughout a word. This difference in function excludes capitalization of a whole turn, such as this;

(1)

<i>xola: GOLD IS THE WAY TO GO HEY VUSI, I THINK YOU'RE DOING THE WRONG SECTION...TELL ME MORE ABOUT WHAT U THINK</i>	
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Since no discourse function is portrayed in this kind of submissions the use of capitalization in them will not be addressed. Upper case letters have a significant discourse function in submissions of this kind,

(2)

<i>Kina: I'am so bored with this. TALK TO ME</i>	
<i>Uno: Hey, my grp is Gold explorers and that is exactly what we wanna do EXPLORE GOLD, if u have any info plz...let me know</i>	

In IRC 'capitalization is almost never used for proper nouns or at the start of sentences. Instead it is conveyed as a convention for expressing emphasis' (Werry 1996: 57). In (3) and (4), Kina and Uno do not only add emphasis to their messages by employing capitalization, they are possibly expressing sarcasm about the research.

Reduplicated letters and reduplicated punctuation marks

Although the two forms of reduplication (in letters and in punctuation marks) do not necessarily feature together, there are several instances in this study where they do. They both aim to seek attention. These multiple letters are analyzed as representing an 'expressive intonation' (Werry 1996: 57), or a 'rising intonation' (Murray 1995: 82) in these words. Therefore, it means a change in the tone of voice is manifest in writing. A repetition of punctuation marks creates 'affect' (Murray 1995: 82). In these cases, the interlocutor requires an expression beyond the familiar form of punctuation. In the present

study, reduplication occurs with the final letters, exclamation marks and question marks as in the examples below;

(3)

<i>John: hi my name is Crane, i am the worlds most famous clown. its time to have some fun with Crane, the world's most famous cloowwnnnnnnnnn!!!!</i>	
<i>Kayne: Buyakasha Hi There I would like to garner information on the oil industry. I need it for my research project Aaaaaaaait Peace Out Yours Faithfully Walley</i>	
<i>Sabil: Kayne!!!!!!</i> <i>Kayneeeeeeeeeeee</i>	

The reduplication of ‘n’ and of ‘e’ in (3) obviously misspells the words, but partly compensates for the missing voice in the medium. Crane sent his message pretending to be John, probably that was part of the fun. He used both repeated letters and exclamation marks to draw everybody’s attention to his message. He extends an invitation for a social conversation and features in several humorous social conversations (see chapter 3 example 3 and chapter 4 example 12). Kayne uses an opening formula, ‘Buyakasha’ – a salutation often used by some African American artists of Raggae music when taking the stage for presentations. The actual Ebonics spelling of this salutation is ‘Booyakasha’. Kayne has Africanized it to ‘Buyakasha’. His message has code-switched English and Ebonics. Sabil ‘shouts’ Kayne’s name in response to his ‘stage entrance’. The repeated exclamation marks and the repeated letter ‘e’ represent his shout. Both examples clearly indicate the way learners used the forum. They used it for social purposes and as ways of establishing their identity.

Reduplicated punctuation marks often signify heavy sarcasm among the learners in this forum as in the following examples;

(4)

<i>Addy: Why are you doing Oil??????????</i>
<i>Gordon: like grant bru! we're doing oil and not clothes and textiles!!!!</i>

Addy posed the question in (4) to Gordon earlier on (see chapter 3 example 2) when he complained about his leadership. One would think he was really concerned about his choice by using the multiple question marks when actually he was being ironic about the project. Gordon pretends to be boasting about being in the 'oil industry research', rather than 'the clothing and textile industry research'. These behaviours are characteristic of a student subculture where pretending to say one thing and meaning another is a common defensive gesture and marker of 'coolness'. This was possible in this social task.

Emoticons

Through the use of emoticons learners expressed feelings of happiness and of sadness. Such can be seen in the following examples,

(5)

<i>Xola: what do u guys feel about what we are doing, can somebody please let me know what we have to do?...i'm like "really" confused:(</i>
<i>Sam: have lotsa ice cream for you:)</i>

Besides the use of the abbreviation 'u' instead of 'you', a disregard for appropriate punctuation and capitalization and the omission of the first person pronoun before 'have lotsa...' which are also features of informal discourse, Xola and Sam have used emoticons. Their messages have been punctuated with these emoticons representing two different facial expressions. Xola's confusion is represented by a sad

face :(), while Sam offers his ice cream to Crane (whose message is not included) with a smiling face (:)). However, in the newspaper paragraphs, although some learners submitted highly emotive appeals, no emoticons can be found. Sam's paragraph is also emotional but he uses ellipsis rather than an emoticon to express his feelings (see example 7 in this chapter), possibly because ellipsis is used in formal genres of speech with a different significance.

Ellipsis

Data from the online texts indicates frequent use of ellipsis by both learners and tutors. It must be noted that this is the only paralinguistic cue employed by the tutors in this discourse, otherwise they always maintained formal discourse. Werry (1996: 57) holds that ellipsis 'create pauses and tempo'. The following extract involving a message from a student and responses from tutors will be analyzed to ascertain the significance of the ellipsis,

(6)

Kenny: *Going "Deeper Under ground" with the oil industry*

The petrol industry has been in the news a number of times over the past month as the price of this commodity has been slowly increasing. Why is this? As some of you might or might not know, this is because the suppliers (OPEC), has been cutting the production of this substance. My group has chosen this topic as we feel that that these changes in the oil and petrol industry affect us al in various ways. For example those of us as who rely on public transport have been forced to accommodate the increases in Jammie shuttle and taxi prices. Thus we all in fact show an economic interest by keeping a close eye on these industries

Tutor Pat: *Effects of Petrol Price Increase*

I wonder if the increase in petrol price has any effect on the tension between taxi operators and the Golden Arrow...Does anyone have an idea about this possibility?

Tutor Fay: *What has motivated OPEC to cut supply of petrol to South Africa? Why are we feeling the effects so keenly and what can we do to remedy the situation so that we are not that hard- hit by the changes in the industry? Just wondering...*

In the above discourse, the student Kenny has posted an opening paragraph of a newspaper article where he addresses the issue of escalating petrol prices and its effect in the community. Both responses from tutors have made use of ellipsis. Tutor Pat initiates a topic, which is related to the student's message, as a response. Within the response, there is a pause represented by an ellipse. The pause in this response seems to create space for the critical reflection on the mentioned events. Although structurally it is linked to another message as a response, all participants are invited to think critically about the raised topic and contribute to the discussion. The ellipse has marked the movement from one student to all the participants. Student's minds are being probed to think critically and reflect on real life situations in their negotiation of meaning (the two events - increase in petrol prices and fight between taxi operators and Golden Arrow (buses) - occurred during this period). Tutor Fay's use of ellipsis also directs the mind of the learner to think about or research the causes of the reduced supply of oil and its effect on South Africa. These guiding questions could be taken up by learners to develop their essays. Both tutors have used ellipsis to probe the minds of the learners.

An ellipse used by a learner has a slightly different significance. An example can be seen below,

(7)

*Sam: OPEC is an organization run by puppets...very strong puppets
might i add. However they rule the oil roost...they rule the roost
and monopolise the thing...we need help from OPEC...*

'Tempo and pause' is portrayed in the ellipsis used in the above submission. The learner seems to have strong feelings towards the organization, therefore the ellipsis marks the breathing space (as it would sound in speech) in the spontaneous message.

The examples of representations of paralanguage discussed in this section have been drawn from the 'introductions' task, except for examples (6) and (7). They reflect social group dynamics within the

group. Some express their feelings, others portray social roles, and others reflect behaviours of a student subculture. Basically they facilitate the social conversations in the ‘introductions’ forum. However, they feature prominently in conversations than in dialogues. The table below shows the frequency of these features in the three tasks.

Figure 4

Task 1	Task 2		Task 3
Introductions	Discussions of newspaper paragraphs		Questions for experts
42	9		2

It is worth noting that, of the paralinguistic cues discussed, only ellipsis is used in monologues and it has a different significance in this forum.

4.1.2. Other features of an informal language

In Murray’s discussion of the language of CMC, time constraints are portrayed as one of the major factors influencing language production in this medium (1995: 80). Since CMC writers aim to simulate spoken language, and are influenced by the speed of delivery provided by the system (Werry 1996), they tend to employ syntactically reduced forms of writing to accommodate the reduced time that spoken discourse would consume. ‘To reduce time, computer communicators abbreviate, simplify lexis, and syntax, and disregard surface errors. But at the same time, they maintain Grice’s maxim of quantity, that is, to say as much as is needed to be understood, but no more’ (Murray 1995: 80). Such features already identified in the discussion are, abbreviations and acronyms, deleted subject pronouns, and disregard for spelling and punctuation. Code-switching, as another feature of informal language, is discussed in the following section. In this study it has remarkable significance in academic discussions.

Code-switching

In this corpus learners, code-switch in peer exchanges. They incorporate some lexical items foreign to the language of learning, which is English. Van Hout and Muyskein (1994) define this form of code-switching, where 'elements are inserted into a structure with a single base language', as 'insertion' (Moyer in Peter Auer 1998: 224). Some examples of this practice can be seen in the academic discussion below,

(8)

Sbusiso: *Gold was the pride of South Africa*

Nowadays Gold is not the pride of our country, because it decreases everyday. Gold used to be one of the most important export products, many people were employed in this industry. Golds used to contribute a lot in the GDP of our country. Has gold lost its shine? What can we do to bring back the pride of South Africa

Mandisa: *Its still the pride*

Okey Sbu look at the gold products prices I mean 'ubucwebe' things still cost more. I don't understand what you mean when you say that gold has lost its value.

While the informality of task can contribute to the production of a code-switched language, in some academic discussions this practice might present an extra discourse function. Mandisa's use of inverted commas in 'ubucwebe' meaning 'glittering objects', might indicate that, while she is conscious of the language of learning, English, the Xhosa word will convince her peer, who speaks Xhosa, that Gold is still valuable. This is a fascinating use of prior knowledge and primary discourse. Her message is a response to an opening paragraph of a newspaper article arguing that 'gold has lost its shine'. Mandisa's use of an insertion in this academic discussion serves as an elaboration of her point of view. She challenges her peer to reconsider his view. Furthermore, she might have been influenced by the existing interpersonal relationship with the interlocutor to use code-switched discourse. This is shown

in her opening address 'Okey Sbu...' (Sbu is a shortened form of the full name Sbusiso) - an informal address used by friends in their social conversations.

The next section discusses various discourses present in the learners' first academic submissions. This range is based on the level of informality. Informality is measured in terms of relative proximity to involved discourse or formal, detached discourse. In this course, learners were helped with producing academic discourse, which is detached and integrated. The following section therefore explores involvement, integration, detachment and fragmentation in the academic submissions of learners.

