

## Asynchronous Discussions in ESP courses

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Should asynchronous discussions be used in English for Specific Purposes courses? What can they accomplish? How can they be effective? The answer to these questions is important for every teacher who would like to use online discussions in his/her ESP course. Although one may believe that online teaching and learning is in its infancy, there is enough research reported in the literature to establish asynchronous discussions as one of the most significant factors in effective online courses. Discussions, often labelled participation in traditional classes, can, and probably should be, used in most online ESP classes. The big difference between discussions in a traditional class and an online class is when they take place. In a face to face (F2F) class, discussions are synchronous (all participating within the same time frame). Online discussions are asynchronous (taking place at different times). These discussions take place in forums that the teacher creates, making assignments in regards to what should be discussed. The teacher monitors the discussions and can reply when necessary.

These discussions can often become the “heart” of (online) ESP courses. The discussion forums for many online courses often become the virtual classroom. Their very nature allows for reflection and critical thinking, resulting in more involvement, by more students, than the typical face to face classroom discussion. In fact, those introverted students, who rarely “speak up” in a F2F class, often lead exciting and thought provoking discussions online.

Discussions are also an effective way to help students learn. Using online discussions in an ESP course will affect the learning outcomes the teacher has established by addressing students preferred learning strategies. Learning environments provide an opportunity for immediate application of new information to one’s personal/professional lives and those where they can demonstrate their knowledge. That’s exactly what well constructed and properly facilitated discussions can do.

Online discussions usually result in greater participation by more students than the typical

F2F discussion. The primary reason for this can be found in examining personality styles. In a traditional classroom, the extroverted students tend to dominate the discussion, while those more introverted sit back and observe. By definition, extroverted people are those who give little consideration to thinking through their statements before verbalizing their comments. Introverts need time to think, research, analyze and reflect before responding. It's fairly obvious that F2F discussions, because of the immediacy, tend to leave introverts out of discussions. What may not be so obvious is that typical F2F discussions are often being lead and dominated by comments that while they may be "correct", don't necessarily reflect much critical thought. This is particularly true during initial phases of the discussion process when extroverts are sorting out their ideas through verbalization. Asynchronous discussions provide an environment in which introverts thrive and extroverts can learn to pause and reflect before responding, resulting in higher level thinking early in the process. In fact, the carefully thought through responses of students, who have had time to reflect, often become the discussion leaders, resulting in more learning opportunities for all.

While the frequency and style of discussions will vary greatly across disciplines, there are several possible approaches that are effective. In the following approaches I am considering an ESP course for accounting students.

- A section of the class is assigned a question to answer in Unit 1 (Taxation), a different section for Unit 2 (Financial Accounting), etc.
- Small groups are assigned a question they collaborate on and then report to the entire class.
- Students choose a question to answer from a list of different topics (financial accounting; management accounting; auditing; taxation; banking).
- Each student is assigned an individual question.
- All students answer the same question.
- Peer review of individual assignments in public forums.

The style(s) that the teacher chooses will depend on a variety of factors. The teacher must choose an approach that facilitates students meeting the course or assignment objectives, therefore a variety of approaches can be used depending on what best fulfills the needs of the learning objectives. It is important to remember that the initial "discussion" question is only the beginning of the process. A discussion doesn't develop until students post their initial responses and begin to exchange responses and reactions. The design of the discussion assignments must reflect and stress this concept to the students.

Effective discussion questions share ten characteristics, no matter what type, style, or frequency of use. They should:

- Support course/assignment learning objectives
- Generate interest

- Questions facilitate thought, not “just the facts”
- Can be applied to everyday life or professional goals
- Provide clear explicit instructions
- Receive points and/or graded
- Reflect a percentage of the course grade that is appropriate, feasible, and significant
- Provide a rubric or other evaluation tool that details the evaluation process
- Require reply to other participants
- Include effective facilitation

While the forums (topics that organize discussions) one can include will be created for your specific ESP course, there are a few forums that can be beneficial for most courses.

- The instructor’s office – This is the teacher’s virtual office where announcements or reply to questions can be posted. Since this will be a public forum (one that all students can see), having them post questions to this forum can save time. You answer a question once rather than in several individual emails.
- Student lounge – This is a forum for “off topic” discussions, things students wish to discuss not directly related to the ESP course. It can also be used to “shift” a discussion that has strayed from the topic and is no longer an adequate educational tool for the objectives.
- Private forums – These forums may be useful under certain conditions for a variety of reasons. Private forums can only be seen by those students assigned to them by the instructor. They can be used by students to post assignments and for teachers to provide feedback. They can be used by the teacher and student to discuss problems, individual private issues. They can be used to provide encouragement, and make notifications. They also serve as a “meeting spot” for collaborative group assignments.

The skills involved in online teaching settings using an asynchronous learner discussion forum do not simply happen. Online teachers are aware that there is quite a difference when teaching in a F2F classroom and teaching online. Teaching online demands that the "Sage on the Stage" give way to the "Guide on the Side."

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