4.2. Framework for involvement and integration

Gee elicits some linguistic features of integration as mentioned by Chafe. These features are echoed in Biber's (1988) framework of 'involved versus informative' discourse. According to this framework, informative discourse such as academic prose or news reportage frequently uses complex lexical and syntactic features of language. These linguistic features include 'nominalizations, attributive adjectives, participles and various subordinating devices (Gee 1990: 55). At the other end of the spectrum Biber identifies indicators of involved discourse genres, which include heavy use of the following; first and second personal pronouns, contractions, hedges (e.g. 'sort of', 'kind of') and amplifiers (e.g. 'utterly', 'very'). Involved discourse uses verbs, which express unobservable states such as 'believe', 'feel', 'know', and 'if' clauses and emphatics such as 'for sure' and 'a lot'.

In Biber's discourse analysis model, the 'involved versus informational production' dimension is one of six dimensions identified as indicating particular communicative functions based on frequent occurrence of certain linguistic features. Although his model is designed for the analysis of computer-based corpora, the features of the 'involved versus informational' dimension are nonetheless useful in qualitative analysis as indicators of involved and integrated discourse.

Biber’s framework is relevant for this study because,

‘it does not assume a simple dichotomy between speech and writing. His characterization of texts in terms of the relation between communicative function and linguistic features reveals that there is no absolute distinction between speech and writing. Thus, written genres such as personal letters are more similar to spoken genres such as face-to-face conversation than they are to other written genres, and in each dimension he has found that written and spoken texts overlap’ (Milena Collot and Nancy Belmore 1996: 18).

Because this study has already noted the hybrid character of online discourse, this model seems appropriate to explore some features of involved writing.

4.3. Involvement and integration online

Three broad categories of discourse are present in the ECO110H academic discussions. These are (1) involved and fragmented, (2) involved and integrated and (3) detached and integrated discourse.

Figure 5

	Involved	Detached
Fragmented	*	
Integrated	*	*

Figure 5 shows that involved and fragmented discourse is identified by linguistic features mostly observed in speech. Involved and integrated discourse is characterized by an almost equal occurrence of indicators of involved and integrated discourse. A majority of indicators of integrated discourse occur in detached and integrated discourse. The first two types feature in the second and third tasks of

the course, which are ‘an opening paragraph of a newspaper article’ and ‘questions for experts’ respectively. The third type of discourse can also be found in these tasks, although it predominates in the assignment drafts produced for task 4.

4.3.1. Involved and fragmented discourse

The following example is an opening paragraph of a newspaper article submitted by a student. She addresses the issue of frequent petrol increases in South Africa. This example is chosen because she expresses her view in highly involved discourse, a personal perspective generated in response to an academic topic.

(9)

Siphiwe: WHAT ABOUT YEAH!

But really the inceasing of petrol is unfair. We can't purchase cars at high prices at the same time pay more for petrol? no ways!! By the way who is this person who keep on increasing petrol prices? Where ever you are I think you need to see me!!!! (ASAP)

Several features of involvement are evident in Siphiwe's discourse. There is a contraction ‘can’t’ (for ‘can not’) and the first and second person pronouns ‘i’, ‘we’ and ‘you’ (twice). Secondly the writer's choice of words and expressions reflects her enraged feeling. She uses an imperative ‘no ways!!’ to express her emotions and attitude directly. This is followed by an enquiry about who causes the price hikes. Thirdly, Siphiwe uses reduplicated exclamation marks as paralinguistic cues to add emphasis to her enquiry and an acronym (ASAP) ‘for as soon as possible’. These features further increase involvement. Spontaneity in text production and the drive to express personal experience characterizes this piece of writing, resulting in involved and fragmented discourse.

Such involved and fragmented discourse contrasts strongly with academic writing, which must be detached.

4.3.2. Involved and integrated discourse

This next example is also an opening paragraph of a newspaper article.

(10)

Ann: What's up in the oil industry

As far as my knowledge of labour in the oil industry goes I'm kind of clueless. What I do know is that the rising oil prices have caused tremendous strain on South Africa's economy and consumers. The major oil companies have also taken a bad knock, this mainly due to the fierce competition between South Africa's oil companies, of which correct me if I am wrong, Shell and BP seem to be the major players. The future of the oil prices is uncertain, one thing I know for sure is that consumers will be the ones to suffer.

Ann has used several markers of both involved and integrated discourse. Indicators of involvement include the first person pronoun 'i' which appears four times, 'me' and the possessive pronoun 'my'. The contraction 'i'm' (for 'I am') occurs twice and the hedges 'kind of' and 'seem to be' (which suggest a non-committal stance) also surface. An emphatic 'for sure' and an amplifier 'mainly' also feature in this text. The private verb 'know' occurs twice in this text. Frequent occurrence of the identified features is indicative of highly involved discourse. This is further exemplified in the clause 'correct me if I'm wrong' which creates the impression of face-to-face interaction with audience.

In spite of the dense markers of involved discourse in Ann's paragraph, some features of integrated discourse can be noted. Such features are, for example attributive adjectives (rising oil prices, tremendous strain, bad knock, fierce competition, major players). Other features are subordinate

clauses. The relative pronoun 'which' introduces an adjectival clause '... of which correct me if I'm wrong, Shell and BP seem to be the major players' further subordinating the clause '...correct me if I'm wrong...'. There are also nominals such as '(my) knowledge' (instead of 'I know'). Although markers of integrated discourse are evident in this discourse, the presence of markers for involved discourse disqualifies it as acceptable academic writing.

4.3.3. *Detached and integrated discourse*

Some opening paragraphs were highly integrated and detached. This can be seen in the following paragraph,

(11)

James: Oil fiasco spirals out of control

The price of petrol in this country has reached unprecedented heights, and the citizens of this country are bearing the brunt of the constant increases. Since petrol is a necessity and modern life revolves around petroleum powered mechanisms, we have no choice but to comply with these ridiculous hikes.

In this extract several characteristics of integrated discourse are evident. There are attributive adjectives (unprecedented heights, constant increases, petrol powered mechanisms, ridiculous hikes) and prepositional phrases (price of petrol, citizens of this country). The conjunctive, 'since' structures the subordinate clause in the last sentence. These linguistic structures have created integrated text. The pronoun 'we' is the sole feature of involved discourse in the paragraph.

The above examples represent the range of discourse found in the ECO110H academic discussions at the draft stage of their articles. They show the different experiences that learners brought into the

discussion. The first two also indicate features believed to occur only in written discourse. This occurrence clearly shows another form of language profile in the forum. It is a profile that incorporates both involved and integrated discourse in written mode. Also, it supports Gee's critique of the 'writing and speech dichotomy'. The next section discusses Gee's critique in detail.

4.4. Speech- writing dichotomy challenged

Gee's (1990) challenge to the speech-writing dichotomy is clearly valid in the case of online discourse. The presence of paralinguistic cues and some lexical and syntactic structures mostly observed in the informal discourse of speech create texts that approximate spoken discourse in a written mode. As in the genre discussed by Biber, their presence in a written mode contradicts the idea of a divide between spoken discourse and its written counterpart, which propagates distinctive linguistic features of speech and of written discourse (Ong and Chafe in Gee 1990). Proponents of this view claim that spoken discourse is a primary product of the language produced in an oral culture or a residually oral culture (according to Ong), which is highly involved and fragmented. Written discourse, which they claim is characteristic of a literate culture, is highly integrated because the writer has molded ideas into a coherent integrated whole. This integration is obtained through the use of complicated lexical and syntactic devices which consequently create discourse that is detached from its speaker and audience.

Although learners produced a wide range of discourses, the aim of the course was to lead them towards producing integrated and detached discourse. The next section therefore discusses the form of guidance given to these learners.

4.5. Responses to paragraphs

Despite the lack of responses from learners to tutors' comments, these comments were meant to guide learners towards writing researched, coherent and academically acceptable articles. Even though they were essentially producing mini- essays, learners were told to follow the format of a newspaper genre. It seems learners did not focus only on comments made about their own articles. In the Computer laboratory they often copied down notes from responses to other learners' articles too. This practice occurred from the second session and intensified in task 4. In this final task they posted drafts and received comments from tutors. The following are some examples of the different types of comments on learners' articles.

(12)

Rita: The petrol price keeps increasing

Why does the petrol price keep increasing? What does it mean for the household in South Africa? OPEC cut production and it means that the price will have to go up. For the household this is bad news because everything will have a price increase, products from clothes to food and everything in between. Most people will turn to public transport because they won't be able to afford the petrol for their own private transport. Don't sweat!! Just keep up the faith...

Tutor Fay: Reply to Rita's concerns

Can you think of sound reasons why ALL prices increase when the price of petrol increases? When you answer this, think particularly of the immediate impact it has on your life in terms of where you buy, what you can save at the end of the day, etcetera.

Johnny(student): Maybe it is a good thing

Public transport is the answer (if it doesn't get blown up).

The above example shows responses to Rita's article from a tutor and a student, Johnny. The tutor's comments are meant to guide Rita towards developing an argument based on concrete facts and drawing from her immediate circumstances. This should help her understand the future impact of the

petrol price increases. Notice Johnny's response, which certainly suggests a lack of seriousness in the discussion.

Some responses directed learners to relevant sources of information. This often occurred when a learner requested information about those sources. Examples of such can be seen in the following responses,

(13)

Dan: any info on oil companies

Tutor Helen: response to dan from tutor 2

I suggest you go to the Mbendi website or the sapia website which are both listed on your library handout

*Mandisa: **back to the history***

When researching I have found that gold was discovered centuries ago .however it is still the best industry in Soth Africa. Through gold mines the country is earning a lot by sellingit to foreign Countries. I'm still busy searching for the history and origins of gold.

*Tutor Pat: **Back to the history***

Mandisa, for insight concerning the history of the goldmining industry in South Africa you could look for a good general economic history of South Africa. Ask for help in the library. The chamber of Mines website tends to ignore inconvenient issues such as the migrant labour system

In the above examples learners are directed to different sources of information. They are directed to information on the Internet and in the library. In some instances the direction would be based on the need shown in the learners article such as in the following example,

(14)

*Shone: **I am confused***

I have a basic idea of why the price of increases. But why does it have to increase every month. Does the government not know that a majority of our countries people are financially challenged. In the long run increasing the pric eof petrol will have a detrimental effect on our economy.

Tutor Helen: response to Shone from tutor 2

Shone, the government is being forced to increase petrol prices because of the world wide increases in the price of crude oil. I think you should review some of the responses from the expert questions and you will find a lot of the answers to your questions.

In the above response tutor Helen comments on Shone's article and further directs him to another forum online where students posted questions for expert advice.

It seems learners responded to the comments about sources of information because, during their sessions in the computer laboratory, I often observed them visiting Internet sites for information, taking down information from these sites and from the tutorial site. Moreover, they had been given a handout on information sources in earlier sessions.

Other responses from tutors focused on the organization of argument in the articles such as the following,

(15)

Tutor Fay: Reply to Lean

It's clear that you've put some thought into your newspaper article. Now think of who will be reading this article. Is there anything you need to explore or explain further to make the reader follow your train of thought? Are there any measures this country can put in place to counteract the devastating effects of steadily climbing oil and petrol prices on our daily lives? Would this form part of our short or long term economic reform plans and why?

TutorKate: Response to Mpho

An interesting paragraph packed (too packed) with facts. You have crammed a whole article into one paragraph. You could have one paragraph on domestic politics and how they affect the gold price, one on the Bank of England selling gold (this was not a domestic dispute was it?) and one on costs of production. By the way, I'm not sure how the decline in the price of gold increases the costs of production - surely just decreases the profits? Stick to one main idea for one paragraph. I can see you have been tracking the gold price with interest!

In these examples tutor Fay's comment aims to guide the line of argument in Lean's article, which is about the increase in petrol price. The learner might have done extensive research on the subject, but the structure of the article did not convey her argument. This comment is meant to assist her organize her argument and simplify her language to suit her intended audience. Mpho had submitted an article, which addressed the decline of the Gold price in South Africa. Tutor Kate's response is meant to guide Mpho's thoughts. Mpho needs to organize and develop each and every point separately while maintaining the same argument.

Some comments from tutors helped learners understand the proper format and the lack of involvement required for the newspaper article genre. Examples of those can be seen below,

(16)

TutorKate: Response to Thembi

Get the tone right Thembi for a newspaper article. Unless you were writing a comment column, you would not use 'I' 'my' or even 'you'. It would be more formal e.g 'The consumer spends a great deal on products with spiraling prices'. What has December got to do with the oil industry? An interesting thought- cars being hijacked for petrol. I wouldn't be surprise

Tutor Kate: Response to Vusi

Vusi, a very catchy headline indeed! Your point about foreign competition is a valid one, but it gets confusing when you then go on to smuggling. You need to make it clear that you support foreign competition, but not smuggling, simply by using contrasting link words like 'however' or 'but' before going on to the smuggling issue. The way you end of is not really appropriate newspaper language-more like ending off a phone conversation.

The above extracts show comments which address the writing format of a newspaper article. Learners are guided as to the proper formal tone to adopt in the article. That would mean excluding those features that indicate informal language. Tutor Kate suggests the passive form of writing rather than a personalized expression in order to nudge the learner towards a detached form of academic discourse.

She also comments about avoiding speech-like discourse in a newspaper article to Vusi's article. In a face-to-face tutorial session, learners and tutors discussed the format of newspaper articles and learners were also given a handout with these guidelines. This discussion came after they had written the opening paragraph exercise.

The absence of discussion threads in the forum poses difficulty with ascertaining whether learning did take place online. However an example of a learner's assignment draft can be seen below. Her newspaper paragraph is in example (10). This paragraph included markers of involved discourse, which must be excluded in academic discourse.

(17)

Ann: Deregulation: The future of labour?

Over the past few years there has not been that much talk about labour practices in the oil industry. Nevertheless, since the publication of the white paper and the subsequent countless meetings between the minister and South Africa's major oil companies, there has been one buzz word doing the rounds,....deregulation!!!!

What deregulation would do to the industry is lead to a more efficient and competitive industry. Although this will cause a decrease in oil prices due to the competitiveness that will arise in the market, concern has risen about job loses which would occur during the reduction of the retail networks. This would be totally unacceptable for South Africa since South Africa already has a very high unemployment rate. Over the past few months the major South African oil companies, which include Shell, BP, Total, Caltex and Engen, have held meetings with the minister to discuss future plans for potential deregulation. The South African government seems to be undecided about deregulation, possibly because it will lead to greater unemployment at a when unemployment is vital to the expansion of South Africa's economy.

Oil companies in South Africa employ thousands of workers, many of whom are petrol attendants. Deregulation would give companies free reign and most intend on implementing self- service stations. This will obviously reduce the cost of petrol for the consumer but will also result in job losses of up to 80 000 workers.

The 'Ratplan' places a limitation on the opening of new sites and prohibits self-service stations and credit card payments for service station sales. Cosatu finds the proposal of deregulation very problematic. In response to the white paper Cosatu said, 'Without recognition that the petrol industry is an important employer of labour,...the white paper allows the fate of labour to be subsumed under the need for investment, competitive prices

etc....'

Government is challenged to ensure that even though deregulation takes place, the industry not only retains labour but also plays a role in job creation in the economy. Although the lowering of prices will benefit the consumer, the retrenchment of workers is inevitable. This cost saving will therefore be offset by the massive UIP claims of thousands of forecourt workers who lose their jobs.

Cosatu holds a strong viewpoint and says they have never agreed to deregulation. Cosatu also believes that the government has not committed itself seriously to looking at the negative aspects restructuring will have on labour, both in terms of job loss, working conditions, health and safety.

The government's view is that restructuring is inevitable and there is no reason why the industry should not be regulated, even though there may be negative effect on labour and small business in short and medium terms. Government is optimistic that opportunities for sustainable employment should be created and maintained, and new entrants should be nurtured. Government does not however say how this sustainable employment will be created and maintained. Cosatu strongly believes that the Ratplan and the ban on self-service should remain in place, and that there should be no contracting out of transport since this results in job losses and economic hardship for workers.

The future of labour in the petrol industry is still very uncertain, but one thing that is certain, is that in order for South Africa to move forward in free market terms, deregulation should be the first step.

Although this draft still needed to be re-worked, Ann's discourse has shifted substantially compared to the first submission in example (10). The discourse is detached and several features of integrated discourse can be identified. Her use of ellipsis and exclamation marks in the opening paragraph serve to emphasize the subject of her discussion. Several attributive adjectival phrases can be identified and these include '*subsequent countless meetings*', '*competitive industry*', '*negative effect*', '*very high unemployment rate*', '*free reign*', '*sustainable employment*' and others. There are also prepositional phrases such as '*the cost of petrol*', '*retrenchment of workers*', '*ban on self-service*', '*reduction of the retail networks*'. These phrases have nominals within them such as, '*retrenchment*' and '*reduction*'. The use of these phrases encourages precision and reduces wordiness in discourse.

She has also used some structural signals to subordinate clauses. Such is evident in this introductory paragraph of the draft;

'Over the past few years there has not been that much talk about labour practices in the oil industry. Nevertheless, since the publication of the white paper and the subsequent countless meetings between the minister and South Africa's major oil companies, there has been one buzz word doing the rounds,....deregulation!!!!'

She uses 'nevertheless' to compare the previous stance as regards labour practices in the oil industry with the present. In the same paragraph, the signal 'since' also structures the subordinate sentence, which states the reasons for the change. She begins her second paragraph with 'What deregulation would do to the industry is lead to a more efficient and competitive industry'. The following sentence commences with 'although' to state the benefits and counter effects of this move, which are decreases in oil prices for the former and job losses for the latter. In the same paragraph she uses 'possibly because' to state the reasons for government to withhold implementation of the new plan. When stating the view held by the workers' union (Cosatu) in the fourth paragraph she begins with, 'In response to the white paper...' to indicate that this body of workers was reacting to the position held by government. In her concluding paragraph, she indicates that the positions held by the concerned bodies in labour issues of the oil industry makes it hard to ascertain the future of labour, after which she further states a prerequisite that will enable this certainty through using the conjoining phrase 'but one thing that is certain, is that...'.
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The examples of lexical and syntactic structures used in this draft have integrated the discourse to a coherent whole. Although it is detached discourse, the line of argument can be followed in the discourse. Her change to formal discourse may not necessarily be attributed to engaging in discussions

online, since, like others, she did not. She might have been one of the students who are able to code-switch from informal to formal language in their writing.

4.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown the different categories of discourse in the online ECO110H text. Hybrid discourse is highly evident in social conversations. This discourse largely employs features of involved discourse including paralinguistic cues. It seems to suggest that students can vary the formality of discourse depending on the task.

Social dynamics influence the nature of discourse. Although some learner paragraphs were integrated and detached, some academic submissions, nonetheless relied on features of involved discourse. Such submissions did not conform to the format of academic discourse since they still employed features of involvement. However, responses from tutors were directed towards shifting the discourse to the acceptably detached and integrated style of the newspaper genre. Although online discussions about the construction of this discourse were not evident, assignment drafts of learners are largely detached. It would appear that discussions were taking place but not online. The learners were motivated to conduct social discussions, and they employed the language appropriate for those discussions - informal discourse. Although the affordances of the online environment did influence their academic submissions, the discourse in those submissions differs substantially from the social conversations of task 1 and largely employs features of integrated discourse. This indicates that they were aware of the academic nature of the task and of tutors as their primary audience. However, their passivity in online discussion cannot be read as an absence of learning in this environment since many assignment drafts, such as the one discussed above, show improvement. It would appear that they were comfortable with

interacting socially and copying down notes from the tutors' comments, a practice that, to some extent, resembles traditional classroom patterns of discourse.

The next chapter discusses the significance of some discourse functions believed to enhance second language acquisition in the ECO110H texts. It explores whether these discourse functions can develop academic discourse.

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Chapter 5

Some 'Affordances' of the Online Forum

5. 0. Introduction

The discussion in chapter 3 argued that discourse patterns in the online sessions varied with the nature of the activity. It established that academic discussions between tutors and learners largely adopted the traditional classroom question-response-evaluation pattern of discourse, resulting in low levels of academic interaction between learners. The discussion in chapter 4 has also shown that learners employed informal discourse in their social conversations. Although learners did not engage in academic discussions with peers and tutors, academic tasks such as the newspaper assignment produced relatively formal discourse. Because of students' passive behaviour in academic discussions, the negotiation of meaning in academic discourse was not evident from this online activity. Nonetheless, this chapter argues that, despite the low levels of participation in academic discussions, discourse functions known to enhance Second Language Acquisition (SLA) can be identified in this text. This analysis of discourse functions shows that, although academic discourse is not seen to be developed directly through online discussions, the affordances of the online forum may have several indirect benefits. For example, learners can reveal their identities and their voices can be heard. They can assume authoritative roles and they can share responsibilities. Perhaps it is important to note that ESL South African learners at University level do not require intensive guidance in their social interactions in English. Basically, they need assistance with controlling the language in the different academic disciplines. A brief discussion of discourse functions and SLA research is necessary to establish the context for this argument.

5.1. Background to discourse functions and SLA research

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is claimed to be one of the positive outcomes of high levels of interaction observed in CMC discourse. Proponents of this view maintain that the online discussion forum provides an environment that supports 'a content-based model of ESL instruction' (Kasper 2000). Such approaches to SLA derive from cognitive learning models and research into second language acquisition. Expounding on cognitive learning theory, Loretta Kasper (2000) explains that scaffolding forms the basis of this kind of learning. This is the process whereby an expert closely guides the learner to develop the necessary language skills. In this type of learning, a student progresses through the cognitive, the associative and the autonomous stages of learning, facilitated by 'extensive instructional support during the initial stages' (p106). Initial support is gradually removed as the student gains proficiency in the task (Chamot and O'Malley 1994, Anderson 1983a cited). Citing several authors, Kasper emphasizes that second language acquisition research has found that the development of literacy depends on being provided with multiple opportunities to interact in a linguistically challenging environment relevant to the learner's goals. She therefore concludes that the electronic medium promotes cognitive development and second language acquisition by providing scaffolding for the learners and engaging them in linguistically challenging tasks.

Echoing the same view, Susana Sotillo (2000) holds that the electronic medium promotes the production of discourse functions that are deemed essential for second language acquisition. She defines discourse functions as 'categories of behavior in electronic discourse'. In her argument she contends that discourse functions 'similar to the types of interactional modifications practiced in face-to-face discourse' (p82), can be found in CMC discourse. For Sotillo, this proves that CMC can enable the acquisition of a second language. Her argument is based on SLA interactionist research, which

maintains that learners need practice in making linguistic modifications because they facilitate comprehension of input through modifying the structure of the conversation in the negotiation of meaning (p83). These discourse functions include moves that question the previous turn, seek for clarification of a prior message, or solicit a change of focus or redirection of a discussion. Moves of this nature facilitate a shared meaning among participants, therefore they frequently occur in conversational discourse.

5.2. Second language acquisition in Sotillo's study

In Sotillo's study of synchronous and asynchronous discussion she identified discourse functions of two types. Synchronous discussions are exchanges that occur simultaneously, for example face-to-face conversations. In asynchronous discussions, exchange is delayed. Synchronous discussions were characterized by functions that resemble face-to-face interactional modifications. In asynchronous discussions, however, fewer of these face-to-face discourse features occurred. A common feature of asynchronous discussions was the 'question, response, evaluation sequence found in traditional "chalk and talk" classrooms' (2000: 98 (and found in the ECO forums)). ESL researchers claim that this characteristic pattern discourages the negotiation of meaning among participants and encourages teachers to move beyond the question-response-evaluation type of discourse. Sotillo contends that meaning negotiation in an exchange is obtained through the questions participants ask and the responses they offer. Such moves assist in scaffolding new knowledge of the language. She identifies the discourses in Fig 3 in this chapter.

Although fourteen of these functions occurred in Sotillo's synchronous discussions, only four were realized in the asynchronous discussions she studied, namely, topic initiation moves and three forms of responses; student responses, teacher responses/comments and student comments or responses to other students. Nonetheless, this was adequate for her to conclude that, since discourse functions were

present in both synchronous and asynchronous discourse, skilled teaching applied in either electronic modes, can enhance the acquisition of a second language. This conclusion is a move away from technological determinism.

5.3. The ECO110H texts and Sotillo's framework

Although Sotillo's study may seem to have provided a solution to academic discourse learning, there are major differences between her context of research and the context of this study. Her study focuses on basic and intermediate ESL learning (for instance learning basic communication skills of language or at the intermediate stage of literacy skills required in communicating in a school setting). The language in question in this study is academic rather than social discourse. The characteristic features of academic discourse place it at an advanced level of language learning. As a variety of language it has its own values and ideologies, e.g. the occlusion of subjectivity and affect. Furthermore, as a secondary discourse it can exclude individuals who belong to other discourse communities since fluency requires an intimate acquaintance with the different academic 'frameworks for thinking behaving and valuing' (Gee, 1990). This advanced stage of language learning requires the development of critical thinking skills, skills for organizing texts, for comparing and contrasting information from theories for synthesis, developing an argument, and the confidence to evaluate and criticize other academic sources. These are specialized skills peculiar to academic enquiry. The next section analyzes these discourse functions in the text of the ECO110H course.

5.4. An analysis of discourse functions

A majority of the discourse functions in the ECO110H text did not occur in discussions between different participants. They occur as independent submissions with no responses to them. Their occurrence in the different forums is presented in the table below.

Figure 6

Discourse functions	(Task 1)		(Task 2)		(Task 3)		(Task 4)	
	Introductions		A newspaper article opening paragraph		Discussions with experts		Posting of drafts–peer and tutor editing	
	Stu.	Tut.	Stu.	Tut.	Stu.	Tut.	Stu.	Tut.
1. Greetings	51		2		1			
2. Closing moves	22							
3. Topic initiation	3		106*	2				
4. Topic shifts	2		3					
5. Off topic comments			1					
6. Adversarial moves	2		1					
7. Reprimands			1					
8. Humor	3		2					
9. Imperatives	5							
10. Information requests	27		2		7			
11. Requests/questions			5		32			
12. Responses	18		5	55		44	3	90
13. Corrective moves								
14. Floor holding/topic continuation								

* Learners submitted newspaper paragraphs thus initiating topics.

Figure 6 indicates that neither corrective moves nor floor holding moves could be identified in the data. Floor holding or topic continuation moves were missing because of the short discourse threads in the forums. Interlocutors were not fully engaged in discussions, such that they made single submissions in a thread. Even in the longest discourse thread (of about four turns), messages are from a number of different interlocutors. A floor holding move occurs when one interlocutor attempts to reestablish control of a discourse thread. Since participants seldom posted more than one message in a thread, floor holding moves could not be identified. Corrective moves can be found in tutors' responses or comments on the writing genre of a newspaper article or misconstrued information.

Figure 6 also shows a decrease in participation by the learners. The number of discourse functions decreases as the activities shift towards academic discussions. The final task of the online sessions required that learners posted their drafts for both peer and tutor review. Surprisingly, responses or comments came only from tutors. None of the students commented on one another's drafts. Interestingly, the decreased student participation online saw an increase in verbal interaction offline. Offline, learners were writing down the online comments supplied by their tutors and they frequently interacted verbally with them about what they meant. In some instances tutors and learners discussed verbally on a printed version of the posted draft (see chapter 6 for a discussion of offline activities)

Dominating the discussions with experts are information requests and questions, mainly because the task was designed to address questions and problems students had encountered during their research. Students formulated questions in their respective groups and posted them for expert advice.

5.5. Discourse functions and the online forum

This analysis describes the significance of some discourse functions identified in the ECO110H discussions.

5.5.1. Greetings and closing moves

Opening and closing moves featured in the first task, where participants introduced themselves. These occurred only once in the second activity. The field of discourse has clearly channeled the production of these texts. The forum's task was to introduce oneself, one's research topic and one's group in the forum, therefore greetings and closing formulas could be expected from this activity. However, some social significance can be drawn from the structures of the formulas in the forum. An example can be seen below;

(1)

Cass: Introducing Cass!!!

*Hey ECO110H. the name of our group is OSLO. We are doing the oil industry.
Good luck with your projects!!!!*

Always 'keeping it real!!!'

Cass seems to be excited about the project. She has employed some CMC writing conventions to draw attention to her message and the closing remark is very informal. Her message 'good luck with your projects!!!!' has a face-to-face-conversational tone, which dominates most of the opening and closing formulas in this forum. This tone has also enabled some learners to project their voices and identities through these formulas. Voice and identity is crucial in this study since it portrays the involvement of the learner in the discourse. A further depiction of such cases is therefore necessary.

Voice and identity

In a collaborative learning environment, such as a computer conferencing forum where participants jointly construct knowledge, individual voices are more likely to be heard than in lectures. According to Rudduck (in Thesen 1994), 'voices remind us of the individuality that lies beneath the surface of institutional structures whose routine nature pushes us to work for 'sameness' rather than to respond to difference'. Postings in these introductions reflect the learners' feelings towards the Industry Research research project and their identities outside the classroom. These are some extracts which illustrate the projection of identity in the forum:

(2)

<i>John: hi my name is crane, i am the world's most famous clown. its time to have some some fun with bocrane, the world's most famous clownnnnnnn!!!!</i>
--

<i>Philile: Introducing Philile</i>

<i>My name is Philile. The name of my group is Executive and we'll be researching the oil industry. Jah bless!!</i>

<i>Crane: Buyakasha! Wicked, me is studying da oil ting an me is wanting all do info 'bout me project...be there anybody who can 'elp??</i>

In (2), John introduces his social role or character, which some interlocutors might not have known. It is part of his identity, therefore he voices it out in his introduction. Although Philile has tried to maintain a formal tone in the first two sentences perhaps in tune with the aspirational name of his group ('Executive')(except for the contraction we'll) he marks another aspect of his identity in his closing remark 'Jah bless!!' identifying himself with Rastafarianism. Crane uses Ebonics, a language, which is associated with African American 'homeboys'. He uses the opening salutation of this language 'Buyakasha' (an Africanized version of the Ebonics salutation 'Booyakasha') and continues

to use this dialect throughout his text. It would appear that these learners want their other identities to be known. Another possibility could be that they simply delight in mimicking this language, as is common practice in online discourse communities (Werry 1995: 58). It is another form of joking that is seen to prevail in CMC (Holomb, 1997).

Voice is also manifest in the expression of affect. Feelings of disappointment, boredom, confusion and anxiety about the research task are expressed. Feelings are portrayed in the following extracts:

(3)

<i>Kina: I am so bored with this. TALK TO ME.</i>	
<i>Shane: My topic for the research assignment is the oil industry and I really hope it will get more exciting.</i>	

These expressions of boredom are markers of students' identification with the student subculture. They show disinterest in the activity. The expression of personal feelings and identities has been encouraged by the social nature of the task. Although these practices may be viewed as off- topic, they reflect freedom in the forum. However, disappointingly these learners did not utilize this freedom by engaging in topic-related discussions with experts and their peers. With their peers they pursued social conversations and with their tutors they responded as they would in a traditional classroom pattern of interaction.

5.5.2. Topic initiation

Attempts to pursue academic discussion in a social task were for some reason suppressed or not pursued. This practice is portrayed in postings that invited an academic conversation or messages that reflect enthusiasm for the research project. Such occurrences can be seen in the following extract:

(4)

Jerry: My name is Jerry. I am in the language and communication group called 'DEEPER UNDERGROUND'! We are studying the oil industry, hence the name.

Johnny: Hi Jerry, that is a very clever name we are studying the oil industry to. I think that the oil price is very bad and I am battling to keep my car running. What do you think.

Here Johnny's sarcasm about Jerry's 'clever name' is followed by an attempt to initiate a discussion. His attempt (though it may also have been sarcastic) shows the potential of the forum to alter traditional classroom patterns of interaction, where the teacher assumes the leading role. However, Jerry made no further turn. Possibly he sensed the sarcasm in the message.

A similar case is evident in a submission where a learner invites a discussion based on a previous share-trading exercise, done by the class on an Interactive Excel sheet. This was the message:

(5)

Don: Just out of curio, I'm interested in what we all achieved(%wise) in the Gold share price games. I got 6.7%. what did you get?

The whole class had played a share-trading game to build their knowledge of their chosen industry in South Africa and the results were viewed the next day. This activity was very popular among the learners during the session, as observed by myself in their movement around the computer laboratory, to check one another's results and the buzz of discussions. In the subsequent discussion, however, none of the students responded to Don's move. Although Sack (cited in Fairclough 1992:155) asserts that interlocutors are unpredictable on whether they will opt to pursue an initiated topic or not, in this incident, it seems learners had fully discussed their results verbally, offline.

In some postings, tutors, in their responses to the learners, also initiated topics on issues related to the discussion, such as in the following dialogue;

(6)

Jerry: Going 'Deeper Underground' with the oil industry

The petrol industry has been in the news a number of times over the past month as the price of this commodity has been slowly increasing. Why is this? As some of you might or might not know, this is because the suppliers (OPEC), has been cutting the production of this substance. My group has been chosen this topic as we feel that these changes in the oil and petrol industry affect us all in various ways. For example, those of us who rely on public transport have been forced to accommodate the increases in Jammie shuttle and taxi prices. Thus we all in fact show an economic interest by keeping a close eye on these industries.

Tutor Pat: Effects of petrol price increase

I wonder if the increase in the petrol price has any effect on the tension between some taxi operators and Golden Arrow...Does anyone have any ideas about this possibility?

Jerry's article addresses the effect of the increase in petrol prices on both motorists and taxi passengers⁴. As a comment on the article, the tutor initiates a topic related to the transport industry mentioned in Jerry's article, and invites responses from any participant, an invitation, which apparently, was not taken up. However, no learner responded to this initiated discussion.

Sharing of authority online

Despite the lack of 'up takes' of these initiated topics, some significance in terms of power relations can be drawn from these occurrences. Both tutors and learners can initiate topics, as opposed to a conventional classroom situation in which several constraints of face-to-face interaction may hinder

⁴ The incidents alluded to in this submission had significant effects on the South African economy and on consumers. The initiation of this topic was meant to encourage reflective learning and to develop critical thinking in the learner. The learner needs to draw from real life situations the consequences of a company's response to the issues of demand and supply which the learner has gathered as theories in Economics. An application of the theories into practice promotes a 'reflection on' the practice (Brockbank Ann and McGill Ian 1998:73).

such moves. While some researchers in CMC have noted an equalizing effect of the computer medium in terms of participation (Ortega, 1997, Kremers, 1990, Moran, 1998), Sybil Gruber (1995) proposes a more discerning view. He contends that 'computers do not necessarily facilitate equal participation; instead hierarchical structures, gender prejudices, and racial stereotypes remain intact; domination, miscommunication and voicelessness overshadow the positive features'. Without discussing these discrepancies in this discussion, my point is that the asynchronous communication interface on which the corpus was drawn, 'affords' (to put it in Kress' (2000) term) the initiation of topics regardless of one's status within the discussion group. Teachers can also employ strategies that may help encourage learners to initiate discussions. As a 'monitor' (Feenberg 1989: 33) in the discussion, the teacher should also help facilitate sustained discussion. Given that learners' voices can be heard in the discussions (as noted earlier in this chapter) possibly they can learn to challenge each other's ideas in a discussion to reach shared knowledge. This practice can encourage collaborative construction of knowledge among learners. A student also shows this shared authority in the following example by assuming the role of an expert,

(7)

Shone: I am confused

Dan: Yes you are confused but I can help you

What do you not understand. Ask me a question an I shall help you

Dan's willingness to offer assistance to Shone might not have been on a serious note because there is nowhere else in the discussions where he responds constructively. However, his message clearly indicates that he is aware of that he can assume the role of a 'tutor' in this forum. The sharing of authority is also evident in reprimands.

5.5.3. Reprimands

Only one case of a reprimand has been identified, made by one student to another in the newspaper article-writing forum. It can be viewed below,

(8)

*Liz: IF THE PRICE OF PETROL KEEPS ON GOING UP I DO NOT THINK I
WILL BE ABLE TO AFFORD TO GO BACK HOME SO I WILL BE
STUCK HERE IN CAPE TOWN*

Grant: Please be serious and focus

I don't think that you are serious about your task my colleague.

I don't see how does your message pertain to your task

Yona: What about...

*How about you if you feel we are not serious how about you been serious
for us*

Liz's appears to be joking about the effects of the escalating prices of petrol, and Glen, reprimands her.

Glen's reprimand is taken up by Yona who launches an attack on him. This event also signifies shared authority in the forum. Glen feels he is equally responsible for calling his peer to order.

Although these examples indicate that learners were aware of the freedom that the CMC environment offered, compared to face-to-face discussions, they could not use it in academic discussions. In social tasks they utilized this freedom to discuss social issues among themselves and discourage academic discussions. This is shown in adversarial moves evident in the forum.

5.5.4. Adversarial moves

An adversarial move can be viewed as some form of rude behavior often observed in online discourse and known as 'flaming'. An adversarial move has been identified in a social discussion as a strategy to subvert an academic exchange. The following extract reflects such a move,

(9)

Rony: I'm really looking forward to doing this exciting and interesting project. The topic we shall looking at in great detail is the oil industry at large, I will be glad to exchange information with fellow members of the course.

*Dunn: **Moron***

Bobby you are not fooling anyone, why try and make as if you are a keen student?

Dunn's move challenges Rony's determination in the research project. As one of the moves that modify a conversation (Sotillo 2000), it should have prompted Rony to make a third turn. However, it seems that Dunn succeeded in his demoralizing tactic.

Flaming

Some researchers (Moran 2000, Murray 1995) have noticed instances of socially unacceptable conduct in CMC discourse. This is shown in the use of abusive language to attack participants. As mentioned in chapter 1, Moran cites two groups of researchers who account for this change of behaviour; that is, Sproul & Kiesler(1991) and Speas & Lea (1992). The first group of researchers base the change on a 'reduced social cues' hypothesis, which attributes the change to freedom from social constraints of face- to- face conversations. On the same note, Speas and Lea (1992) argue that the presence of social constraints guards against the possibility of falling back on the 'cultural stereotypes', that are within every person and therefore guard against adopting inappropriate behaviors. In other words, the reduction of these cues in a networked communication can lead to the violation of some social codes, therefore exposing some of the socially unacceptable behaviors of individuals, which face-to-face interactions often inhibit. This submission has followed this trend:

(10)

*Leo: **SAM YOU IDIOT***

The above submission sounds rather rude in the context of a networking group. The register employed by Leo, though he addresses a friend, is inappropriate. Its use among friends might be more acceptable than on this network. This practice clearly shows that though the reduction of social cues may encourage high levels of participation, these constraints play an important role in the maintenance of academic discussions. In conventional contexts, Leo's responds individually to a friend, thus ignoring the tenor of a discourse where most of the participants in this forum have no permanent social relationship with each other. Another explanation could be that Leo was very much aware of the effect of his breaking the rules.

5.5.5. Topic shifts

The learners' choice of topic, in some instances, shifts from the academic realm to a social topic. This shift is characterized by a gradual move towards a more social discourse which seems to have occurred primarily among interlocutors who had previously established relationships. Humorous messages reflect this shift.

5.5.6. Humor

These moves featured in the newspaper article writing forum and the discourse- threads were formed by learners only. These are among the few longer discourse-threads in the forums.

(11)

Crane: BPcrisis

On my way to varsity this morning I heard on the radio that the reason that the oil price is sky-rocketing is because of something to do with British petroleum monopolizing the oil prices. I don't know the full story but something fishy is going on and is now affecting the penguins here in Cape Town

Sam: IDIOT

I DIDN'T KNOW PENGUINS WERE THAT AFFECTED BY THE INCREASE IN OIL PRICES, CRANE. IHAVEN'T SEEN A PENGUIN AT A PETROL STATION FOR A LONG TIME NOW...

Dan: Sam Sam Sam

The oil price increase is due to the cahne in the budget budget proposed by

Kenny Loof. He is a politician not an economist and he should rather raise the price of cigattes than oil.

Sonny: poor penguins

Crane submits what should have been an opening paragraph of a newspaper article but it 'sounds' like he is telling a story to his friends. He also voices his concern over the penguins that have been affected by large amounts of oil spills on the shore in Cape Town. In his story he is addressing the issue of petrol price increases. However, Sam's move focuses on the issue of the penguins and he further converts it to a joke. Why would penguins be at a filling station? He says 'I haven't seen penguins at a filling station for a long time now'. Sonny sarcastically sympathizes with the penguins. The discussion, which was intended to focus on the real response of South African oil and petrol industry to world market prices of crude oil, quickly reverts to a witty exchange. A similar discussion is shown in the following extract,

(12)

norman :WOULD'NT IT BE NICE!!!

If only we had a scientist like the one in "BACK TO THE FUTURE", who could invent a vehicle that could "run on rubbish". S.A would no longer have a dumping problem, a wonderful achievement for our "enviromentally dedicated society"

Dan: I agree

We need cars than run of water.
(later on in the forum)

Sam: dan

what do you think the name of your car should be?

Dan: in response to your question

It should be called the Aquacar.

The three participants in the discussion Norman, Dan and Sam were researching issues surrounding the oil industry. Topics researched in this area included how a chosen company in the industry had

responded to changes in the world market price of crude oil or its future prospects. Learners could also write about anything interesting they had gathered about the industry. Norman suggests that a car that will not require petrol or diesel for fuel (as the two come from crude oil) could be invented. He suggests that waste material would be a better option and it would promote a clean environment. (The rise in petrol prices was on the news headlines at this time). In the next turn Dan suggests an unrealistic solution to the problem and Sam enquires about the possible name for Dan's suggested type of car. Though this conversation addresses the rise in oil and petrol prices, it assumes a playful tone. These learners seem to be interested in joking in this forum. However, this practice could be taken up by tutors to pursue an exploratory discussion among the learners. In this kind of discussion learners challenge each other's ideas with the aim of reaching common understanding (Wegerif and Scrimshaw, 1997). Since Norman and Dan were voicing their ideas towards finding a solution to the problem, an exploratory discussion could be reached with expert guidance. However, it did not occur in this forum.

According to Holomb, (1997) students use jokes to establish interactions in CMC. However, he warns that 'a joke instantly organizes participants into hierarchically differentiated groups and thus creates and sustains new patterns of power in the classroom, patterns that lead the author to question whether CMC levels hierarchies or merely redefines them' (p3). In the discussed examples of humor in this study, the same interlocutors are repeatedly humorous in both discourse threads. Already, a certain subgroup of 'clowns' can be identified. These learners shared the same interest of joking. Within the group this was a powerful means of holding control in social conversations. They participated actively even in the 'introductions' forum (see chapter 3 example 3). However, their participation did not contribute to learning about the industry topic, rather they were interested in social conversations.

5.6. Conclusion

The chapter has shown some 'affordances' of this mode of discourse in spite of the learners' relative lack of academic participation in the discussions. Individual voices can be heard and identities are reflected. Participants can also share authority online by initiating topics and reprimanding others. Others can expose unacceptable behaviours in this mode. The forum can also group participants according to their interests (e.g. interlocutors in humorous conversations). This is all possible through the freedom that the forum provides. It allows for more diversity and breaks the stranglehold of academic values. From a teacher's perspective, however, it was unfortunate that learners did not transfer these potentials of the forum from the social task to academic discussions. Learners in this course needed to develop discourse that is at an advanced stage, an institutionalized discourse, rather than developing social skills. It is not possible to argue that academic discourse has been developed through discourse functions. Sotillo's framework had been designed for primary or secondary discourse learning. It would appear that learners needed a much more guided form of learning as tutors were often seen talking with them offline in the computer laboratory. The online forum was largely used for publicizing information for every student's consumption. A challenge for the tutors of such a course is to set up dialogue between social tasks and academic tasks in order to harness students' prior knowledge, primary discourses, and non-academic identities.

Chapter 6

Offline activities and online discussion

6.0. Introduction

Previous chapters have analyzed and discussed the corpus drawn from the database of the ECO110H online discussion sessions. The analysis finds shifting interrelationships between the ‘field’ and ‘tenor’ of discourse reflected in the nature of the online discourse. In academic discussions, the dominant pattern of discourse resembled traditional classroom patterns of discourse where the teacher maintains an authoritative role, the role of an expert, and interactions follow the pattern of conventional classroom exchanges. In social discussions, learners generated longer discourse threads but their discussions were unlikely to contribute to the learning of academic discourse since the subject of discussion was non- academic. A wide range of discourse was produced across the various tasks and the language of interaction, as employed by students, shifts between involved and integrated discourse. Although research has shown that an online discussion forum affords learners an opportunity to construct meaning collaboratively (Ortega 1997), the ECO110H discussions are unlikely to have enhanced the learners’ development of academic discourse in this way, since only a limited number of learners responded to the tutor’s comments online and hence the collaborative function of the online mode was minimal. However, in the case of ECO110H discussions, the online texts are a very small component of the whole learning experience.

This chapter argues that online texts cannot be read in isolation from the whole social fabric of the learning context. The various classroom activities observed by the researcher while online discussion sessions were in progress were extremely important and are not reflected in the online texts. These activities include frequent verbal interactions between learners and tutors and among learners in the computer laboratory. While learners did not extensively participate in academic discussions online, an

observation of interactions in the laboratory gave me access to an entirely different picture of the sessions. In addition, learners also engaged in several research practices in the computer laboratory. These offline activities are explored for their contribution to students' learning of academic discourse. Interviews with the facilitators of the course have supported my intuition that offline activities played a significant role in the development of students' command of academic discourse. Unfortunately, my access to this site was limited, and I was unable to gather detailed data which might have given further substance to these general impressions. This is, however, a major area for future research.

6.1. Limitations of observations

My observations were limited by external factors with regard to both the research site and possible observation procedures (as mentioned in chapter 2). An available site included both first and second language speakers of English. I selected a group with a larger percentage of ESL students and closely observed four ESL students within the group. My access to these students was limited since other research projects were being conducted simultaneously and the lecturer was uncomfortable with such intensive surveillance of her students. As a result it was not possible to prepare audio recordings of participant 'talk' as they completed the online discussion tasks. My observation notes, which document participant activities and the topics of their collaboration, are therefore my major sources of data. Further information has been drawn from responses to interview questions with two facilitators of the course.

6.2. Computers and talk

Since some offline activities required face-to-face verbal interaction between learners, this study has adopted a model which analyzes the 'types of talk' generated by learners around computers. This analysis, documented in Rupert Wegerif and Peter Scrimshaw's (1997) collection of articles on

'Computers and talk in the primary language classroom' provides extremely useful insights. Their articles feature Eunice Fisher, a member of the Spoken Language and New Technology (SLANT) project team who developed the model from analyzing data collected from several primary school pupils of different ages, who all worked at a variety of computer- based educational tasks. The aim of the study was to compare and contrast learner-learner talk with teacher-learner talk and to ascertain whether the learner 'talks' have any educational significance. They discovered three educationally significant types of talk which, according to Fisher (1997:23), are also applicable to other educational group activities beyond the computer environment.

The first category is '**disputational talk**', characterized by 'short exchanges consisting of assertions and challenges or counter assertions' (p54). In this type of exchange, participants disagree, no consensus is reached and decisions are individualized. The second category is '**cumulative talk**' where speakers work towards constructing 'common knowledge' but avoid confronting differences in point of view between members of the group. In this type of talk, 'discourse is characterized by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations' (p54). Finally they identify '**exploratory talk**' as the third and most educationally valuable category. In this type of exchange, participants critically challenge each other's ideas. Participants must provide supporting evidence for their claims. Justification for challenges and alternative interpretations are offered, such that decisions are reached through group consensus. With Gary Perkins (1997:121) Scrimshaw adds yet another type of talk termed '**tutorial talk**'. One learner in this type of exchange takes the role of a tutor or an expert directing or correcting the work of others. In terms of the 'tenor of discourse', this mode differs slightly from the other three since it assumes an unequal relationship between participants.

Among the types of 'talk', the SLANT study ranks 'exploratory talk' as the most educationally valuable form of exchange. Through this type of talk, learners challenge each other's views until common ground is established. Common knowledge is therefore obtained through the collaborative efforts of every participant. This type of talk would be most relevant for the ECO110H course participants since they comprised of learners from diverse educational backgrounds and thus different literacy experiences.

Although different categories of talk are identified, the proponents of the model do warn that they are not meant to fit neatly into all speech acts, therefore some categories may feature in the same speech event. Nevertheless, these four types of talk are a 'frame of reference' to assist us in understanding the modes of thinking that learners adopt in class.

6.3. A comparison of the study with the present research

The SLANT study bears some resemblance with the present study given its educational objective. However, it differs considerably in terms of the participants' age group and activities. These features of this study have been discussed in relation to 'the context of situation' (Halliday 1989) (Refer to chapter 3).

Although Wegerif et al focus on the pupils' participation, that is, on pupil-pupil exchange, teachers were also present in the environment, facilitating the learning process. In the ECO110H study, both learners and tutors are studied as components of the 'tenor of discourse', and compared to Wegerif's study, there is an important prevalence of learner- tutor exchange.

In terms of the 'mode of discourse', both studies are interested in the role of 'talk' in a computer classroom, which occurs concurrently with online activities. While the SLANT study focuses on 'talk', the present study focuses primarily on the online interactions.

In both studies, the 'field of discourse' differs. While the ECO110H study focuses on writing skills, the SLANT study researches talk produced in game playing around computers. Activities like game playing are likely to feature certain types of talk. When playing games as a group some commands can be executed without verbal utterances from participants and the aim of winning as a group may cause disputational talk if other members do not accept one's move. Furthermore, the pupils in the SLANT study consistently worked in groups, whereas students in the present study could work as individuals or as groups. A difference in the nature of verbal interaction between the two studies is therefore anticipated.

In addition to the four types of talk discussed in Wegerif et al, this study discovers another kind of talk - 'social talk'. In this kind of talk the subject of the discussion is of a social nature. Nonetheless, the study is surprisingly useful, given its emphasis on the role of learner talk in both contexts, and I have adopted its framework for my purposes. This study has found that the learner-tutor verbal interaction is more significant compared with peer talk.

6.4. Offline interaction in ECO110H

The SLANT model will be differently implemented in this study since interaction with tutors was an important component of the learning mix. Activities observed in the computer laboratory could be grouped into the following three types, namely,

1. Learner- learner interaction

2. Learner- tutor interaction

3. Research practices

All of the three activities occurred throughout the sessions, with one or two activities dominating by particular activities.

To protect my subjects' privacy, pseudonyms have been used, namely, Lungile, Zama, Glen and Mandisa. These learners are all second language speakers of English. Three of them are women while Glen is a man. Lungile and Zama were members of the same research group, while Mandisa and Glen were in separate groups. Glen researched the oil industry, while the others researched the gold industry.

6.4.1. *Learner- learner interaction*

Learners interacted constantly with one another, probably because their research tasks required both individual and group activities. Some discussions focused on academic issues, while others were social in nature. In some instances, learners interacted because they needed technical assistance or writing advice. Three exchanges have been sampled to represent the types of talks that occurred among learners; one exchange focuses on technical assistance, another is a debate on Gold Share trading results (an activity that featured in the session prior to the online discussion task). The final exchange focuses on a group discussion of questions to be posted for expert advice. In all the exchanges I observed, learners' talk never reached the level of the most academically valuable talk - the exploratory mode. Instead, the observed talks were cumulative, disputational, tutorial and social. This is because learners seemed to prefer discussing with their tutors individually offline. A brief discussion of the three sampled events follows.

(a) Technical advice

Although tutors frequently offered technical assistance to learners in matters such as accessing a research site or executing certain commands, technical peer assistance also took place. Often this started as cumulative talk, but sometimes resulted in disputational talk if success could not be achieved. My example of this is from an incident in the third online task where learners had to post their drafts for tutor and peer editing. Glen had saved his draft (which included an image) on a 'stiffy' disk. After several attempts to copy the text and the image from the MS- Word program and paste it onto the online text box he could only manage to move the text without the picture, therefore he sought advice from some friends. He followed advice from one but still failed. When one of the friends who sat next to him instructed him on what to do, he would repeat after him while carrying out the command, but still failed. At this stage their talk was cumulative since he complied with their advice. However, after a tutor had also tried to offer assistance additional peer advice was met with resistance from Glen. He refused to carry out any further peer commands. The cumulative talk shifted to disputational talk. Glen disagreed with his friends' advice and carried out an individualized decision. This is similar to the talk that Wegerif et al describes when learners play games together.

Glen was among the first students to post their drafts. After this incident he concentrated on writing notes on paper from websites, while occasionally consulting with a friend. Although the researcher could not follow their actual discussion, a subsequent enquiry revealed that they had been preparing for the oral presentation of the research project, which was due soon after the session. In this latter 'talk' their discussion was based on the information they gathered from the texts they engaged with. They shared information from the discussion site and the Internet sources that they visited. From their description of the interaction, it seems more cumulative than exploratory or disputational (as in the previous incident). In the online discussion, Glen reprimanded a learner who had written a paragraph

which, according to him, signified lack of seriousness in the project (see chapter 4 example 8). He was one of the more dedicated students, but like many of the other learners he seemed to be more comfortable discussing with peers offline than online. One would expect Glen to engage in exploratory talk with other learners. However, he often interacted with tutors offline and copied notes from the discussion site.

(b) Gold Share Trading results

Cumulative talk was observed in a discussion about the Gold Share Trading game (which was played earlier in the course as part of learning about the stock exchange). The talk was between Zama, Mandisa and another female friend. During the course of the online game, learners commented frequently on what they saw on each other's screens. It would appear that some learners had basic knowledge of share trading prior to its introduction in this context. To others the topic was entirely new.

The educational challenge of this activity is clarified by an e-mail response given by one of the tutors when I informally interviewed him after the course was over. Based on the students' interest in this activity and their frequent interactions with him I enquired about their most frequent queries. He responded as follows:

'In some of the initial tutorials it was possible to establish that several of the students already had a basic understanding of shares as a form of ownership but I think there was a far less developed understanding that people can buy and sell shares for profit' (Carr, 2001)

During the Excel based share trading game session, prior to the online discussion sessions, some of the questions learners often asked the tutor were:

Which shares should I buy?

How can I buy and sell shares?

Why has the value of my share fallen? (Carr, 2001)

During the share game, Zama, Mandisa and a friend next to them would read out their share values and would joke over them while giving each other advice on how to buy shares in the next game. This talk assumed the cumulative mode of exchange because learners did not challenge each other. In this exchange they often code-switched between their first language (Xhosa) and English. As the discussion shifted to social issues, Xhosa dominated. This social talk overlapped with the online discussion time and often overtook it. They extended this discussion to talking about other students' experiences of studying for an Economics test, which was due on the same afternoon. These students were absent from this session. At this stage the discussion had shifted to social talk. Despite the educationally challenging nature of the share trading game there were neither challenges nor disputes nor solutions to disputes in this whole event. For that reason their exchange was not exploratory.

(c) Questions to experts

In this task, group members met for discussions of questions posted for expert advice, based on their research. This task featured as the third task in the sessions. The group I observed, which included Lungile and Zama, first engaged in tutorial talk which later turned to disputational talk, and the group eventually dispersed without reaching consensus.

Soon after they had gathered, Lungile led a lengthy discussion about what questions they should ask the experts (although she was not the group leader). She had a set of suggestions to make about the questions. What followed were three different sub- discussions within the group as Zama and another member discussed in Xhosa the problems they were facing in their research. Lungile continued with the earlier topic with another member in English and the fifth member turned around to his computer and started writing private e- mails. Zama and her friend reported back to the other two in English, but they

all returned to their computers without having posted any questions to the experts. It seems that what started off as tutorial talk by Lungile turned into disputational talk, which never evolved into exploratory talk. In this group discussion, nothing constructive was achieved. It seems that, at this stage, some of the learners had not started their research. Some of them, like Lungile, had not even posted their opening paragraph of a newspaper article (required for a previous task). A question was posed online from Zama, who requested information about relevant sources for her research. For the same reason, academic group discussions were ineffective at this stage. The learners might have needed individual attention or to progress further in their research before they could attempt the task.

6.4.2. *Learner- tutor interaction*

Interaction levels between learners and tutors increased in the final two sessions where learners posted their drafts for peer and tutor review. As discussed in Chapter 4, this task featured neither comments nor clarification requests from students in the online forum. Instead of responding to the tutors' comments online, they requested verbal clarification from the tutors during the sessions. As a result, tutors frequently assisted individuals. Occasionally, the 'talk' between the learner and the tutor would focus on a printed version of the posted draft rather than the online article. Some learners who posted their drafts in the first session of posting received verbal comments from their tutors prior to the additional online comments. This is evident in some tutors' online feedback, which commences with, 'As I discussed this draft with you offline I will just add a few comments here'.

Wegerif (et al) do not document the role of teachers. In ECO110H verbal interaction between tutors and learners dominated the learning, rather than the peer interactions prized by Wegerif et al. This partly accounts for the learners' lack of involvement in academic discussions online. It would seem that traditional classroom practices were transferred into the computer assisted learning environment where

the teacher maintains the role of an expert. In this environment the teacher still maintained that role as is evident from in the students' need for verbal confirmation of the online feedback.

Who were initiating these verbal discussions?

It seems that both tutors and learners propagated the verbal interactions for different reasons.

Information gathered from interviews with two of the course facilitators confirms my interpretation.

My discussion will focus on factors that might have prompted the learners before discussing those that prompted tutors.

The learners' needs for verbal interaction.

Firstly, it seems that students were not content with reading the online comments, and almost always requested an elaboration of the comments. When questioned about the major considerations, which prompted tutors to have verbal discussions with learners, it transpired that the students often initiated 'student- tutor' talk. As tutor Pat pointed out in response to this interview question:

'It generally makes sense to comment online (because) we are trying to develop a record of emerging knowledge and improvement in the drafts from one stage to the next ... something that a student can refer to. But it was very clear to me that most students, Indian, Coloured, Black or White had a very oral culture of interaction, they would often not believe something unless it was explained to them verbally and personally. I've often had a student come to me and ask me to explain this comment and that comment and that comment...'

This response clearly depicts the kind of offline interaction that went on in the 'online' sessions. Students needed verbal feedback for a confirmation of responses from tutors from as early as the second online task, where they received comments on their opening paragraphs of newspaper articles.

Secondly, judging from their verbal interaction with tutors offline they viewed the teacher's comments as far more significant than those of peers. They might have felt commenting on a learner's draft online would be tantamount to assuming the role of an expert. As tutor Helen commented in the interview,

'most of the students might not have been confident enough to comment on each other's drafts'.

For that reason, they resorted to discussions with tutors, since they judged them as much more knowledgeable than peers. Students are also acutely aware that

'there is also a question of marks which must come from the tutor'.

This was tutor Helen's further comment, which could be the third reason that made learners initiate verbal discussions with tutors. It would appear that they were mostly concerned with responding to comments that could help them earn high grades in their assignments. The assumption is that comments made by the tutor as an assessor of the final product, the assignment and the oral-presentation were more valuable, since they might lead to improved grades. The issue of assessment is further confirmed in a learners' submission below, which featured in task one.

(1)

<i>Jack: We are in the Gateway to Economics programme. I'm doing the oil research project and Hale is doing gold. We have no idea what we are doing. We hope this is going to go well for us because we need the marks (my emphasis).</i>

This submission reveals that learners were partly concerned with scoring high marks, therefore discussing with tutors would assure them if they were responding correctly to tasks. The question might be why they preferred verbal discussions with the tutors rather than utilizing the online forum for this purpose. This leads to the fourth reason.

An overall observation of the learners' participation clearly reveals that for a majority of them, the online forum was still a bit artificial. This is evident in a discussion about share trading results

mentioned earlier in this chapter. Despite the popularity of this game, no participant responded online to a learner's query about the share trading game results (as mentioned in Chapter 4 example 5). This would suppose that learners were satisfied with or only comfortable with discussing their results in a face-to-face mode. Verbal discussions carried a far heavier weight in the computer laboratory than the online collaboration.

Fifthly, for a few of the learners it would appear that the online forum was not a preferred mode for formal discussions of an academic nature. This idea is drawn from a close observation of some individuals who were actively involved in discussions. Their submissions in academic discussions were often humorous (see chapter 4 example 12 and 13) and sometimes sarcastic (see chapter 4 example 5). In social discussions they participated actively and in these social discussions they also used CMC conventions of writing, which partly shows that they had prior experience of the use of online forums for social conversations. However, they also did not engage in academic discussions online, although they seemed familiar with online discussions.

The above reasons clearly indicate that learners preferred verbal discussions with tutors on academic discussions. However, tutors also encouraged these verbal interactions.

The tutors' needs for verbal interaction

It would appear that tutors also encouraged the verbal interaction in the sessions. Firstly, it seems some tutors felt that the online space was inadequate for detailed comments. This is evident in the following response from tutor Helen:

'I have problems with that (only responding online) and some tutors, my tutors had a problem with it too, we think that it needs to be both ... one on one concentration perhaps with a paper

as well as online, particularly for second language students because the online discussion (forum) is a different kind of response, you can't comment on every language area and in some way I think it is good because you are forced to comment in a sort of discussion way ... some of the tutors for second language students asked for written paper drafts so that they could work on them...'

This response indicates that some tutors felt that verbal interaction created time and space for adequate explanation, especially for ESL students, who needed guidance in several language areas. They needed individual verbal interaction with their students.

Secondly, some tutors felt most comfortable with discussing with their students offline than online. This is reflected in this second part of tutor Helen's response:

'My comments in a verbal way ... I think that has to happen. For one thing there were 130 students and I was concerned that students would not get responses quick enough if we only needed to respond in the online discussion ... moving about you address more problems than online ... I was comfortable with responding to them verbally...'

It seems tutors adopted a range of teaching strategies in order to provide the best assistance to the students. This practice confirms an observation made by a group of composition teachers who reflect on their own different strategies for conducting learning in computer-equipped classrooms (Nick Carbone, Margaret Daisley, Ed Federenko, Dix McComas, Charlie Moran, Dori Ostermiller, and Sherri Vanden Akker 1993). They concluded that 'different teachers make different use of the same technological resources' (p13). In the ECO110H study these differences in conducting online sessions is further evident in the style of responding used by each of the tutors when commenting on learners' texts.

Thirdly, the same response shows that tutors were concerned with 'speedy delivery' of feedback. As a result the time factor also increased offline interaction levels. Students needed to complete their research, hand in the written assignment and make oral presentations within six weeks, therefore both parties were pressured.

Because of these frequent verbal discussions between tutors and learners, prompted by the discussed factors, the online forum functioned as a resource center for information rather than a tool for collaboration. The next section focuses on the resource role of the forum in the context of the ECO110H course.

6.5 The online forum as resource center

It seems that the major role of the online forum was being a resource center for gathering information from posted messages of all kinds and sending in drafts for feedback rather than as a truly collaborative space. However, this information, such as comments from tutors, was elaborated verbally offline. In the next section I discuss this role of the forum by looking at brief online and offline participation histories of two of the students observed, Mandisa and Zama.

6.5.1 Events of individuals in the online environment

Zama

Zama did not participate in any academic exchange online. She received no comments on her newspaper article either, which was quite unusual. However, her tutor often stopped to assist her. During the session on 'Questions to experts' I heard the tutor enquiring from her about her research progress. She was also among those who posted their drafts in the first session and spent the rest of the time writing down notes and reading articles from the web. In the final session, one of the tutors who

had not responded to her online discussion verbally with her a printed version of her posted article. This printed article already had some comments on it. Another tutor who had commented on Zama's draft was called over to join the discussion. Zama needed verbal explanation of the comments the tutor had made online. At this stage the discussion involved the three of them. This particular tutor pointed out in the interview that she was more comfortable with commenting offline than online. However, Zama's final essay shows the implementation of some of the online feedback to her posted draft, although some suggested changes were not effected. (see Appendix 1 for the two essays). She had received the following comments,

(2)

TutorPat: Zama, thank you for the draft of a very interesting article

- 1. The **title** sets the theme but it is a bit too long to really catch attention on the newsstands.*
- 2. Is the **physical demand** as important as speculative demand*
- 3. Why has there been a 'downward trend in the gold price'?*
- 4. Is there any hope of gold mines increasing their employment in the near future?*

Of the four online comments, she responded to two in her final draft - comment (1) and question (4). Her response to the first comment is shown in the reformulated title of the final draft. The initial title was,

(3)

'THE EXPANDING DEFICIT IN THE GOLD INDUSTRY AND WAYS TO OVERCOME IT. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY? IF SO WHAT ARE THEY?'

The above title was rephrased to the following subdivided title

(4)

'THE EXPANDING DEFICIT AND RDG: Reconstruction and Development in Gold is in progress to overcome the Deficit'.	
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In her final draft she also responded to comment (4), which enquired about the future prospects of the gold industry in South Africa. She added the following information,

It looks as if the sun might shine again in the gold industry as it has had 280000 jobs being lost since 1990, at least now it is trying as it has employed approximately 12000 during the past year and there is still more to come as the technology to mine deeper is under development.

There are projects that are aiming at advancing job creation, rural development and entrepreneurship in the industry. This made possible by the Chamber of Mines with companies such as AngloGold and Gold Fields becoming more involved.

The above information had not been included in her first draft. This information was evidence in support of the future prospects of the gold mining industry (see paragraphs 5 & 6 of the final draft in Appendix 1b).

Additional changes were made - possibly these were suggested in her offline discussion with the tutors. In the first paragraph she elaborates on the meaning of 'Environmental constraints' by providing a definition in brackets. She also made some grammatical corrections to her second paragraph. Although this student was passive in online academic discussions, both online and offline comments contributed to improving her writing. However, for her the online forum served as a source of information rather than a discussion site. This practice resembles library practices where one gathers information from printed articles which cannot be questioned.

Further evidence of the resource role of the forum is shown in the following response from tutor 1:

'A student wrote a basic draft about the current situation in gold mining which showed an awareness of many of the key challenges facing the industry but did not communicate any analytical understanding. I provided feedback online which suggested several directions for exploration and development. The student thoroughly rewrote his article. He was able to address all the issues which I had raised in the feedback and to show an explicit application of microeconomic theory to a discussion of industry costs. This was an excellent example of a student who was able to integrate the economics of the formal curriculum with his experience of the Industry research Project'. (Tony, 2001)

This response illustrates that for some learners the online process of drafting was productive. Since none of the learners responded to comments after posting their drafts in the forum, they improved this through implementing the online comments rather than extending their knowledge by responding online. Possibly learners were not confident enough to respond to tutors online in a public forum, considering the unequal power and knowledge between tutors and learners. Probably they did not see the reward of discussing online. As discussed earlier on in the chapter, the discussions adopted traditional classroom patterns of discourse where the teacher is an expert.

Mandisa

Mandisa was one of the few learners who made an attempt to comment on another learner's article (see chapter 4 example 8). However, that was the only comment she made in the online forum. She was given information about sources she requested and was guided not to use personal pronouns in her writing of the newspaper article (see Chapter 1 example 5). She was among the first few to post their drafts in the first session and then spent the rest of the time reading articles on the web and writing down notes. For about 10 minutes before the end of the session, she had a verbal discussion with her tutor about her posted article, which continued until 5 minutes after the end of the session. Her discussion with the tutor therefore lasted for about 15 minutes. Although I could not hear their

exchange it was clear that they were discussing her posted article. This is evident in the tutor's opening line when responding to her article afterwards: 'As I discussed this draft with you offline I will just add a few comments here'. It is evident that most of the comments to her article were made offline in a verbal exchange.

The experiences of Zama and Mandisa clearly indicate that although online academic exchange between tutors and learners was limited to traditional classroom patterns, additional academic exchanges occurred offline. Again, this identifies the role of the online forum as a resource rather than a space for collaboration. The learners' research practices further support this finding and these are discussed in the section that follows.

6.5.2. Research practices

Since learners worked on research projects they engaged in several research practices within the sessions. They gathered information from both electronic and printed articles.

Online they surfed the Internet for sites with information related to their research areas. They took notes from the articles in hand-writing on paper. From the online discussion forum they also copied down notes from the tutors' feedback on their posted articles as well as on others. According to a student's report to one of the facilitators, learners also read each other's articles and copied down useful information, although they rarely commented on these articles. They referred to printed articles when composing opening paragraphs for newspaper articles and assignment drafts. Generally, these activities were accompanied by verbal consultations with both peers and tutors.

6.6. Insight from the activities

The various offline activities noted in these online sessions seem to suggest greater interaction levels offline than online, in the form of individualized 'tutorial talks' by the tutors rather than the pupil-pupil talk described in the SLANT study. Evidence of this is the frequent offline verbal discussions with their tutors while academic discussions online adopted the conventional classroom practice of a 'question-response-evaluation' mode. This according to Delamont (1983: 27) cannot be defined as interaction. She holds that when interlocutors are interacting 'each is constantly interpreting (his/her) own and other's acts, and reacting, and reinterpreting, and reacting and reinterpreting, reacting...' until common knowledge is established. These moves would be reflected in sustained discourse threads in an exchange. Instead of the online forum being utilized for this purpose in academic discussions, it served as a resource center for feedback from tutors and individual contributions from learners. The ongoing verbal discussions with tutors about posted comments seem to have substituted to some extent for the missing threads in online discussions of an academic nature. Thus meaning was still negotiated collaboratively, but between tutors and learners rather than between learners.

The individual consultations between tutors and learners in the computer laboratory show that the environment does not exclusively offer online collaborative learning. This mode also affords one-to-one verbal collaboration between tutors and learners. Furthermore, tutors are afforded flexibility to adopt the teaching strategies with which they feel most comfortable.

Chapter 7

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) learning environment for practices that can promote the learning of academic discourse.

The ECO110H online and offline discussion context has been explored for this purpose. This was a Language and Communication course done by first year Economics students, who are both first and second language speakers of English at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. One of the objectives of the course was to assist learners with writing academic essays by engaging them in online discussions among themselves and with their tutors.

This exploration has shown differing results in the participation levels of learners and the discourse produced in this mode, a level of variation not predicted by the literature on CMC in educational contexts (discussed in chapter 1). Although this study could not conclusively identify the development of academic discourse through online discussions, the major contribution of this study is that online texts cannot be read in isolation from the overall social and learning context. Social dynamics within this context contribute to the nature of the learning process.

In chapter 3 I argued that interaction patterns in online discussions are influenced by a complex and shifting interrelationship of field, tenor, and mode. This has been made evident in the difference in interaction patterns between learners and tutors in, on the one hand, the social tasks and, on the other, the academic tasks. Significantly, interaction patterns of learners and tutors in academic discussions resemble traditional classroom patterns of discourse, while peer-peer interactions dominate the more

socially oriented tasks (Task 1). In addition, the authority of the teacher is not significantly affected by the use of this mode.

In chapter 4 I showed the range of discourse produced by learners in the different tasks of the course, that is, on both social and academic activities. These discourses showed that, rather than the technology determining the nature of the discourse in this mode, the task participants engage in, and their social relationships influence the discourse they produce. As a result, in academic discussions such as tasks 2 and 3, though indicators of involved discourse can be found, they are not as prominent as they are in social conversations (Task 1). This would suppose that learners were conscious of which discourse to employ in what context rather than the mode contributing to the type of discourse produced. I also showed the range of tutors' online comments providing guidelines for the proper writing genre. Nonetheless, learners rarely engaged in academic discussions with either peers or tutors. The presence of different profiles of involved and detached discourse in the various tasks suggests that the CMC mode does not solely determine discourse production.

In chapter 5 I have argued that discourse functions deemed essential for second language acquisition do not develop academic discourse in this context. Although the mode 'affords' the production of these functions, they are not necessarily relevant in an academic literacy class. Nonetheless, in this forum these functions reflect the learners' voices and identities, and offer the potential of shared authority and responsibilities among participants. The distinction between these discourse functions and academic discourse indicates the challenge to teachers who use CMC in academic literacy classes: how to bridge the gap between students' primary discourses and identities, and the new genres and forms required of them in an academic context.

In chapter 6, I argued that online texts cannot be read outside the whole social fabric of the learning context, by exploring 'offline' literacy activities in the online context. Offline activities explored in this chapter include verbal interactions between learners and between tutors and learners. The study found that more academic discussions took place offline than online, and that they took place between tutors and learners rather than between peers. Peer interaction in academic discussions both online and offline seems to have been less important. This is shown in that the social relations between tutors and learners which characterize traditional classrooms were also evident in the CMC learning environment. For this reason, a shift in the mode and task did not essentially change the tenor or social relations between learners and tutors.

Conclusions

- A complex interrelationship of field, tenor and mode of discourse influences interaction patterns and discourse in online discussions.
- Both verbal interaction between learners and tutors, and online discussion were used to develop academic discourse.
- Learners and tutors enact traditional classroom practices in the CMC mode.
- Online texts need to be read in relation to the social fabric of the learning context.
- Involvement, integration, fragmentation, and detachment can be found in both written and spoken discourse and in varying levels in CMC.
- Discourse functions for ESL need to be evaluated against the characteristics and background of the learners and the goals of the literacy class.

Appendix 1a

THE EXPANDING DEFICIT IN THE GOLD INDUSTRY AND WAYS TO OVERCOME IT.

THE EXPANDING DEFICIT IN THE GOLD INDUSTRY AND WAYS TO OVERCOME IT. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY? IF SO WHAT ARE THEY.

Environmental constraints are part of the key problems leading to the deficit. Physical demand tends to be greater than total supply and it has been like that for the past years up until now. However new technology is being developed to mine at depths down to 5000 metres.

There has been fluctuations and generally downward trend in gold price, this leading in an increase in production costs and South Africa's production level has been steadily falling. However in order to cut costs mines have undergone massive changes in the industry, they have reduced costs but unfortunately this has led to workers being retrenched.

Workers have been retrenched because of mergers in the gold industry, there have been lots of jobs made redundant, and producers are trying to minimise their costs because South Africa's gold mines have the highest production costs.

Government, labour and mine operators have come together to promote mining and major new projects and technology. New approaches to the organisation of work, better labour relations and some commercial innovations are starting to reshape the industry.

The whole aim of the policy and the new legislation is to facilitate growth and provide new opportunities in the mining and minerals sector also for current stakeholders.

In South Africa the changes have been almost revolutionary indeed, while the fluctuations in generally downward trend in the gold price have in themselves been enough to participate in the dramatic change.

The mining industry (gold) together with government and labour have committed themselves to co-ordinate the application of their appropriate resources to the implementation of new developed strategy, these developments has also provided access to international capital markets and cheaper finance growth.

It looks like rather than relying on help from the government (although the government has delivered some help) the industry has helped itself by shutting down the non-profitable mines and merging with the prospering mines and investing in new projects.

Appendix 1b

THE EXPANDING DEFICIT RDG

Reconstruction and Development in Gold is in progress to overcome the Deficit.

Environmental constraints (**difficulty in mining**) are part of the key problems leading to the deficit. Physical demand tends to be greater than total supply and it has been like that for the past years up until now. However new technology is being developed to mine at depths down to 5000 metres.

There **have** been fluctuations and generally downward trend in gold price, this leading **to** an increase in production costs and South Africa's production level has been steadily falling. However in order to cut costs mines have undergone massive changes in the industry, they have reduced costs but unfortunately this has lead to workers being retrenched.

Workers have been retrenched because of mergers in the gold industry, there have been lots of jobs made redundant, and producers are trying to minimise their costs because South Africa's gold mines have the highest production costs.

Government, labour and mine operators have come together to promote mining and major new projects and technology. New approaches to the organisation of work, better labour relations and some commercial innovations are starting to reshape the industry.

It looks as if the sun might shine again in the gold industry as it has had 280000 jobs being lost since 1990, at least now it is trying as it has employed approximately 12000 during the past year and there is still more to come as the technology to mine deeper is under development.

There are projects that are aiming at advancing job creation, rural development and entrepreneurship in the industry. This made possible by the Chamber of Mines with companies such as AngloGold and Gold Fields becoming more involved.

The whole aim of the policy and the new legislation is to facilitate growth and provide new opportunities in the mining and minerals sector also for current stakeholders.

In South Africa the changes have been almost revolutionary indeed, while the fluctuations in generally downward trend in the gold price have in themselves been enough to participate in the dramatic change.

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